

One Night in Boukos

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One Night in Boukos

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CHAPTER I

IT WAS A spring evening in the city of Boukos. The air in the courtyard had a wet tang, like a suggestion of rain, nothing as definite as a promise. Above the brick wall, against the dark blue sky, the pale blossoms of fruit trees showed like tiny clouds. The trees themselves were planted in a row of pots along one side of the courtyard. Along the opposite wall, echoing the trees, stood a row of painted statues. A pale-haired goddess with bare breasts and a mantle draped in chiselled folds over one arm held out a golden apple. A young soldier, naked but for a pair of tooled greaves, leaned in a muscular pose on his tall spear. A man with horns and a tail propped himself against a tree stump and raised a cup to his lips. A princely figure in a short, belted tunic and sandals held the hand of a naked child with wings. They were eerily lifelike in the fading light, and Marzana could easily imagine that one of them might move at any moment.

Perhaps, Marzana thought, to an inattentive observer, he would look like another statue himself, standing still in the torchlit colonnade of the house, feet firmly planted, hands clasped behind his back. A statue very different from the row along the wall: a tall, dark-eyed man with an aquiline profile never seen in Pseuchaian art. Against the chill of the evening he wore a long coat, with woven bands of leaves and birds decorating the wide sleeves and the hem. Beneath it, his linen shirt and loose blue trousers also bore subtle coloured patterns. A red sword-belt lay across his chest, and a curved blade hung sheathed at his side. His pointed beard was lightly hennaed; beneath his tall felt hat, his dark hair fell to his shoulders, and small gold rings winked in his ears.

He destroyed his resemblance to a statue by unclasping his hands and looking guiltily down at the string of prayer beads he held. He moved his thumb slowly over the polished surface of the one where he had left off, and looked back out at the statues that had distracted him. He found them, like all Pseuchaian art, both admirable and unnerving in their striking approximation of life. Zashian artists, he supposed, being of course second to none, could have created sculptures of equal naturalism if they had wanted to. It was simply not the way things were done in Zash. He was very far from home, and there was no forgetting it.

He thumbed the remaining beads in the string with a renewed, though still half-hearted attention, silently finishing his evening devotion. He was on the point of turning back into the house when the gate at the far end of the courtyard opened. He saw the sentry, silhouetted in the light of his lantern, nodding curtly to someone, but not bowing. Not His Excellency returning home, then. Marzana stayed to see who it was. A familiar figure in a red coat came sauntering down between the statues and the fruit trees.

“Bedar?”

The owner of the red coat extracted a hand that had been tucked into his sash and waved in greeting. He arrived in the torchlight spilling out from the colonnade, and he yawned elegantly.

“Hello, Marzana. You are not waiting up for His Excellency, I hope.”

The red coat was expensively embroidered with winged lions in gold thread. Its owner was younger than Marzana—how much younger Marzana had never been able to discover—and smaller, his figure soft with feminine curves under his expensive clothes. He had a child’s clear olive complexion, delicate hands like a woman, and the shrewd, hard, calculating eyes of a bandit

king.

“Not waiting up, no,” said Marzana. “I was not expecting him so soon. Is he on his way?”

Bedar shook his head, the gold pendants of his earrings swinging against the backdrop of his long, silkily black hair. “The party continues unabated. His Excellency remains.” He leaned against a column, arranging himself decoratively. The shrewd eyes were beautifully almandine and finely outlined in kohl, his sleekly folded eyelids just touched with aquamarine. “Much good may it do him.”

Marzana frowned. “He sent you home?”

“No, I left. When he inquires about it tomorrow, I will have been taken ill—I very probably *would* have been taken ill, should I have remained much longer. You laugh.”

“I do.”

Bedar produced his own string of prayer beads from his sash and flipped them irreverently around two fingers. “This is why I like you, Marzana. You laugh at me.”

Marzana hadn’t been sure that Bedar *did* like him, and found he was pleased by the revelation, flippant as it might have been.

“You astonish me! You simply left? Are you not the perfect servant that you are rumoured? Do you do this sort of thing often?”

“Of course not. I should never have got where I am if I did.” He poured the string of beads from one hand to the other. They flashed red and gold in the torchlight, inappropriately well-matched to the colours of his coat. Prayer beads were not supposed to be items of jewellery; the thrice-holy Vaksha had made this very clear. “His Excellency was enjoying himself, as far as I could tell, and scarcely noticed either my presence, when I was there, or, I daresay, my departure, when I ceased to be. Certainly I was not greatly needed.”

“No doubt. But you were the only one he took with him—now he is there without any attendance.”

“The Pseuchaian will think nothing of that—it’s quite usual for them, and they don’t have a proper sense of His Excellency’s rank. *He* won’t mind, either. Believe me. He will do very well on his own. The Boukossian ministers are fawning over him, even as we speak. This is the faction that is very eager for the alliance—they wish to make up for that unpleasantness in the Basileon two days ago.” Bedar balled the prayer beads up and tucked them back into his sash without attempting to tell them properly. “You are still vexed, I take it, that he refused an escort from your men?”

“Vexed? No. Soldiers are not vexed—that’s a word from the women’s quarters.”

“Oh, well—pardon me. Darkly brooding? Bitterly vengeful?” He put a little growl into the words that was amusingly unsoldierly.

Marzana laughed. “Let me put it this way. Had he hired me himself to oversee his guard, and then refused like this to let me do my job, I should resign the commission. But my orders come from my commanding officer—and beyond him, from my king. I know where my duty lies, and I shall go on trying to do it, whether His Excellency likes it or not.” He shrugged irritably. “He should have taken an escort—it was pure folly not to. But I wash my hands of it. If he will not listen to me, then I have

tried to do my duty, and no better may be. Why did you leave the party? What was it like?"

"An ordeal, in a close little dining room with hard couches and a roaring fire—the Boukossians were all half-naked, of course, so they weren't bothered by the heat." Bedar affected a careless tone, but Marzana was not convinced.

"Were they offensive?" he asked.

"Oh, well—" Bedar studied the meticulously filed nails of one hand for a moment. They were stained slightly around the edges with ink—the only thing about his appearance that gave any hint that he did something to earn his keep besides being decorative. "Offence is in how one takes it, I suppose. I was the subject of much speculation. I was twice taken for His Excellency's wife—once for his son, and His Excellency nearly choked on his wine at that point. Those who did not ask stupid questions contented themselves with staring. They drink from cups the size of washtubs, you know, and there is *all manner* of merriment if you suggest watering their ghastly strong wine like a civilized person. There was some threat of dancing—that was when I made up my mind to leave."

Marzana winced. "That was probably wise. I am half inclined to send a couple of my men to the minister's house to wait for His Excellency. But I think I will not."

"They would only have to stand around in the cold—possibly in the rain, if this silly foreign weather ever makes up its mind—to be snapped at when His Excellency decides to come home."

"Precisely. No one would get any thanks for it. Tomorrow is this festival of the Boukossians', is it?"

Bedar nodded. "They have already begun preparing—I saw them in the streets, on my way back here. I anticipate horrors."

"I daresay. But look here—will you tell Smar and the others that they need not be afraid to go out in the streets, that there are no crowds of jeering youths with cudgels? I have tried to tell them that this place is not like that—but they won't take my word for it."

"I shall tell them," said Bedar with a smile. "I shall tell them that I walked all the way home from Sosikles's house tonight *by myself*, though I did see some hard-looking men in the street—they will think me a very reckless fellow, I am sure."

"I don't need them to be reckless—to tell the truth, I'm not sure what I think about you walking around alone after dark, but I'll let that go. It's just that I'm tired of Smar sending my men out to run errands for him—they have their own duties, and Smar and the rest have theirs, which they can't do if they are afraid to leave the house."

"My dear Marzana, I shall tell them. Don't worry."

"Thank you." He half-stifled a yawn. "I must go check on the sentries before I fall asleep on my feet. I beg your pardon."

"Of course. God guard your sleeping and your waking." He gave a beautiful, unstudied version of the pious gesture that went with the words.

"And yours."

As he crossed to the door of the house, Marzana felt a sharp twinge in his bad hip, which had been aching on and off all evening. It would certainly rain tonight, he thought, or tomorrow. If tomorrow, that would be a pity for the Boukossians and their festival. As for him, he had no plans to go anywhere.

He was right about the rain. The sky was pale and clear when he rose the following morning, but there were puddles on the windowsill. It had grown colder, too, and he buttoned his coat as he went on his rounds to inspect the sentries. He arrived in the queer little Pseuchaian kitchen at the back of the house in time to be of assistance in interpreting between the Zashian cook and a shop-boy who had come to deliver some peculiar local produce. A Pseuchaian cook had been provided with the house when the ambassador's party was installed a week ago, but he had been hastily dismissed. Apparently the Boukossians had not imagined that the ambassador would have brought his own cook with him. Indeed, they had seemed astonished by the sheer size of His Excellency's entourage; the house they had provided, which they had probably thought flatteringly grand, was actually barely large enough to accommodate everyone.

The cook gave Marzana an almond pastry, apologizing for the quality of the local ingredients that he had been obliged to use in its creation.

"Is there any cheese?" Marzana asked wistfully. He had been craving some good cheese almost ever since they left Suna a month before.

"Not in my kitchen," said the cook primly. "Haven't you heard? The only milk you can get in this country comes from the Horned Beast."

"Really?" said Marzana, trying uneasily to remember whether he had drunk milk or eaten yogurt during the last week. Surely, he thought, if one ingested something from an unclean animal, one would in some way be aware of it? He considered that for a moment and concluded that it might only apply in the case of the extremely pious. He doubted that he would qualify.

He walked back through the colonnade of the house's inner courtyard, thinking to sit on one of the benches by the door and finish his breakfast. His right hip was aching again, and he looked at the sky, wondering whether there would be more rain. There were a few dark streaks of cloud. From inside the open door he heard voices: Bedar's, calm as usual, and Smar's, clearly agitated. Marzana stepped through the door to see if there were anything he could do.

Smar stood in the middle of the atrium, in coat and hat and boots, as if he had just come in from the street. Bedar, listening to him with arms folded and a look of rather elaborate sympathy in his long, dark eyes, was still in his dressing gown. He could, as Marzana had observed, be up and busy before dawn, if the service of his master required it; when it did not, he apparently liked to sleep late.

"I don't blame you, Bedar," Smar was saying, with pompous insincerity. "I'm sure you weren't to know—but I tell you about it for your own good, because you were quite wrong, it is *not* safe to go out there. People who carry on in that way might be capable of anything. Anything!"

"God guard your going and coming, Smar," said Marzana. "Is something the matter?"

Smar turned on him with pursed lips. He was rather white in the face, Marzana observed; something had obviously given him a scare. But whatever it was, he seemed to think it was none of the captain of the guard's business.

"No, indeed," he said thinly. "We are surrounded by ghastly barbarians—nothing whatever is the

matter." Turning back to Bedar, he added, "Not that I blame you, I'm sure—you weren't to know, were you?"

He turned on his heel and stalked away into the house, leaving Marzana to look questioningly at Bedar.

"What doesn't he blame you for, exactly?"

"Oh—he ran into a procession outside. Something to do with the festival—apparently it got started at dawn. They were carrying ... well, I don't know what they were carrying, really, but he seems to think they were puppets, with gigantic ... " Bedar made a fastidious gesture, and finished the sentence apologetically: "gigantic ... *parts*. He is convinced that they were worshipping them."

Marzana pressed his knuckles to his lips. "I'm sorry," he said, when he had regained control of himself. "This after I told you to assure him that it was safe to go out of doors."

Bedar smiled slightly. "He says they tried to make him join in some sort of dance."

"How distressing for him. Is there something else amiss? You look ... worried." It was not precisely true, but he looked as close to worried as Marzana had yet seen him.

Bedar looked up, now visibly startled. "Worried? Oh." He brushed back his hair with one hand, tucking it behind his ear. "It is early—I suppose I am not dissembling up to my usual standard yet."

"So you are worried."

"I don't think His Excellency came home last night." He spoke quietly.

Marzana was a moment taking this in. "He is not in his suite?"

Bedar shook his head. "I woke up feeling guilty about having left the party—you were right, it is not the sort of thing that I do, as a rule, and His Excellency is by no means the worst master I have served. I got up, thinking that I would go and make my apologies, and I met one of the boys in the hall, coming with His Excellency's breakfast tray, so I took it from him and went in myself. His bed has not been slept in. I don't know who else knows—your sentries may not have noticed, since they have their separate watches, and no one knew when to expect him. Some of the slaves must have been up, waiting to put him to bed—but I don't think anyone has told Smar yet. He didn't say anything about it. He was on his way to the market, he told me, when he ran into the procession."

"The Boukossians must have invited His Excellency to stay the night. It is probably their custom when they have been drinking hard—as you told me they were."

"Yes—doubtless you are right. Still, I feel horribly at fault. I ought to have remained—his Pseuchaian is not so good as mine, and had he needed anything, and not been able to tell them—had he been taken ill, perhaps ... I am greatly to blame for not having been there. I must make what amends I can. I intend to go to Sosikles's house directly—I was on my way back to my room to dress when Smar came in."

"You should have an escort. I will have one of my men accompany you."

Bedar smiled. "I am not afraid of Pseuchaian inviting me to dance, if that is what you mean. But if you think I should have an escort, by all means, I shall take one."

"Thank you. I wish your master would be so reasonable. I will send Aza with you—he is a trustworthy fellow."

"Thank you. And, Marzana—should anyone begin to worry that His Excellency is not at home ..."

"I will tell them that he spent the night at his host's house, which is a Boukossian custom, and that you have gone to fetch him—as arranged beforehand. Will that do?"

"You are a mighty cedar tree of compassion, and I kiss the hem of your coat."

Marzana laughed.

Bedar retired to his room to dress, and Marzana finished his breakfast and went to find Aza. He sent him to wait in the courtyard, then returned to the atrium. Bedar emerged from his room, putting in his earrings, but otherwise looking like he had been dressed for hours: immaculate in white trousers and a black, embroidered shirt, his eyes discreetly painted, his hair smelling of lilies.

The front door was opened, just then, by a sentry. A handsome, blond Pseuchaian youth in a blue cloak was ushered in, followed by a curly-haired boy carrying a painted jug.

"Good morning," said the youth jauntily, addressing Marzana across the atrium. "I have come to see the ambassador."

"You honour my master's house with your presence," said Bedar in lightly accented Pseuchaian, bowing to the youth. "I regret to tell you that His Excellency cannot see you at present. May his humble servant be of use to you in any way?"

"Oh, hello," said the youth breezily. "You were at our party last night, too—I remember you." Turning his attention back to Marzana, he said, "I am Leusiklos, son of Sosikles. My father has sent me with a gift for the ambassador, to thank him for coming to our party last night. Phormion, come here," he said to the boy with the jug. "We have an expression, you know: the weapon that made the wound will heal the wound. This is the best vintage from my father's own estate—he trusts the ambassador will enjoy it as well as the wine at dinner last night. Oh, and the boy is part of the gift, of course." He grinned pleasantly. "We hope that he'll prove as pleasing as the wine."

"Your father is the soul of generosity," said Bedar. "His Excellency will be desolate to have missed your visit."

"Quite all right—I understand how it is, the morning after. Still asleep, I suppose. Everyone at our house had to get up early today for the festival—we hadn't the luxury of lying in. Well, I must be off. No, Phormion," as the boy made a move to follow him out, "you heard me—you're to stay here."

When the youth was gone, the boy stood clutching his jug, looking at the two Zashians in front of him, his eyes darting from their trousered legs to Marzana's beard and back again with undisguised terror. As for the two Zashians, they looked at one another.

"Sosikles is the man whose house you were at last night," said Marzana.

“Yes,” said Bedar.

“And he has just sent his son here with a—” glancing at the boy with distaste “—with a gift for His Excellency.”

“Yes.”

“Which means that Sosikles thinks His Excellency is here—which means that His Excellency is not at Sosikles’s house.”

“Yes.”

“Then where is he?”

“I have no idea.”

CHAPTER II

THE ATRIUM OF Sosikles’s house was a chaos of scurrying slaves carrying dishes and garlands and leafy boughs with ribbons tied to them. A young man wearing nothing but a loincloth came through from the garden, leading a couple of white animals with chains of flowers around their necks. Bedar backed hastily against a wall to get out of their way, making, in spite of himself, the sign against bad luck. On the whole, he agreed with the opinion of the Vanian theologians, that avoiding a particular type of beast was mere superstition. But he had been born in a tiny mountain village in a remote province of Zash, and a very few aspects of his early childhood had died hard.

Sosikles, a lean, eager man with greying hair, appeared on the stairs, trailing a purple mantle that a slave who followed him was trying to pin in place as he descended.

“You’ve caught me just in time, Bedar,” he said cheerfully. “I’m on my way out to our local shrine, to officiate in the Psobion—our annual festival, you know, in honour of our city’s patron god.”

“Yes,” said Bedar, with a smile that was all one motion, not remaining fixed for more than an instant. “I am indeed fortunate to have intercepted you, sir.” He caught himself trying to deepen his voice as he spoke, and was vexed by it. That, in this case, was the right word.

“What can I do for you, my lad?” Sosikles inquired, hitching up the purple mantle, which his slave had finally succeeded in pinning. “Did your ... did the ambassador receive my present this morning?”

“He did,” said Bedar, “and charged me to convey his very great gratitude. I am almost reluctant, in

light of your generosity, but ... ”

“No, no! Is there something else? Something I can do?”

“Well, sir, His Excellency regrets to trouble you on this festival day, but he wished me to inquire whether any of your staff has found a blue silk purse, which he fears he may have left behind him last night. It contains a few trifles which he would be sorry to lose.”

Sosikles creased his brow for a moment. “None of my slaves brought anything like that to me last night—or this morning, though we’re all so busy here, with the festival, that I wouldn’t be surprised if it had been overlooked.”

“It is perhaps more likely that His Excellency lost the purse on his way home. Unfortunately, I was not with him. May I inquire if he was conveyed home in a chair, or escorted by some members of your household?”

“Oh dear no—didn’t he tell you? He didn’t go straight home from here. The party broke up around the fourth hour—no later than that. I was for bed myself, thinking of how busy I’d be today—but most of the rest went on somewhere else, to lengthen the night, as we say in Boukos.” He smiled pleasantly. “I believe the ambassador went with them. Yes, I’m quite sure he did. At any rate, when they left here, he was certainly one of the party. It’s a shame you left when you did, Bedar—it was quite a good night.”

“Indeed, sir, I regret it. His Excellency did not mention to me where he had gone after leaving your house. Is it possible that you might tell me, and so spare me a journey back home to inquire?”

Sosikles laughed. “You have quite a way about you, Bedar—you know that?”

“Sir.” Since he had no idea what this meant, Bedar thought it best not to commit himself to any particular response.

“Well, they went to Gorgion’s, as far as I know. Astragalos had the idea—I believe Lekythos decided to go home, but the rest of them went on. Gorgion’s is in Fish Street, on the corner. But you won’t want to be rushing off there now, will you? I don’t expect your ambassador would miss you if you didn’t come straight back. I tell you what—come and see a bit of the festival with me, and I’ll order you a chair to take you to Gorgion’s and back. Are we agreed?”

It was the way that Sosikles’s gaze had fastened on him, rather than the words he used, that suggested to Bedar what this offer really was. A Zashian man would have put it differently—supposing he had seen fit to speak of it at all—but if he had been very bold, he might have indulged in just such a hungry look. This time Bedar’s smile was even more perfunctory.

“I am terribly sorry, sir,” he said.

The street outside the minister’s house was as busy as the interior of the house had been. Owing to a strange Pseuchaian custom of mixing shops and dwellings together, the door of the house, though decorated by marble columns and set back a little from the street, opened right between a spice merchant and a perfume shop. Both were closed for the holiday, but the street was busy with foot-traffic.

Marzana stood outside the perfume shop, where Bedar had left him, arms folded, ignoring the staring and pointing of the clean-shaven, bare-legged men and unescorted women who passed by. He looked, Bedar thought, like one of the Lords of the Dawn, as they were carved in black

basalt on the face of the great temple in Suna: stern, broad-shouldered, unshakeable, armed for all eventualities.

He was rather Bedar's type, actually, but Bedar knew the feeling was not mutual, and didn't mind. He fancied Marzana had more value as a friend, anyway.

"Well?" Marzana said, when he saw Bedar. "Do we know anything more?"

"Yes. Apparently His Excellency and the other Boukossian ministers left the party to go to a fish market in the middle of the night."

"A *fish* market?"

Bedar shrugged. "That was the best sense I could make of it. At the fourth hour—what is that? I've never quite understood their way of telling time."

"The fourth hour at night? That's two hours before midnight. We would say the tenth hour. That was when the party broke up? That doesn't seem very late—I thought these Boukossians were great revellers."

"Yes, well—apparently they need fish at that time of night, to keep the revelry going. Shall we walk, Marzana? We are in some danger of becoming a tourist attraction here."

Marzana nodded. They set off towards the end of the street which opened out into one of the small public squares that were patchworked across the city of Boukos.

Bedar went on, thinking out loud, "Possibly the place where they went did not sell fish—Sosikles said that it was in the street with the fish markets, but I suppose it might be something else. A wine shop, do you think?"

Marzana looked doubtful. "I don't see why His Excellency would have gone out to such a place."

"He may have thought it would be rude to refuse. For that matter, perhaps it would have been. I should have been there." Bedar ran a hand through his hair and looked up at the sky, which had grown overcast. "But no amount of saying that now will change the fact that I wasn't. The question is, what do I do now?"

"What do *we* do now, you mean," said Marzana.

Bedar looked at him, smiling in spite of himself. Bless his heart, Marzana wasn't trying to say, "You have created a problem for all of us," but rather, "We're in this together." Yet Bedar knew he had only himself to blame.

"That is very kind of you, my dear Marzana. But I am the one who neglected his duty."

The truth was, quite apart from worrying about what might have become of His Excellency, he felt personally ashamed at having let him disappear. For most of his life, his masters had entrusted him with things—secrets, money, members of their households—and he had guarded them, one way or another. This was the first time he had lost anything, and it was not one of his master's treasured possessions but the master himself.

Marzana made a dismissive gesture. "You were provoked, from what you told me. Well—we were both provoked. But you are certainly not the only one who was negligent. Indeed, the worse fault

was mine. You merely neglected His Excellency's convenience—I neglected his safety. I feel as guilty over this as you do, I daresay. We are in it together, and that's that. The question is," he added reluctantly, "do we need to involve anyone else?"

Bedar considered this, for about as long as he thought it deserved to be considered. So far, they had not mentioned to anyone that the ambassador was missing. To Smar they had told the planned story about His Excellency spending the night at his host's house, trusting that the rest of the household—the ambassador's half-dozen aides and all his lesser servants—would hear the news eventually from Smar. They had left the curly-haired boy and the wine in his charge as well, not having known what else to do with them. For a moment Bedar pictured how Smar would react if they told him the truth, the panic among the ambassador's aides that would result, the shouting and hand-wringing and loud declarations about the folly of trusting barbarians not to murder honest, civilized Zashians ...

"No," said Bedar, "I do not think we need trouble anyone else with this just yet."

"Good," said Marzana briskly. "Nor do I. This may yet turn out to be a trivial matter, easily solved. It would be foolish to sound the alarm unnecessarily."

"And diplomatically unfortunate if the Boukossians should hear it," Bedar added dryly.

They had reached the square by this time, and found it dominated by a cluster of carts with tent-like awnings, from which people were selling food. Men and women in flower-decked festival clothes were clustering around and walking away eating off of skewers and out of folded vine-leaves.

"How can there be so many of them?" Marzana wondered. "The whole population cannot be in the streets—some of them must be minding the stalls—and some of the shops are open."

"I think they come in from the country. Look at those two, for instance." Bedar nodded towards a pair of men in broad-brimmed straw hats, with leather satchels. "Do they look to you as though they just came down from one of these apartment blocks?"

"No. I see what you mean."

They walked around the outside of the square, keeping clear of the crowds, and discussed what they should do. Marzana had some idea where the street of fish markets was, having passed it a few days before in the course of an errand. He thought it might be worthwhile to seek out Gorgion's, whatever it was, and see if anyone there had useful information. Bedar, thinking he could guess what dreadful ideas Marzana cloaked in those dispassionate, professional words, "useful information," did not ask for more explanation than that. He said that he thought it might be a good idea for him to call on Kottabos, another of the ministers who had been at the party, to see if he could tell a better story than Sosikles about the previous night's events.

Marzana nodded. "An excellent plan. Shall we agree to meet back at the house at noon? If one of us has found His Excellency by then, or if he has come home on his own, well and good—if not, we can discuss further strategy at that point."

"Further strategy ... now those are *not* words from the women's quarters."

"No?" Marzana smiled. "And what would you say instead?"

"What in the name of the angels of the Almighty we are going to do,' perhaps."

"I suppose that would also be apt. Until noon, then?"

"Until noon. God guard you."

"And you."

They clasped hands, in the fashion of their country, and parted.

Bedar set off into what he hoped was the street that would lead him to Kottabos's house. If he had to, he would ask directions—but not until he was satisfied that he could not find the place on his own. In Suna, where he had lived for three years but still found it easy to get lost, he was never hesitant to ask directions. Here things were different. In Suna he knew his place, and would not have presumed to look men of a certain rank in the eye; but at least people did not stare in surprise every time he opened his mouth.

He found the house, which he remembered from the day after their arrival in Boukos, when the ambassador and all his staff had been invited to dine with Kottabos. There had been a feverish debate between His Excellency and his aides over whether or not Kottabos expected him to bring Bedar, who had been present when the general invitation was issued, but who would never have been thought to be included in such an invitation in Zash. In the end they had brought him, and it seemed to have been the right choice; the Boukossians had been fascinated with him, if only because they seemed not to have any clear idea what he was.

Kottabos's house was large, and stood in a quiet neighbourhood where the buildings were set a little apart from one another, as in certain parts of Zash. It was quiet inside, too, with none of the festival chaos that had prevailed at Sosikles's. Bedar inquired for the master, and a well-trained, soft-spoken young slave asked him to wait, and then showed him through to a chilly colonnade facing a large, wet Pseuchaian courtyard-garden, centred on a fountain dominated by a marble group of a naked boy and girl. The master of the house reclined on a couch in the colonnade, sipping at a cup of steaming wine and looking, from the greyish cast to his heavy face, as if he was probably testing out the Boukossian adage about the weapon that made the wound.

"*Bee-dar*, isn't it?" he grunted, eyeing his visitor.

"Sir." He had always thought his name was a simple one to pronounce—*Beh-dar*, nothing to it—but he had been surprised how many ways there were to get it wrong.

"Message from your ambassador?"

Bedar supposed it was a good sign that Kottabos thought His Excellency might be sending a message this morning; that must mean, at least, that he did not know of any fatal mishap befalling him the night before. He repeated his story about the blue silk purse, embellishing it with further details. He had gone, he claimed, to Gorgion's in the street of the fish markets, but being unable to find his master's property there, he begged Kottabos's pardon for disturbing him this morning, but wondered if Kottabos could tell him how His Excellency had gone home from Gorgion's.

Kottabos gazed at him uncommunicatively for a moment out of dull, hooded eyes. "I don't think he did go home," he said finally. "We had a few games at Gorgion's, then we left. Nobody could agree about where to go, so we split up. Some of them went on to Temple Walk, I think. The rest of us went to Old Pottery Street." He sipped his wine slowly. "I don't remember where the ambassador went." He did not appear to be thinking about it, to try to recall; evidently there was little hope of his remembering anything much from that period of the night. After a moment he added, "Aristygion might know. He seemed pretty sober."

“Indeed, sir? If you will forgive me one further question, would it be possible for you to tell me where Aristygon lives?”

Armed with an explanation of where the sober Aristygon might be found, Bedar left Kottabos’s house, and stood for a moment in the street outside. He had seen people being carried in sedan chairs through the streets of Boukos, and Sosikles had offered to hire one for him, so it must be possible, might even be permitted. In Zash he would have known how to go about it, but here he did not know where one found chairs for hire, let alone how to determine which ones were for the use of foreigners, which only for women, and so on. At any rate, he doubted it would have been easy to find a free one during the festival. Small matter—it was early yet, and he did not mind walking. And certainly his task was enviable compared to what he suspected Marzana would have to face. Kottabos had spoken of “a few games” at this Gorgion’s, the place where Marzana was headed. It must not be a fish market after all.

CHAPTER III

FISH STREET ON the morning of the Psobion was a narrow prospect of shuttered storefronts, with a stale, aquatic smell in the air. Marzana walked the length of it, unhopeful. He stopped in front of a whitewashed building on the corner, shuttered like the rest, but with the look of being something other than a shop. What, exactly, Marzana could not guess. There was some tidy red lettering over the door, but this was no help. Though among his fellow soldiers Marzana had always been considered rather a bookish fellow, that was only in his own language; he could not read a word of Pseuchaian.

At any rate, the whitewashed building seemed as closed as the fish markets. The small intersection of streets on which it stood was empty except for a couple of old men seated on a bench at the opposite corner, wrapped in their cloaks, with walking-sticks propped beside them. They were eyeing Marzana with frank disapproval. One of them scratched his stubbly chin and muttered something to the other. Marzana supposed he ought to ask them about the whitewashed building, since they obviously belonged to the neighbourhood. He tried to recollect what was the polite address in Pseuchaian for an elderly man. He had heard that these people set almost as much store by respecting their elders as Zashians.

The door to the whitewashed building opened before he had remembered the proper address, and a thin-legged, brown-haired man with a broom appeared, sweeping the dust from inside out into the street. Marzana turned back.

“Good morning,” he said. It felt bald and impious as a greeting, but he did not know which of their many gods the Boukossians invoked for such a purpose, and wasn’t sure it would be quite right of him to mention them anyway, since he did not believe in them.

The man with the broom looked up, and his eyes widened a little.

"Hello, foreigner! Are you looking for something?"

"Yes, I am. Is this the place that is called Gorgion's?" He tried to pronounce the name as he had heard it, but his accent when speaking Pseuchaian was far thicker than Bedar's.

"It is," said the man, evidently understanding him nonetheless. "We don't open up until evening, though, on account of the festival. You looking for a game?"

"I ... " He had not quite understood what the man meant by this, and wondered if it was his grasp of the language that was at fault, or something else. "I am looking for a man. Another Zash—ah, Sasian—like me. I think he was here last night."

The man leaned his broom against the doorframe and folded his arms. "He owe you money or something?"

Marzana took an instant to consider. This man seemed the sort who might give him information about the ambassador, for a price, even if he thought Marzana was hunting him down for something unpleasant. On the other hand, he could think of another story which would be more likely to produce results, and had the additional advantage of being the truth.

Making a show of digging his purse out of his sash, Marzana said, "No—I work for him. He is missing." He extracted the purse. "If you have information to help me find him, I can pay you for your trouble."

The man's eyebrows went up. "Generous of you. Well, there was a Sasian here last night. I don't know if he was your man—there's a few of them in town, for this trade alliance business. But I suppose if you thought he was here, it might have been him. I just noticed him because of the beard—but I suppose you'll want to know when he left, and who he was with, and so on. Stamnos might know—he's inside cleaning up. Come on in."

He held the door open, and Marzana ducked to pass through the low doorway into the building's dim interior. For a moment, he took the place to be some kind of cook-shop or tavern, because it was filled with small tables and clusters of wooden stools. And there did seem to be empty wine cups on some of the tables; a round-faced youth in a dirty tunic was walking among the tables with a tray, gathering them up. But though they might have sold wine on the side, the real purpose of the place, Marzana realized, was something else. Each table was furnished with a small stone cup which was not for drink, and number of knobby pieces of bone with different figures incised on their faces. At one side of the dim room was a wooden counter with a rack of coloured tokens and a large strongbox. Everything seemed clean, in spite of the clutter from the night's custom, and in good repair, as if the place did a brisk business and served a respectable clientele. Yet Marzana almost shuddered as he realized what this was. Such places were of course illegal in Zash; but to a gentlemen they seemed one of those things, like brothels, that scarcely needed to be prohibited by law. After all, no respectable man would have so sullied his reputation as to enter one, even if the law had permitted it.

There was no help for it now, Marzana thought. But surely the ambassador had not stayed long in this place himself, once he had realized what it was.

"Stamnos," the man with the broom was saying, "this man's looking for the Sasian who was here last night."

"What for?" said the youth with the tray of cups. "Does he owe you money?"

"No, you daft lump," said the man with the broom. "He's gone missing! The other Sasian's gone missing. So you just think whether you saw anything helpful, and can remember it."

"Sure." Stamnos set down his tray and gave Marzana a friendly grin. "I was just thinking, if he *did* owe you money, you'd be in luck—because *he* was, last night. I was working counter when he and his party left, and I cashed him out—he made a bundle. His friends were all congratulating him and saying it was beginner's luck, that sort of thing. He came with a bunch of purple cloaks—and left with them too ... yeah, I think they all left at the same time. It was late, but ... I didn't think they were going home to bed—I think they were headed off somewhere else. Actually, I remember when it was, because I saw they almost bumped into the watchmen when they went out—some of them had got a good look at the pictures in the bottom of their cups—and I remember he was calling seventh hour when they almost knocked him down."

"There, you see," said the man with the broom. "I said he would know something."

"Thank you," said Marzana to the youth. "That is very helpful. May I ask—when you said 'purple cloaks,' what do you mean by this?"

"Oh, that's just what the young people call the ministers of the Basileon—the civic assembly, you know," said the man with the broom. "On account of the purple cloaks they wear when assembly's in session."

"I think they were six or seven of them, besides your man," said the helpful Stamnos. "They took up two tables, and they had a horde of slaves with them that hung about outside. Oh—and I've remembered something else, but I don't know if it's any use to you."

"Yes?" said Marzana.

"It's just that your man was playing with another group, for a while. I didn't see how he got to join them, but I did notice he had a game or two with them, and then went back to his own party—and I didn't think they'd even really noticed he was gone, because they were losing to the house pretty badly just then, and some of them were so drunk anyway. Only ... these other men, the ones he had a few games with, I noticed they weren't drinking much. There were four of them, I *think*, though I'm not sure. Oh, and when they cashed out, I heard them talking, and a couple of them had Ariatan accents. They cashed out right after the purple cloaks did, I remember that."

"They were Ariatans, for sure," said the man with the broom. "They were dressed like Ariatans."

"Yeah, *and they had Ariatan accents*—I said. I thought it was funny, because the Ariatans are the ones who were at war with Sasia last, right—only seven years ago?"

"Yes," said Marzana. "Seven years ago. But we have had a new king since then. Many things have changed."

"Oh, right, yes—I suppose so."

"How do Ariatans dress?" Marzana asked. Seven years ago he had been on campaign in Smerdin, and he had never, to his knowledge, seen an Ariatan.

"Like peasants, the lot of them," said the man with the broom. "Undyed wool, and boots like soldiers on the march."

"They wear their hair short, too," said Stamnos.

"Ah," said Marzana, looking at the sandy hanks of hair that barely concealed the youth's ears, and wondering what he considered *short* hair. Stubble?

"Anyway, that's all I remember—I hope it's some help."

"Thank you. It is indeed a great help." He untied the mouth of the purse that he had taken out and tipped a few coins onto the table beside the youth's tray, shaking the purse carefully so that he would not have to touch the coins with his fingers. "Please take this for your pains."

He offered the man with the broom a somewhat smaller reward, and left the building. The door closed behind him, and he stood in the chilly street, wondering what to make of all this. One thing seemed quite clear: the ambassador had spent close to three hours in a gaming house. What was more, he had not sat by and looked on with distaste; he had taken part in the games himself, and actually stooped to collecting his winnings. If Marzana did manage to track him down alive, it was clear that he would have to pass over in silence the details of where he had been to search for him. It would never do to let him know that he had heard about this.

Across the narrow street, the old men were still sitting on their bench. Marzana saw them staring at him again, and approached, bowing respectfully. One of the old men stood up, grasping his stick and drawing himself up as tall as possible. He still had to look up to meet Marzana's eye.

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