

The Assassin and his Mistress

The Assassin strode unhindered into the throne room. He was dressed, as all Assassins were, in black. Topped by a black helmet, his black mask covered his face like a second skin and his eyes might have been blue. It was hard to tell. His muscles bulged beneath his black leather jerkin, and his black leggings were covered by knee high black boots. The thick clothing didn't seem to restrict his movements in the least. He held a sword in his right hand and a dagger was sheathed on his right hip.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, your Majesty, but I hold a contract on your life."

He approached the throne, and a guard tried to get between him and the King. The Assassin brushed aside his weapon, pulled him close and kneed him in the groin. As the man started to fold up, the Assassin clubbed him with the hilt of his sword, and the guard went down and stayed down.

"Please note that I am entitled to kill anyone who interferes. Your guard, however, is merely unconscious."

He broke the sword arm of a second guard with the flat of his blade and stabbed a third guard in the thigh, and then he was at the throne. He brushed aside the King's short sword and plunged his blade between the King's ribs and into his heart. The monarch collapsed and the Assassin stepped back, pulling out his sword.

It was then that he made his mistake. He knew where all the armed men were to the centimetre, but had not allowed for the unpredictability of the civilians in the room. A surge towards the throne threw one of the women into his path, and as she stumbled, by chance she grasped the Assassin's arm. She and the Assassin disappeared.

The woman fell to the floor and backed up against the wall. The Assassin's sword pricked her skin, just above her low-cut neckline. The weapon was still red with the King's blood.

"Don't kill me, please, sir!" she said in alarm.

The Assassin removed his sword.

"Why should I kill you?" he asked. "You're no physical threat to me, and I have no contract on you."

He wiped and sheathed his sword.

"You are an inconvenience to me, it is true, milady, but it was my mistake that caused this situation."

The woman looked around and realized that she was no longer in the throne room.

"Where are we? What happened? Is this a dream?"

"Hardly. More like a nightmare, perhaps. We are in my lodgings, not too far from the palace. I chose to step from the throne room to here, rather than fight my way out, to avoid the possibility of innocent bystanders being hurt. By chance, you had your hand on my arm, so you came with me. Now I have to figure out what to do with you."

She felt something between herself and the wall, and glancing at the Assassin, she realized that his dagger had been dislodged from the scabbard on his hip. She scrabbled around behind her and found the hilt. She surged to her feet and tried to stab him.

He grabbed her wrist and sighed.

"I said that you were no threat to me, but you show some spirit, milady. If you want to stab someone, you should aim to strike upwards into the gut and twist the blade to do more damage. Don't stab overhand, especially if you are attacking someone as tall as me. Even if you were able to

hit me, you probably wouldn't do much damage to me by cutting my upper chest. Unless you chanced to hit my neck, of course. Drop it!"

She dropped the dagger and the Assassin retrieved it, and slid it into its scabbard.

"We have to get out of here before the town gates are locked. I'll have to take you along for now."

"Why, sir?"

"Because you will see my face. I can't walk through the town, dressed like this."

He indicated his black leather outfit.

"I can't walk through town in my court clothes, either. But I can do this."

She shook out her hair and let it flow over her shoulders. She undid something and stepped out of her skirt and her top petticoats. In an instant she had a long hairpin against his throat, but again he had caught her wrist.

"Nice try," he said, "You can't hurt me. Please don't keep trying. I may have to hurt you!"

She nodded.

"Will you be able to walk through town like that?"

He gestured. Her blouse was unchanged but below the waist her court finery had gone, leaving her in her under petticoats.

"Yes, if I have a cape over me. My under petticoats look enough like simple skirts, especially this blue one, and my blouse is a little low cut and a little too upmarket, but it will do."

"Here, take this," he said, giving her his cape.

He removed his helmet and peeled off his mask. He removed his black leather jerkin and leggings, while she modestly averted her eyes. When she turned back, he was still wearing dark clothes, but that was the fashion for men these days. He still had on his knee-high black boots, but his leggings were brown. His jerkin was dark green.

"Let's go," he said, picking up his backpack while waving her out of the door.

She looked around and the only evidence that someone had been here was her top skirt and top petticoats. She hesitated then bundled them up under her arm and they left.

As they approached the town's west gates there was a bit of a crush, but that was normal for this time of day.

"Take my arm," she said, "and smile. But not too much. We're being delayed, remember."

The guards at the gate were behaving normally, she saw. That is, they were picking on the richer looking folks and accepting 'donations' from them to ease their passage. She and the Assassin squeezed their way through the foot traffic and onto the road outside the walls where the crush dissipated.

"We turn south shortly. I've a man waiting with the horses, but since you are coming along, and we only have two horses, we'll have to make do."

They turned off onto a track to the south and found that they were not alone. It seemed that others wanted to get off the road, too, for whatever reason. After a kilometre or two they turned onto an even smaller track and then they were alone.

"I'm Louise," said the woman. "I'm a Lady in Waiting to the Queen. What's your name, sir?"

The Assassin did have blue eyes. He also had rust coloured hair and was, Louise thought, quite good-looking in a stern sort of way. He was pale skinned, like a Northerner.

"You can call me Erik, milady. That's one of the several names that I use."

Louise had long brown hair and dark brown eyes. Her skin had a tinge of colour to it, from a distant Southerner ancestor.

"I must say that you are very calm, milady Louise, for someone who has been ripped away from the royal court and now is associated with an Assassin. Are you scared? Do I not scare you?"

He wasn't taunting her, she decided. He was merely curious, so she responded truthfully.

"Well, if I had time to think about it, I would probably be scared. As it is, I might have nightmares. I think I'm pretty safe at the moment, though, because, for whatever reason, you have taken me under your protection. You could have easily killed me in your room."

The Assassin nodded. "Yes, you are safe with me, for now. It's a matter of honour. I have not been paid to kill you, and my mistake caused me to step you away with me when I left. I do not kill people who I have no contract to kill, if I can help it. I had to bring you along, because I had to get out of the town as soon as possible. But you could have escaped me at the gate. I wasn't expecting the crush, and you helped me get through it. I thank you for that."

"Yes. I could have. But I wanted you to get away, because you didn't kill me when you could have. I reckon that I am still in danger, though, because I've seen your face."

"A fair assessment, but you didn't mention something. You have the same skin colour as the King. I think that you might be related, and therefore have thoughts of revenge?"

She sighed. "Yes, I'm related. Second or third cousin, I think. I have no thoughts of revenge, though. We were never close. Why did you kill him? He wasn't a bad King, was he?"

"I had a contract. It didn't matter to me whether he was a good King or a bad one, but if it makes you feel better, from what I have heard he's known for oppressing minorities, like those sun worshippers down south."

"Oh. So did the sun worshippers hire you?"

"No, I don't think so. They aren't rich enough, and I just mentioned them as an example. Only rich people can afford our services, and poorer people must make their own arrangements. I never know who the client is, but sometimes I can guess. A merchant gains control of a market, and starts bankrupting competitors. Someone hires an Assassin to kill him, so it's pretty obvious that the client is probably another merchant or group of merchants. In the case of the King, I have no idea who hired me. It is most likely someone close to him, though."

"You're being very frank with me, sir."

He turned his icy blue eyes on her. "One way or another, I will nullify the threat that you are to me, and fulfil my obligations to you. Sooner or later."

There was no malice in it, she thought. They walked along in silence for a while.

"Oscar is just up here, with the horses," he said.

The cottage in the woods had collapsed and, although the forest was striving to hide the remains, traces of the walls could be seen. A few piles of rock covered by grass and moss showed where the former inhabitants had fenced off an area around the cottage. A cherry tree had survived the forest's advance, and two horses were tied to one of its branches.

"All done, boss? Boss? ... Who's this?"

The small broad man who was tending the horses was visibly taken aback.

"Oscar, this is Louise. Circumstances dictated that I bring her along."

Oscar shook his head. "OK, boss. If you say so. It's going to be difficult."

"I'll take her on my horse, for now, Oscar. You can carry the bags."

They set off through the forest, with Louise mounted behind the Assassin. She felt uncomfortable at first, but relaxed as the kilometres slowly passed. At first they continued south but gradually swung around to the west again.

Oscar chattered away, but it didn't seem as if he cared whether someone talked back to him or not. Erik answered him now and again, and so did Louise, but it soon became just background noise.

"Are we staying at the inn tonight, boss?" Oscar asked.

"Yes, I think so," said the Assassin. "Louise, milady, you'll have to share a room with us. Is that a concern?"

"Milady? There's no need for that! If it is necessary, I'll share a room with you. You, sir, Erik, I trust and if you trust Oscar, I'll trust him too."

"Good. We'll book the room, and then we'll smuggle you up. It won't matter too much if you are seen. Patrons often smuggle women up to their rooms."

"Oh, I see. Do you often smuggle women up to your room, sir?"

Oscar laughed.

The Assassin said "Never. This will be a first."

There was a severe tone to his voice.

"You mentioned that you 'stepped' from the throne room to your lodgings, sir. What did you mean by that? What magic is it that you used, Erik?"

"It's more science than magic," said Erik. "Imagine that this world, everything, the sun, the stars, the moon, the planets and all the people on them, all the space between them, imagine that it is all contained in a crystal ball."

"Yes, I can imagine that."

"Then imagine that there are countless crystal balls, endless numbers of them, all packed next to one another. I was told by the person who taught me to step, that the crystal balls are called 'spaces'. When you step, you move between spaces. Spaces near to the one that we are in are very like this one, and ones that are further away can be very different."

"How different, sir?"

"I was shown one where the whole world seemed to be a desert, rocks and scrawny bushes. There were no men, but there were insects. The dominant insects were like cockroaches, but intelligent. They built amazing palaces out of their own poop, but in spite of that it was a pleasant space. Another space had two suns, a blue one and a yellow one. I saw no life in that one."

"Are you serious?"

"I rarely joke," he said.

She considered. It was like a theory that the old court astronomer mentioned one time, but only to dismiss it. She told Erik.

"The old man is wrong. The theory is true. I can vouch for it."

"Why don't you use it to get away completely?"

He smiled grimly. "Because it gives me a headache if I move too far. If I had stepped from the throne room to where I left Oscar, I would have been incapacitated for hours, which is not good if you are being hunted."

"You can step within a 'space', then, it seems, as well as between spaces."

"That's a good point. As I understand it, we did actually move between spaces, but they were so close together that they seemed to be the same space. A tree somewhere in this space grew one less leaf, maybe."

She nodded.

"Can all Assassins 'step'?"

"Many of them. Some can never learn the trick, and others can't step at all without experiencing a migraine. You are interested in such stuff, milady?" he said.

"Yes," she said. "I was the despair of my tutors. I loved the physics, the maths, all the science. The boy stuff. I was not interested in the literature, the psychology, the divination and interpreting dreams, the magic. All the sorts of things that girls are supposed to like."

"I think that you would have disliked needlework and cooking, and preferred archery, and sword fighting. You would have disliked the minor combat stuff that they teach girls. But you tried to stab me overhand..."

"What would you have done, sir, if I'd tried to stab you in the guts?"

"Well, I'd have broken your wrist... Oh, you were testing me! Or you would like me to think that you were. Very clever."

"The truth, sir? I've never been taught how to stab someone. Thank you for the lesson."

"Ah."

She smiled and they fell silent as the horse walked along the trail. Oscar seemed to be dozing on his horse, so the only sound was of the horses' hooves.

"What's your cover story?" she asked.

Oscar answered. "He's the heir of a Baron, travelling to the Court to be presented to the King. He didn't actually get to meet him. Boss, perhaps we should change that?"

He nodded towards Louise.

"I see. I'm your cousin, also travelling to be presented to the King, in the hope of possibly snaring a husband."

She put her hand under her chin, and fluttered her eyelids. Oscar laughed.

"I see," said the Assassin, who didn't didn't see the pantomime, of course. "That will do fine. Did you have any luck? I presume that there is some truth in your story."

"A few expressions of interest and an unpleasant encounter in a dark hallway. Nothing more."

"Hmm?"

"I dealt with it, sir. Let's just say he walked awkwardly for a while."

"I get the impression that you found the court boring. Is that why you let me take you away so easily? You didn't beg me to let you go and you could have escaped in the crush at the gate, milady."

"I wasn't going to beg! Except maybe for my life, but you didn't threaten that, apart from a little at the beginning. I could have tried to escape at the gates, but I didn't want to risk it. You could have killed me in the crush with little danger to yourself, and I didn't know what the odds were that I could get away. Besides, you didn't kill me at the beginning, and I felt that I owed you a debt, even if you don't see it that way. And yes, I did find court boring."

He nodded. "Once again, a nice summary. You impress me, milady,"

"Thank you."

The inn was a nondescript place. There was just one bar, which took up much of the front of the ground floor. There were kitchens and storage rooms at the back, and a small corridor leading to the outside. In the garden there were a few tables and benches for those clients who wanted to sit in the open air.

The stairs to the upper levels, where the bedrooms were, branched off from the small corridor. Erik and Oscar booked themselves in, and then let Louise in through the back door when no one

was looking. She had covered herself in Erik's cloak, and they slipped up the stairs. Louise couldn't stop giggling, much to Erik's annoyance.

Their room had a single large bed in it. The Assassin fished around under the bed and rolled out a truckle bed.

"Oscar and I will take the large bed, milady, if you will take the truckle bed."

"Thanks, Erik. Please call me Louise, though. I think that we are well past 'milady'!"

"If you wish," he said. "What do you think of the accommodation, Louise?"

She laughed.

"My family could buy the whole inn and not really notice. But it is fine. I've slept in worse. School was much worse! We had eight girls in a room about this big, and girls of that age are not tidy or clean creatures."

That got a smile from the Assassin. "Yes, we had similar in my school, too."

"Me too," said Oscar. "Twelve kids, a donkey and a pig."

"You forget, Oscar, that I've seen your school."

"Oh yeah, boss. So you have." He was unconcerned.

"Oscar, do you have a needle and thread? I have to fix my clothes. My top is still too upmarket and my under petticoats could be made to look more like proper skirts."

"Sure, milady." Oscar passed over a small package.

Louise slipped off her top. Of course, she still had on her undergarments, and this was not the time to be modest. She started stitching away, removing some of the decoration, reshaping the garment.

"Oscar," said Erik, "I know that you have contacts here. Can you discretely source a proper skirt for Louise? Also, could you go downstairs and organize some food?"

"Yes, boss. Right away."

The Assassin watched as she unpicked and folded and sewed.

"I must apologize for my remarks about needlework earlier. I'd bet that you can cook, too."

She laughed. "I wasn't a total tomboy! The needlework came in handy when I tore my clothes climbing trees and racing through the woods with my brothers, though, and there's some artistry to needlework which I like very much. I might be a passable cook, but I've never had a chance to try, except at school."

She smoothed the garment and tried it on.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"Yes, that looks much less 'courtly'. It's still low cut."

She frowned. "Yes, you are right. It was already low cut so I didn't have much material to work with. But it's the fashion at the moment, anyway. It will do."

Oscar came back, carrying a red velvet skirt. Louise looked at it closely.

"That's nice!" she said. "It's not real velvet, of course, but it's what girls are wearing these days. The maids back home used to wear skirts like this on their days off."

She tried it on and it fit perfectly.

"That's amazing, Oscar! How did you manage that?"

"Oh, I've got a good eye, and my friend, the one who gave it to me is about your size. And sheer luck was involved, too."

"She got paid?" asked the Assassin.

"Yes, boss, of course. And, er, she said she had forgotten the transaction already. Nice girl."

Just then the food that Oscar had ordered arrived, and Louise hid until the servant had left.

"Er, boss," said Oscar. "I also got these."

It was a bottle of hair dye and some cosmetics.

“Why would we need those?”

“To lighten milady’s hair, perhaps. And give her a different skin tone. Because of this.”

He produced a broadsheet that he had bought downstairs. It had been delivered by an express pony, and gave full details of the recent assassination and Louise and the Assassin’s disappearance. It gave descriptions of them both, but of course the Assassin’s description didn’t matter. In the uniform, they all looked much the same. Louise’s description was accurate and that did matter. The article concluded that the location of the Assassin and his mistress was currently unknown. Rewards for any information, etc.

“Mistress?!” said Louise and Erik at the same time.

They were both stunned by the broadsheet.

“Oh, wait a minute,” said Louise. “Someone is trying to throw the blame on to me! Who was quoted in the paper? The Chancellor?”

“It doesn’t say,” said Oscar.

“Right. Thanks for the hair dye, Oscar. I’d better just lighten my hair. A heavy dye job would be obvious.”

“Wait a minute,” said the Assassin. “You are under my protection, and it is my decision what we do. Is that understood? I’m happy to take your suggestions into account, of course, and I agree that colouring your hair is a good idea.”

Louise considered. This was not the time for a power struggle. He was right.

“Yes, sir, that is understood. How does this change your obligations to me?”

“My mistake led to you stepping with me from the throne room, and I could not kill you, so I brought you with me. That allowed your enemies to frame you, unfortunately. My options range from abandoning you, to killing you, or just taking you along. I cannot abandon you while your enemies are hunting you, because that has come about as a result of my mistake. I cannot kill you merely because you are an inconvenience to me, so you will have to come along. In that case, dyeing your hair seems like a good strategy. We will stay the night, because not to do so would be suspicious, but we will leave early in the morning. Do you have any issues with that?”

“No, Erik, that seems to be the best plan. Can you tell me where we are heading? I realize that it might be best if you kept that information to yourself.”

“Well, I will tell you that we are heading for an Assassin’s Guild lodge, but I won’t tell you where at the moment. I haven’t seen you leaving any clues of our passage, but I can’t be certain.”

She nodded. She could deny it, but that would carry no weight, of course.

“If I’m under your protection, Erik, I’m not going to try to get away. Not that I’d had any such plans anyway. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. You’re a bright woman, Louise, so you will understand that I can’t take your word for it.”

She nodded.

“Please give me a hand, Oscar. There is only a small mirror, and I can’t easily dye my hair by myself.”

“Sure, milady.”

“I assume that you are a registered Assassin, Erik, so why are you running?”

“I’m not running exactly, Louise. I’m removing myself from the area. What I did was completely legal, of course, but if I remained in the area, then there is a high chance that the authorities would

try to detain me. I would either have to let myself be taken into custody, meaning that I would have to languish in jail until my Guild could get me released. Or, I could resist arrest and people would be injured or, regrettably, killed. That's without figuring in aggrieved relatives and those who hired me."

"Why would those who hired you be a problem?"

"They would consider me to be a link back to them. I don't know who hired me, but some clients can't be convinced."

"Oh! I see. Why are you an Assassin? Is that a question that I can ask?"

"Yes, you can ask. It's a question every Assassin is asked, before they graduate, and afterwards too. If the assessment panel believe that you haven't properly asked it of yourself, then they will not graduate you."

"It sounds stressful."

He nodded. "Yes, it is. A good Assassin asks it of himself before and after each contract."

"Can you tell me? Obviously if you'd rather not..."

"It would make a change from telling Oscar. He's sick of it."

Oscar snorted behind them. "That's true!"

En route, they had acquired a third horse from one of Oscar's contacts, so Louise was no longer riding behind Erik. Oscar had dropped back and Louise was riding alongside Erik.

"I perform a service, and one which is in fairly high demand. The price that we charge is high, to reduce the number of frivolous contracts. We guarantee success, but a non-Guild assassination attempt may be successful or may not, and generally leads to more injuries and fatalities.

"Arguably, our service reduces the possibility of a tyrant or despot taking over a country, since the people of the country could hire an Assassin to remove him. Some argue the opposite.

"Arguably, it reduces the incidence of civil wars or vendettas. Again, some argue the opposite. Such evidence that exists seems to support the Guild's view, but, of course, it is disputed.

"I personally don't like killing people, and that is true of all the Assassins that I know. It's a necessity, the reason for the contract. I believe, though, that our service reduces random killings and vendettas, reduces the impact on innocent bystanders, and reduces the possibility of unnecessary pain and suffering that might result from a bungled amateur assassination."

"How did you become an Assassin?"

"The prosaic answer is that I was an orphan and was selected when I was young by my brothers in the Guild. The more personal answer is that I questioned my calling at every step of my progress in the Guild, as did all my contemporaries. Some did not make it. They dropped out and a significant number committed suicide. Some were judged to be unsuitable by the Guild. I was very fortunate. My first contract was a saint of a man. He said to me 'What you do is essential. Do not grieve, and do not hesitate'. That has sustained me over many contracts, but I still do not know exactly what he meant."

She touched his hand as they rode side by side.

"I thank you," he said.

"I hesitate to ask, but surely some of those that you kill may be good men or women?"

"Yes, but we Assassins cannot take sides. We have to stay apolitical. We are told 'So-and-so is good man. Do not kill him.' But the person who tells us may not be telling the truth. He may have aligned himself with the person on whom we have the contract.

"And sometimes a person's public face conceals a totally different private face. Some things that my fellow Assassins have reported about their targets are truly gut-wrenchingly evil. Those cases

are fairly easy to come to terms with. Though when the target is an apparently saintly man, well, that hits the Assassin much harder.

“But the contract that I had the most difficulty in coming to terms with was a little old lady. She was dying of a painful disease, and wanted an end to it. She’d paid for the contract herself! She told me about it. I know that it was her wish, and I was as gentle as I could be, but that contract was really hard. We cannot use poisons, so she took a sleeping potion, but it was still very hard. We chatted until she fell asleep, and then ... I did it.”

“I see. My cousin. The one you killed. You mentioned that he oppressed the sun-worshippers and other minorities. I hadn’t heard that.”

“Yes, I learned that after I was given the contract. To be fair, I also heard that he did good things too. He sent the army to help people after the earthquake, if you remember. Who’s to say whether he was a good King or a bad King, or more likely just a middling King? History will judge him, not me.”

They rode along quietly for a while.

“I like talking to you, Louise. Oscar and I have been together so long, that we can almost read one another’s minds. He’s a dear friend, but to be able to talk to someone new and intelligent is a great pleasure.”

“Yet if someone took out a contract on Oscar, you would kill him?”

“In an instant,” said Oscar. He didn’t seem concerned.

“He’s safe. None of Oscar’s friends or enemies could afford a contract.” It was the closest the Assassin had come to making a joke.

They had been travelling to the west and were now travelling slightly north. Louise thought that she knew where they were headed, but she decided to keep her thoughts to herself.

“Boss, we’ve got company,” said Oscar.

A hundred metres or so in front of them, two men had stepped out of the woods. Louise immediately wheeled her horse and as she expected there were two men approaching them from the rear.

“Erik, there are two behind us.”

“I know. Here.”

He passed her a cocked crossbow and a bolt.

“If you have to shoot, try to make it count.”

He dismounted and drew his sword. Louise noticed that Oscar had wheeled his horse too, and had drawn his longbow. He had an arrow nocked. Louise glanced at Oscar and he returned the glance.

“The boss will handle the two in front,” he said with confidence.

“What can we do for you, sirs? I am a certified Assassin and these two people are under my protection,” said Erik, while advancing on them.

“Kill them,” said the largest man.

The two men in front drew their swords and advanced on the Assassin. The two at the back loosed bolts at Louise and Oscar, but their angle was difficult and they missed. They started to cock their bows, but that would take a few moments.

Oscar loosed his arrow at one of the men at the back, but it missed.

“Damn! I hate shooting from horseback,” he said.

“Allow me,” said Louise.

She turned her horse slightly sideways and fired at the left-hand man. He spun around and went down as the bolt hit him in the shoulder. Louise lay flat on her horse, and a bolt from the remaining man went over her head. The second of Oscar's arrows went into the man's throat and he dropped. Louise and Oscar wheeled their horses to see what was happening to Erik. There were two bodies on the road, and Erik was wiping his sword on the jerkin of one of them. He sheathed it.

"Amateurs! They weren't expecting us to fight back. I almost feel insulted. They were expecting you to run, and they would have had clear shots at your backs. If you are on foot, it's hard to hit someone on a horse who is advancing towards you. You did exactly the right thing. Well done, Louise."

"I muffed my shot, and only winged him. He's still alive."

"Good! Let's see if we can find out if they were after us or if this was just a random robbery attempt."

He walked up to the man who Louise had shot. Their attacker was sitting against a rock groaning, with the shaft of the bolt protruding from his shoulder.

"Oscar?" the Assassin said.

Oscar cast a professional eye over the wound. "Hmm, I don't think it hit anything serious. It wasn't barbed so it should come out without causing too much damage. The shoulder should heal OK, but it will always be stiff. It might be a little numb too."

"Better that than dead," said the Assassin. "Now, why did you attack us?"

"Harold told us to kill you. Someone paid him and he paid us."

"Do you know who?"

"He was a bit secretive, but he mentioned someone called Cyrus."

"The Chancellor's nephew!" said Louise.

"It hurts! Can you do something, please?"

"In a minute. How did you find us?"

"Tracer spell. In milady's clothes."

"What!" Louise ran to her horse and retrieved her old clothes and sure enough there was a charm sewn into the hem of her skirt. She threw it on the ground and stamped on it until it was powder. She continued stamping until Oscar made her stop.

"Boss," said Oscar. "Shall we fix him up now?"

"Yes. OK, sir, this is going to hurt."

He held the man tightly and Oscar pulled the bolt out in one movement. The man shrieked and passed out. Oscar bandaged him while he was unconscious.

"We'll leave him here. Someone will be along soon. He won't bleed to death now."

"I'm sorry about the tracer spell, Erik. I only brought those clothes along on a whim."

Erik shrugged. "I know you did. It doesn't matter. But why was he tracing you? He couldn't have known that I would accidentally step with you attached!"

"The Chancellor is the most ambitious person in the court, but I don't see how tracing me would help him in his conspiracies. Oh, wait a minute. He did seem very interested in my lands, the ones my grandfather left me. He was always being nice to me, and frankly, it was creepy. The charm would always tell him where I was, wouldn't it? Maybe he wanted to marry me for my lands? Also, he would then be distantly related to the King. Former King."

"And if he did marry you, then those between you and the throne might suddenly start to die."

"The slime ball! I didn't realize!"

She pondered for a moment. "But if he wanted to marry me, why set those thugs on us? Why pretend that we were in it together, you and I? Oh, I think I know. Cyrus was creeping around one of my other cousins. The Chancellor wanted a scapegoat and, at the same time, didn't need me any more. It was a spot of luck for him that I accidentally got carried along with you. That's my guess."

"That makes sense. There's one good thing, though. At least it wasn't the police or the militia. They probably don't know where we are, but I think that it would be better if we stepped up our pace."

When they stopped for the night, Louise practised with the crossbow. She was not satisfied with her shot during the fight, because, as she had explained to Erik and Oscar, she had tried for a body shot and only winged the man. She thought that her time at court had taken the edge off her shooting. Erik nodded his approval, and called out some suggestions, correcting her stance and recommending that she hold the bow slightly differently, and soon she was hitting her target nine times out of ten. He was impressed by her shooting and told her so. She only stopped when she was too tired to cock the bow.

"I've come to a decision," said the Assassin. "If the Guild agrees, we will publicly ask a ransom for you, Louise, from your family. That signals the fact that we have no connection with you. We'll include a clause that forbids you from identifying me, though I doubt that it is really needed, is it? We will also send out a broadsheet to explain that you were accidentally dragged along with me when I left the throne room. We won't say how. People will assume that it was magic."

"A ransom? Has it been done before?"

"There are precedents."

"The broadsheet. Will people believe that? It's the truth, of course, but will they believe it?"

"Well, it will come from the Assassin's Guild of course. We are known for our integrity. But it doesn't matter too much."

"Boss, she could align herself with the Assassin's Guild. There's precedent for that, too."

"Yes, Oscar. That's true. A last resort, if your enemies don't relent."

"First we have to get to a Guild lodge," said Louise.

"I don't anticipate any difficulty there," said the Assassin. "We are one day away, and we can be reasonably sure that your pursuers have not let the authorities know where we are."

"We are heading for your Grand Lodge, aren't we? Where your Master resides."

He nodded.

They stopped one last time at a travellers' rest stop a kilometre or two out of the town where the lodge was. Louise was under the protection of the Assassin so she didn't stray too far from Erik and Oscar, but while they watered the horses she slipped round the back of the building to use the facilities there.

She was on her way back to the front of the building when a hand clamped over her mouth and her arm was twisted up her back. A second man stepped out from behind a bush.

"I'm sure you are saying 'Thank you for rescuing me, Cyrus', but I'm afraid that you will have to remain silent, just in case you accidentally alert your companions. Since those incompetents I hired failed to kill you on the road, I've had to come up with another plan. I'm going to take you back, so that you can stand trial for the murder of the King. Oh, I'm sure my uncle will ask for your pardon, if you'll agree to marry him and sign over your lands to him. It's up to you."

The Assassin walked around the corner. "This woman is under my protection. Let her go."

"Back off," said Cyrus. "She's mine."

The Assassin was relaxed. "You know, she told me about an unpleasant incident at the palace. Was that you?"

Louise took the hint and stamped on her captor's foot and his grip loosened, then disappeared.

"OK, boss. He's out of it," said Oscar from behind her.

Cyrus snarled and drew a highly illegal explosive driven projectile weapon, a gun, from inside his coat, and aimed it at the Assassin. Louise didn't bother to think. She just launched a flying kick at Cyrus's arm and the gun discharged into the air.

Erik grappled with Cyrus, and Louise shrieked. She recognized a killer hold.

"Erik! Erik! No! No! You're an Assassin! You don't have a contract on him. You don't! Don't let this become personal. You're a professional. Let him go!"

"She's right, boss," said Oscar from behind her.

The Assassin relaxed his grip. "Yes, you're right. Thank you, both of you."

He threw Cyrus down to the ground.

"What should we do with him, then?"

"I've got an idea," said Louise.

The farmer took his small daughter and son round the back of the traveller's rest. They saw a curious sight. Two men, bound back-to-back, were tied to a tree. They were naked from the waist down.

"Daddy, I can see their wi--"

"OK, kids, back to the cart."

When the police arrived, they found Cyrus and his henchman, and they found the gun with Cyrus's fingerprints all over it. They also found a letter from the Assassin, regretting his absence and offering to make a statement to authorities. Shortly after this became common knowledge, the Chancellor 'retired' to his estates.

"I request sanctuary for this woman," said Erik.

He slid a small booklet, his licence, across the polished wood counter, and the man behind it regarded it closely.

"I see."

Louise, the Assassin and Oscar were in the reception room in the Guild lodge. It was a large room divided into two parts by the counter. A few plain chairs were located on their side of the counter, but on the other side the room was furnished like a sitting room. The occupant had just put aside his book and mug of tea to deal with them.

"Reason?"

"Unintended entanglement with Guild affairs."

The man raised an eyebrow as he returned the booklet.

"You had better come through then."

He raised the flap in the counter, and the Assassin and Louise passed through.

"Here you go, Oscar." The man lobbed some keys to Oscar who hurried back through the door to deal with the horses.

The Assassin and the man embraced.

"Brother!"

"Brother! I've not seen you since that contract up north. Is everything going well?"

"Well, there were some complications with the latest contract, as I said."

He indicated Louise.

“Milady! My apologies. Welcome to the Guild lodge. I’ll have to take you to a waiting room until the Master has made a decision, then I will get someone to show you to your quarters.”

“I’ll see you later, Louise. I’ll have to check in, but I’ll see you at the evening meal. Everyone who is not on duty eats at the same time.”

Louise felt a little abandoned, which, because of the sort of woman she was, led her to question her state of mind.

The Master looked like someone’s grandfather, but his appearance was deceptive. Louise would later find that he had one of the sharpest minds of anyone she knew, and he was also a veteran with over three hundred contracts to his name.

She was shown into the Master’s sitting room, and he saw that she was seated and poured her a cup of tea.

“Can you tell me how you came to be entangled in my Assassin’s business my dear?” he asked. He listened, nodding, as Louise told the tale.

“Mmm, mmm. I see. And what have you to say about this?”

He produced a copy of the broadsheet. Someone had ringed the word ‘mistress’ at the bottom, with a bold pen.

“I don’t know whether to laugh or not, Master,” she said. “Erik is an attractive man, but we were companions in arms, and not lovers.”

She wondered briefly if she would have... She stopped that thought in its tracks and blushed. The Master smiled slightly.

“Besides, we had not met before the assassination, and the broadsheet was written only shortly after we left the town, and before we had stopped for the night. There was no time to... Err.”

She stopped that thought too. The Master was smiling broadly now.

“Relax, my dear. I believe you.”

That was worse, somehow.

“I will grant you sanctuary, of course. It’s never been refused, so far as I know. We will be looking to ransom you back to your family, but that will take a while to arrange. Lawyers and so on. Would you like to keep busy while you are here? You could help with the younger people, the orphans and others.”

“Thank you, Master. Thank you for allowing me sanctuary, and I’d be pleased to help out.”

Erik had given his report to the Master, so he was surprised when the request for another meeting arrived.

He hurried to the Master’s office, and found him sorting some papers on his desk.

“Sit down, son. Sit down.”

Erik was aware of how the Master operated so he ignored the shuffling. He inspected the wall lights and the ceiling fittings, and other irrelevant objects around the room, just like anyone who is invited into a room and then has to wait.

“What do you think about this?” asked the Master, eventually.

It was the broadsheet with the word ‘mistress’ ringed in black ink.

“Erm, it’s not true of course. We think that the Chancellor was behind it, trying to throw suspicion on to Louise.”

“‘We’?”

“Louise, Oscar, and myself.” He knew immediately that he shouldn’t have mentioned Oscar.

“Hmm. What do you think of Louise, son?”

Erik considered. "She's a nice person. Bright, intelligent, resourceful. Didn't complain about anything, which made the journey much more pleasant than it might have been. Accepted the situation and was helpful. Was excellent in the fight. Helped take the gun from Cyrus."

The Master probed a bit more. Erik was on the spot, and couldn't escape. He wondered what it would be like to really have her as his mistress. Err, where did that thought come from?

"So, is she was the sort of woman who could become the mistress of someone, say a young Assassin, if the opportunity arose?"

Erik thought about Louise. He liked her very much. He could imagine... He steered away from that line of thought, but his ears felt hot.

"Come, come," said the Master. "It's not a difficult question. Well, maybe it is."

"Yeeees, maybe," Erik said carefully. "But the Guild does not approve of such liaisons, does it?"

"Well, we are not monks, son," said the Master. "But it is difficult for 'such liaisons' to last in our profession. If one does last, it often causes the Assassin to renounce the Guild."

Erik experienced an instant of doubt. He liked Louise, but could it develop into more than that? The Master was implying that it could, and that he might leave the Guild as a consequence. Could he leave the Guild? He answered the Master as truthfully as possible.

"I understand, Master. You are not suggesting that I end my friendship with Louise, I think, but you are pointing out some of the possible consequences of continuing it. Louise doesn't belong in the Guild, but I do. She will probably be ransomed some time in the next few months, and I will be given another contract, probably based in another lodge. Any friendship, even a deep friendship, between us is likely to end in a few months or so."

The Master nodded and muttered "Deep friendship?"

Erik ignored that and continued.

"I will continue my friendship with her, but I will ensure that she knows about the strength of my ties to the Guild. I think that she already has a good idea, anyway. I can't predict for sure what will happen, but, knowing Louise, she won't want me to break my ties. They are part of me. Maybe we can stay just good friends, while she and I are both here."

"Good boy. She will need a friend."

Louise hurried down the corridor to her meeting with the Master.

"Hullo, Master. You sent for me?"

"Come in, Louise. Sit down, my dear."

"Is it about my ransom?"

"No, no. As you know we are intentionally drawing out the process to give your family a chance to come up with a suitable deal before we publish the ransom 'demand'. It will not be onerous. Have you considered the option of aligning yourself to the Guild, though? You've been here a few months now. You seem to be enjoying it, in spite of the fact that you are confined to the lodge."

He reflected that everyone liked Louise. She was good with the orphans and others of the intake, and an excellent teacher. The Master was impressed how she argued logically and pertinently that there should be more women in power in the Guild. She had made an impression at the shooting-range, where her skill with the crossbow pushed the better shooters to excel. He wasn't sure if she realized her effect on the Assassins and trainees and everyone else at the lodge.

"Yes, I am enjoying it. I love teaching the orphans and the others in your intake, but no, I don't want to align myself to the Guild. Women in the Guild are not equal with the men. If there were any females in the front line, or you had at least some women leaders... Apart from milady the

Manageress of the Household, the women here are all wives and girlfriends or servants hired in from outside.”

“And mistresses?”

She laughed. “Yes. And mistresses.”

“You could always help with that. But anyway, that’s not the reason that I called you here. Erik is leaving. He has a contract elsewhere.”

“Oh. Can I see him before he goes?”

“Yes, certainly. He is waiting for you in Meeting Room One. But first I need to talk to you.”

He stood and paced the carpet.

“Your case is unusual, but not unheard-of, Louise. Erik made a mistake and you were carried along with him as a result. He correctly brought you here. There are other cases where young ladies, and even some young men, have been caught up in the affairs of the Assassins’ Guild, and have ended up at a Guild lodge. My boys are young, tend to be good-looking, and it’s not surprising that this happens, now and then.”

“I see. I only know one Assassin well, Master, and it seems to me that, from what I have seen of him, and what he has told me, they are also thoughtful, caring people. Those are attractive traits.”

“Yes, that is true,” said the Master. “To continue, in every case where someone has ended up at a lodge, the young person has had no option but to go along with the Assassin. Although it is rarely an abduction as such, the close contact often results in a co-dependency arising. In other words the young person forms an attachment to the Assassin, and vice versa.”

“Ah. The ‘hostage syndrome’, Master. You are wondering if I am suffering from it?”

“Precisely, my dear. Our Assassins are taught about it. Erik is aware that he and you could be caught up in it. I was unaware that you knew about it.”

She looked at the back of her hands. At some time during the day she had somehow acquired a streak from a whiteboard marker pen across the back of the fingers of her left hand.

“I don’t know if I’m suffering from it, Master. I’ve often wondered about it myself. I like Erik a great deal and I have great respect and affection for him, and for all the members of the Guild, but I have no urge to try to prevent him leaving, and I will not implore him to take me along. That would seem a bit silly. I will miss him. I’ve enjoyed our time together here, but we have different courses to follow through life. I don’t know if my respect and affection for him and the Guild is partly or completely caused by the ‘hostage syndrome’. I might only know for sure after I have been away from here for a while. I may never know.”

“You are a remarkable person, Louise. Please go and say your goodbyes.”

“Thank you, Master. I will probably cry.”

She entered the meeting room, and he spun around.

“I wanted to see you before I left, Louise. You know that I’m wedded to the Guild. You know, by now, what I mean by that?”

“Yes, I know what you mean by that. I’ve never hugged you, my friend. May I?”

He nodded, and she moved towards him, and put her arms around him. He encircled her with his arms.

“I enjoyed our little journey. Incidentally, Oscar said that he did too. And I’ve enjoyed the time we’ve had at the lodge, too,” he said.

She kissed him on the cheek, and he kissed her back. Like brother and sister.

“Go, with my love, Erik, and don’t look back. But...”

“But what?”

“Remember me. Remember your ‘mistress’!”

She was laughing and crying.

“I will. I will remember you, Louise, my friend, my ‘mistress’.”

They kissed one more time, then separated. He headed for the door.

“Erik...”

He turned.

“Send my love to Oscar too.”

He smiled and nodded, and left the room.

The man in black paused in surprise.

“Louise? Is that you?” He spoke briefly to his companion who continued on by himself.

“Erik? Erik? After all these years!”

She put her hand on his arm.

“Shall we go for a coffee? Oh, by the way, this is my eldest daughter, Patricia. Patsy, this is Erik, an old friend of mine.”

Erik took Patsy’s hand and shook it. Louise saw Patsy’s initial disinterest melt as she gazed at Erik. Louise smiled. He was still a handsome man.

“Milady,” said Erik to Patsy. “I knew that you had married and had children, Louise. You take after your mother, milady Patsy.”

“Thank, you, sir. Do you have any children?”

“Patsy!”

“Yes, Patsy, I do have children. Two boys. But they are younger than you are.”

They stopped at a coffee shop.

“You have children?” asked Louise.

“Yes. My wife is a Guild member, though she was never on the front line. She’s a negotiator. I met her some years after our little adventure, Louise. We are very happy.”

“Good, I’m glad. Oh, you aren’t compromising one of your contracts by talking to us, are you?”

He laughed. “No, of course not. I wouldn’t let that happen. But the Guild is changing, and nowadays we mostly go in for negotiation and arbitration, not killing. You may have heard. Besides, I retired from the front line when I got married.”

“How is Oscar? Did he retire when you did?”

“Not exactly. He moved into the leadership side of the Guild. He’s now the Guild Master.”

“Really? Your Oscar? Do you call him ‘boss’ then? But I thought that the Master was called something else. I do follow your public announcements.”

“Yes, my Oscar! I call him ‘Master’, of course. You forget that we in the Guild all have more than one name. You may be interested to know that the Deputy Guild Master is his wife. You had a big influence on the Guild, Louise, even though you weren’t there for long.”

They chatted for a bit, then Erik had to go. They stood up.

“Goodbye, milady Patsy. It’s been nice meeting you. It’s good to see you again, Louise, and I hope that we bump into each other again some time. Goodbye, my mistress!”

He kissed her cheek.

“Goodbye, Erik. Now I will have to explain that to Patsy.” She laughed.

Louise and her daughter watched Erik stride off.

“Well, he’s mellowed. He’s much more relaxed than he used to be. He was even teasing me, I think!”

“‘Mistress’? ‘Mistress’?! Mum! Does Dad know?”

“It’s not like that! We never ... Well, I’d better tell you the whole story. You’ll like it. Dad knows. I told him shortly after we met.”

“I bet he was about to kill you, but you fell in love instead!”

“Nothing like that!” Louise laughed, though a little voice inside her told her that it wasn’t too far from the truth. “What really happened was this...”
