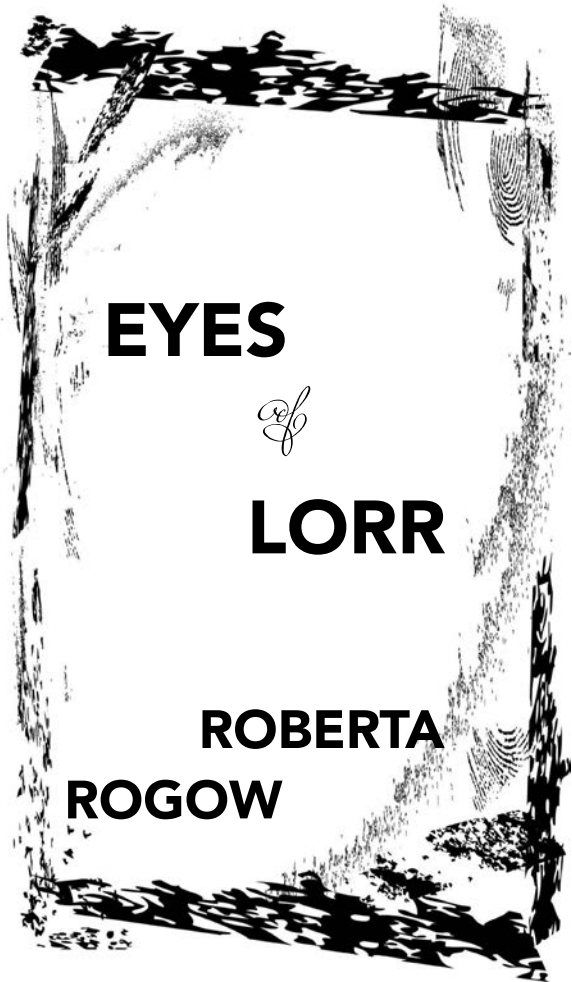




EYES
of
LORR

ROBERTA ROGOW



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EYES OF LORR

© 2021 by Roberta Rogow

ISBN 978-1-61271-391-5

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2021941167

**TO JACQUELINE LICHTENBERG AND
JEAN LORRAH**

Who introduced me to the marvelous
world of fan fiction many years ago

NOTES FOR SALE

IT ALL BEGINS WITH THE CLIENTS.

They come to me with their problems, and ask me to solve them. Usually, it's personal, not something for their Guild Security to bother with, and definitely not something that would draw the City Guard into their orbit. A spouse that's cheating, a family member taking advantage of an elderly parent, a child gone missing.

They come to the little room behind Jake and Holly's Boutique, they tell me what they want me to do. I find out what they need to know, I tell them, and they go ahead and do what they feel has to be done.

I'm Pola Drach, Independent Eye. I'm not directly connected with any of the Guilds. I'm not in the Guards. I have no political affiliation. I just watch and listen, and report.

My clients are mostly Middle Tier Lorrans, what you might call above-the-below and below-the-upper. Small shopkeepers, office drones, mechanics, and technicians. Sometimes refugees from the religious bickering in Pangkot, come to Lorr for work and safety, or Norlanders who've had their fill of ice and snow. Once in a while I get a bigger fish, someone connected with the Upper Tier families. I've even done a job for Master Assassin Fee M'Farr...but that's a story for another time.

This client was definitely not from Lorr. He was Contamonti, from the toes of his lizardskin boots to his flat-crowned straw hat. Nice, bland face, nothing to distract, no obvious scars or odd features—just regular eyes, nose, mouth all adding up to a good-looking whole, but nothing to distinguish him from anyone else in Lorr. Blue eyes took in my spare quarters, reddish-blond hair sticking out from under the hat. Reddish-blond fuzz sprouted from his square chin—too young, then, to grow a full beard like the Contamonti Elders.

Wearing the standard Conty garb—blue cotton trou held up with straps attached to a bib across his chest worn over a full-sleeve blue shirt, braided cord keeping the shirt closed at the neck. Broad shoulders, good solid chest, well-built under the baggy outfit. In other words, a typical youngster fresh from the countryside, ready to take in the perils and delights of the City of Lorr.

He hesitated as he came in the door, as though worried he was doing the right thing, coming to me. I don't look like much—medium height, medium weight, honey-gold skin, fair hair, green eyes, just the far side of thirty.

I was wearing one of my autumn outfits of a brown jacket, yellow shirt, brown trou. Nothing gaudy, nothing too worn. I wouldn't be noticed in a crowd. That's the way I like it, and it works for my clients.

I smiled, encouraging him to come in. “Oyo, how's business? What brings you here, friend?”

“I'm Zacharias Garber, I'm here in Lorr with the Contamont Miners' trade delegation,” he stated in pass-

able Lorr Standard, flavored with the distinctive Conty twang. “I’ve lost something. I need to have it back, quickly. I was told you are the one who finds things.”

I looked him over while he stood shifting from foot to foot.

“Sit down, and tell me about it.”

He plumped himself into the wooden chair across the desk from mine. It’s deliberately uncomfortable. I don’t want clients lingering, chattering, wasting my time when I could be getting on with the job.

He shifted in his seat. “The...the persons on Entertainment Row said you would help me.”

Persons? Either buskers or the Licensed sex workers who walk the street, trolling for customers. I’d have to find out which one pointed him in my direction. It’s a debt, and in Lorr, all debts have to be paid.

“I’ll do my best to help you.” I reached into the drawer next to the kneehole in my desk and pulled out one of my standard contracts and the graphite stylus I keep handy for clients. “What did you lose? When did you see it last? And what do you want me to do when I find it?”

“It’s my notebook,” he burst out. “I’ve got to find it! It’s got everything in it—all my thoughts and feelings, all my work notes. I keep it here.” He patted his chest. “Inside my bib pocket.”

“Did you take it out and leave it somewhere?”

“No, no. It must have fallen out when...”

He stopped. A blush started somewhere under his chin and spread across that fair face.

“You took off your trou,” I said slowly. “On Entertainment Row? In one of the Pleasure Houses?” I didn’t have to ask how or why. It was obvious, written on his red face.

“It was a party,” he went on. “I didn’t think I should go, but Elder Mackintosh said it was an obligation, since it was arranged by the Banker’s Guild representative, the one who was in favor of promoting our funding. Elder Mackintosh was quite insistent that we accept their hospitality, even though it might be somewhat...” He paused. “I didn’t know quite what was involved in such an affair. I thought it would just be food and drink. I didn’t expect the...other entertainment.”

Meaning Licensees. I got the picture. Get the Contramonters muzzy, ply them with jack and spray weed around; then turn the Licensees loose to pick up whatever they could wangle out of them. Standard operating technique for merchants in Lorr, where anything goes if it brings in a profit. I’d have thought better of the Banker’s Guild, but everyone has their off-moments.

“So, you went,” I said. “And you accepted the hospitality offered.”

“I did,” Friend Zac moaned. “I had no idea it would be that kind of place...that kind of party...”

“Not the sort of thing they do in Contramont,” I finished for him.

Beyond the mountains, folks get prudish, clinging to the Second Ship customs that separate genders. Especially true in Contramont, where things get downright rigid when it comes to male-female relationships.

“So, you were lured into a bedroom by one of the wicked females, removed your trou...”

Zacharias’s blush turned purple. “Not a female,” he whispered. “His name was Emil. I’d never, ever thought I would...that is, I wanted...but it’s a sin, I mustn’t...” He stopped, gripped by shame.

“I’m not here to judge you,” I said with a confidential smile. “What happens in Lorr stays in Lorr. I assume you and this Emil are both over puberty, and the encounter was part of the entertainment, paid for in advance by whoever was throwing this, um, party. And that no force was involved on either side.”

It doesn’t matter to me whether the two parties involved are male or female or mixed. No one in Lorr cares what anyone does in private with anyone else, so long as it’s consensual, and both parties are over puberty.

Nonconsensual intimacy is another matter—that’s rape, in any language or dialect, and it’s the one thing in Lorr that will bring every law-enforcement organization down on the perpetrator in force. The City Guard won’t stand for it; the Entertainment Guild won’t turn their backs on it; even the Fatsos—the Honorable Guild of Forgers, Assassins, Thieves, and Swindlers—draw the line there. The Regs don’t cite many things as “crime” in Lorr, but rape is right up there with unsanctioned killing and running out on a debt.

Zac nodded, the blush fading from his cheeks.

“There was no force. I went upstairs willingly with Emil. It was...enlightening.

“Then, there was noise downstairs. Emil helped me put on my overalls, and we went down. There was some kind of disruption going on—some other people had come into the place, large men in leather jackets who demanded attention. Our host protested, said he had paid for access for the entire evening. The intruders were very rude.

“Then a squad of City Guards came in, said they had been notified there was a riot in the making. There were words exchanged, and the person in charge made everyone leave. Pedi-shaws were summoned to take us to our lodgings. I left with the others, back to the Stranger’s Hostel at the Advanced Academy, where I have a room.

“I do not know how I got into bed, but someone else must have been there. I fell asleep. And in the morning, when I woke, I realized the book was gone.”

“And you went back to Entertainment Row?”

He nodded. The purple of embarrassment was replaced by the pallor of terror.

“I tried to recall which of the places was the one we visited, but they all look alike in the dark, and by daylight I couldn’t remember which one it was. And then one of the...the persons...on the street told me to go to Clothier’s Alley and talk to Pola Drach.”

I appreciated his delicacy of language. Most Contys would have called them “women” or, worse, “whores”.

“Well, Friend Garber...”

“Call me Zac.”

“Friend Zac, here are my terms. I charge a silver a day. For this, I will find your missing book, and return

it to you. You understand that if I find out something that goes against the Regulations of the City of Lorr, I have to report it to the City Guards.”

“You’ve been listening to those people who claim we’re trying to milk the Lorr treasury for our own profit,” Zac retorted. “That’s just not true. All we want is a fair deal, and funding for our new venture.” He stopped short again. “And all I want is for my notebook to be returned.”

“What makes this book so important to you?” I asked.

“It’s...personal. As I said, I have my thoughts, my feelings in that book. And some of the experiments I conducted on certain strains of coal...”

“Coal?” I echoed. “Your delegation is dealing in coal?”

“That is one of the resources under negotiation, but I’m not directly connected with those discussions. I’m here to attend classes and lectures in organic chemistry at the Advanced Academy,” he explained. “And to discuss several of my own findings with my colleagues from Lorr and Norland and South Coast. All my notes are in that book, so you see, I must have it, and soon!”

Merciful Founders Faith!. This character was a Boffin, one of those high-minded types who try to probe the mysteries of the innards of New Earth. Scientists, they call themselves. No wonder he was in a stew. One word of his indiscretions with a male licensee, and he’d be on the first transport back to Contramont. Goodbye to any hopes of advancement among the other Boffins,

and whatever he'd been working on would be debunked as rotten at the source.

I shoved the form and the stylus closer toward him.

"Write down exactly what you want me to do, and pay me the silver," I told him. "Lorr coins. Conty credit chits are no good to me. I'm not about to go across the mountains to collect them."

"I have silver," Zac assured me, and laid out three coins. "You can contact me at the Strangers Hostel across Academy Way from the Advanced Academy in the Industrial Sector when you find the book." *When*, not *if*. At least he had that much confidence in me.

I nodded and added my signature to the document. "What does this thing look like?"

"It's about the size of my hand." He demonstrated. He had a fairly large paw for a Boffin. They tend to be scrawny types. "Plain paper between leather covers. Written by hand."

"Go back to your hostel," I told him. "I'll be in touch. As soon as I find your book, I'll send a message."

He started to say something, then thought better of it.

"May the Father and Son be with you," he said,

He left me wondering just what was going down with the Contramont Miners' Trade Delegation. Someone had laid out a lot of coin and effort to lure them into what they considered "sin", but to what end? What was so special about this new venture the Miners were pursuing? I made a mental note to find out.

I filed the form away in the bottom side drawer of my desk, then sat back and formulated a plan of attack.

Under normal circumstances, I'd get background on the client before I took on the case, but I had no sources for information on Contramont Boffins. My usual founts of information, my landlords Jake and Holly, were useless. As the leading couturiers in Lorr, they have their fingers on the pulse of Lorr society, but they don't know anything about Contys. The males all wear those cotton bibbed blue trou. The females? Who knows? Most of them aren't allowed to travel out of their mountain hideaways, and the very few that have been seen in Lorr weren't spending any coin on clothing.

Since this Boffin was a newcomer, I couldn't ask my contacts in Admin, either. Transients are supposed to register with the appropriate Guild, which forwards the information to Admin, but Boffin Zac wasn't connected with a Guild yet. Many Boffins affiliate with one or another of the Guilds, but only after they finish their studies and get certified in their specialty. Since Zac was still a student, he wasn't certified; and for all I knew, he'd head back to Contramont when he finished his courses.

I don't have any contacts at the Academy. I'd spent one very unhappy year there, fifteen years ago. I'd left suddenly for reasons I prefer not to recall, and I've never had much time for Boffins since. So, that line of inquiry was out.

If this venture of theirs was being sponsored by someone in the Banker's Guild, I might have asked one of *them* for an opinion of the Contramont Miners and their negotiations. But I'm not too welcome in the Bankers'

Guildhall these days, not after I'd exposed one of their leading families' involvement in a plot to introduce false coin into the Lorr economy. Once I gave testimony in a legal hearing, my face was known and marked. No chance of my getting straight answers there, not even from disgruntled office drones.

I decided to go down to Entertainment Row and start asking questions there. Just in case someone didn't care to answer, I pocketed the sigil from the Assassin's Guild, a token of appreciation from Master Assassin Fee M'Farr. I hoped I didn't have to use it. I prefer to keep my relationship with the Master Assassin private, as does he.

I also hooked my small bludgeon onto my belt. I didn't expect to use that, either, but you never can tell when someone might take offense; and it's always a good idea to be prepared for anything that might come along.

Then I decided to check the Newsposts, and find out just what this Contramont Miners' Trade Delegation was about; and why the Banker's Guild was being so iffy about lending them money.

And what made this particular young Boffin a target for seduction and theft of private property.

ii

I headed for the Newsposts to see what the pundits had to say about the Contramont Trade Delegation.

You'd think that a place like Lorr, where every contract is put on paper, would have a better way of spreading information than Posting it; but the Founders put their public notices on central pillars when they came

here, before the paper mills got started, and that's the way it's been ever since.

Six posts stand in a circle at key intersections and at the bridges across the river to Flatlands. Every Guild, plus Admin and the Dark Ones, sends runners with notices to be attached to the pillars at set times; and the public can thus be aware of important actions, sales of merchandise—whatever the Guilds, Admin, or Dark Ones think people should know about.

And then there's Post Six, where anyone can post anything at all.

My favorite Newspost is the one at the intersection of Clothier's Alley and the Grand Boulevard. I found the usual crowd in front of it, shouldered my way through, and checked the notices.

Post One has the International News, which is where I'd find what the Contramont Miners were up to. I scanned the notices while I tried to remember what I'd learned about Contramont in Basic Education.

According to my old schoolbooks, Contramont was started by some miners about a hundred years ago when the coal and iron mines on this side of the Mineral Mountains began to play out. They thought they could extract more out of the other side of the mountains, but to get there they had to go the long way around. The Mineral Mountains are really steep, mostly jagged peaks and crags, the only passes being the ones carved out by rivers at the bottom of deep gorges. Those rivers are full of rapids and waterfalls, so not navigable by anything larger than a small canoe with a daredevil paddling and car-

rying a few packs of animal hides to the markets on the other side.

To reach their goal, Contramont's settlers went past South Coast, through the Drogo Straits and north on the Inland Sea, then inland. Those early settlers were tough, according to the mag stories, battling giant lizards to get to the raw materials they wanted, and opening mines on the far side of the Mineral Mountains—hence the name *Contramont*. They found plenty of iron ore, coal, and other useful resources, all right; the problem was getting it back to where the raw material could be made into something else.

They chose to track to Port Chicago, and built steamers to carry the ore and coal to the refineries financed in Pangkot by the moneymen in Lorr.

At least, that's what I'd been told. How much was myth and legend, and how much was fact? Not my problem.

Whatever the history was, Contramont is one of those places where explorers and boffins from more civilized places go to find rarities. The people who live there? Total cloddies. The stock character in a farce is the Conty visitor to Lorr who talks with a twang and gets taken in by sharpers...and then turns their tricks around and gets back at them.

Post One didn't have much about the current discussions, except for a brief notice from the Banker's Guild that listed the Delrey Bank as backing a possible trade agreement with the Contramont Miners, with the addition: "Details of said agreement to be posted when

signed, refer to notice on Post Three for more information.”

Someone was being very cagey about exactly what was on the table. I thought this over as I scanned the other posts.

Post Two is Local—nothing dire at the moment, just the usual jousting among Guilds. Merchants insisting on selling what Craftsmen made, Craftsmen claiming they should be able to sell their own products. Transporteers fighting Seamen about access to the landing sites for the big ships docking in Flatlands. Grocers complaining about the Dark Ones imposing fines against products the Dark Ones claimed were tainted and therefore inedible. Everyone scratching for an advantage. That’s the way it goes in Lorr.

Somewhere in the mix was a bulletin stating that the Flatlands Guards were now to be called the Flatlands Force, to distinguish them from the official Lorr City Guards. It didn’t make much difference; they’re still under the direction of the Honorable Guild of Forgers, Assassins, Thieves, and Swindlers. Set a thief to catch a thief? I hoped the Flatlanders felt safer with that lot protecting them. I wouldn’t.

Post Three: Financial. I thought I’d better take a look at that one, too, just to check on the state of the Contramont Mines output. I elbowed a couple of females in light wool jackets and trou aside to search through the assorted notices of sales of goods and financial deals. I shivered in the rising breeze. It was getting windy; the autumn gales weren’t far off, and my jacket wasn’t that

warm, but I wasn't ready to drag out the heavy leather coat yet..

Buried under a notice about a sale of lined winter jackets at Gueirenich's Boutique, I found what I was looking for. A brief note stated, "The Delrey Bank is considering backing the new mines in Contramont, but no decision has been reached. Certain differences between the parties concerning the terms of the loan are pending resolution."

Translation? Delrey was asking for more kickback than the Contys were willing to give, and the Miner's Trade Delegation couldn't go ahead without funding, so things were at a standstill until one or another party blinked. Zac had said he wasn't involved directly in these negotiations, but just suppose he'd heard something or seen something, and jotted it down in that journal. It might not sit well with the higher-ups. That was something I could look into.

My eye was caught by the notice next on the post. The New Earth Airship Line was heading into bankruptcy due to a lack of funding. Not surprising—the whole idea of running a fleet of airships from one settlement to another is absurd. Airships are best left to the daredevils of the Aerial Corps.

A few of the Upper Tier of Admin have private airships, but the cost of running one, the possibilities for disastrous crashes, and the horrendous cost of setting up a whole chain of stations along the coast of the North Continent makes the thing impractical. It would take a huge infusion of capital, and the cooperation of all the

settlements just to get the scheme off the ground. Anyone who'd invested in it must be taking a bloodbath.

Then I remembered how much Selva and Devon Delrey had invested, and snickered. Between bad investments and dicey negotiations, things were not going well for the Delrey Bank.

Post Four is Entertainment, today touting a new farce opening at Theater One and a drama at Theater Two. I like a good farce; I'd check this one out when I had the chance. Drama? I get enough of that at work. I decided to skip that performance.

Post Five is Sports, not something I'm interested in. I take no delight in watching two people slugging it out, and I don't bet on who goes faster than whom, on two wheels or four. And watching people chase a ball around isn't appealing, either.

I waited patiently while various people came and went, riffling through the items on Post Six while I considered the Delrey connection with this affair.

Selva was out of the picture, shunted off to a faraway lodge where she could stew in her own juice. After her fiasco with the Pangkoti pirate captain Ishka Kunine fizzled, no one would even speak to her, let alone include her in any financial dealings. Bad enough for her to conspire with Pangkot, but to use her family connections to undermine the Lorr economy with false coins? That was the ultimate disgrace.

Devon Delrey? An amiable cipher, married into the Vikk merchant clan. He'd managed to charm his way back into his wife's circle, after a lot of groveling and

promising never to stray again; but his role was as a figurehead, smiling at social functions.

That left two Delreys still active in the Delrey Banks—Vernor, the senior member of the clan, devious and secretive, and Gorgeous Gyorgi, the youngest Delrey, just out of the Academy and with a reputation for mischief.

Either of them might have decided to sponsor a party at a Pleasure Palace to entice the straight-arrow Con-ty into an indiscretion that could be used as leverage in negotiations.

Maybe I should check with Jake and Holly, I thought. If anyone knew what was going on in the Upper Tier, they did.

I finally got through the crowd to where I could flip through the various papers tacked or taped or nailed onto the post. Mostly gossip, of the “Who saw who where” kind, with no names mentioned for fear of lawsuits. I looked through the newer postings for something like “Found, one small book, will return for suitable reward.”

Nothing of that kind was posted, but someone was indignant about the Contramont Miners Trade Delegation.

“Our friends from across the mountains should learn better manners! It is unseemly to rouse one’s neighbors at an early hour in the morning with loud revelry best suited to the Academy Youth Services during the Solstice Break. Signed, Resident of Garden Sector.”

So, that was where the Contramont Miners were being stashed, not in the usual Travelers’ Lodgings between

the Grand Boulevard and Entertainment Row? Either someone was renting a house, or they were staying with a Lorr resident. But Zac wasn't staying with them, not if he had a room at the Stranger's Hostel at the Advanced Academy.

Another interesting point, which I would follow up on. But not right now.

I checked the rest of Post Six for more about the incident, but no one else seemed to know or care what the rowdy Contys were up to.

I glanced up at the sky. Not sundown yet, but soon it would be dark. Time to check out Entertainment Row.

iii

I made my way towards the river, moseying along the Grand Boulevard where the Upper Tier does its shopping, past the foot of Arriver's Hill to the Flatlands Bridge, where Entertainment Row begins. As I strolled through the gathering crowd, I thought briefly about stopping at my digs on Foodie Alley, over Fletcher's Food Shoppe. It was getting chilly, and I could have used a change of jacket, maybe a quick bite at the shop, and a chance to check Ficus for new leaves.

I decided against it. I'm too well-known on Entertainment Row to pretend to be an office drone or Pangkoti refugee, so no reason to change clothes. I live there, I use the Entertainment Guild Baths, and many of the Entertainers and Licensees have come to me with their small problems. In return, they give me information. One hand washes the other, debt for debt.

As for Ficus, I didn't want to seem too anxious. It wouldn't do any good, and might even inhibit the sensitive plant. And it wasn't all that chilly, not yet.

I went past the entrance to the alley with only a glance upwards. Ficus was just visible in the window, not much more than a stem with a few leaves. I'd leave it alone, for now.

I sauntered past the two theaters, one on either side of Entertainment Row. The audience for the afternoon performance of the new farce was just letting out of Theater One. Theater Two wasn't open for business yet, but a signboard announced the new drama would be shown tomorrow.

I stopped by the corner where Moggy sat with his array of string and percussion instruments. He's a big male, no hair on top of his head but plenty below the chin, barrel-chested and long-limbed. His voice cuts through the constant chatter on Entertainment Row with a repertoire of new and old songs, some from the Ships, some he writes himself.

"Oyo, Moggy," I greeted him. "How's business?"

He shrugged and glanced at his open instrument case. I took the hint and dropped a couple of bits into it.

"That won't pay my rent," he complained.

"There's more for information," I told him. "What do you know about Contramonters?"

"They tip worse than you, Drach. And they don't appreciate good music."

"I heard some of them were on Entertainment Row last night."

Moggy grimaced. "I saw them. I even played 'Across the Water' for them, one of the old songs from the Settlement Times. One of them stopped to listen, but their keeper hustled them along."

"They weren't on their own?"

"They had a guide. A youngster decked out in a multicolor kilt and matching jacket." Moggy spat. "Pfeh! He made sure no one got away from the group."

"Really?" I added a half-silver to the case. "Must have been a rowdy bunch."

"Farmer boys, miners. Ship songs are lost on them—all they know is their own howlers; and they weren't interested in music, they were after females. The minder kept telling them to be patient, they'd find better company when they got to the party."

"That's for the info. Thanks."

And off I went, thinking hard. The Contramont Miners Trade Delegation had been led to the slaughter at a high-tier Pleasure House, which matched what Boffin Zac had told me. Nice to know the client wasn't lying.

I spotted a couple of Licensees lounging in front of the Grand Casino. One was a newcomer, a strapping brunette in a skintight red dress, hair caught back in a glittering net. The other, less spectacular but more welcome, was Velda, Basher Bob's popsy, a redhead. She wore a green gown that suggested more underneath than her friend's too-obvious garb.

"Oyo, Velda," I hailed her before she could pretend she didn't see me.

“Oyo, Pola.” She turned and took a step away from me. She didn’t get far in those super-high-heeled shoes.

“A word, Velda.” I blocked her escape. “I need some help.”

“The last time I helped you, I wound up with sundew stings up and down my legs and a ruined dress,” she shot back. “You owe me, Pola.”

What could I say? “You’re right, I do,” I admitted. “And I need your help again.”

“What kind of help?” She gave me the stink-eye.

“Nothing dangerous. I just want to know whether you or your friend saw the Contramonters on Entertainment Row last night.”

Before Velda had a chance to deny even being on Entertainment Row, the brunette in red spoke up.

“You mean that batch of bib-wearers? Straight from the Minerals? Sure did. You couldn’t miss them. What a bunch of cloddies!”

“That bad,” I said.

“You’d think they never saw a female before,” Velda added. “Gawking at every Licensee they passed.”

“I heard they were steered into one of the Licensed houses,” I said. “You don’t happen to know which one?”

“Pegeen’s Pleasure Palace,” the brunette sneered. “I saw them going in.”

“Very upper-tier,” I commented. “The Contramont Miners must be generous.”

“Not with their own coin,” the brunette grouched. “The character in the kilt wouldn’t let them even talk with me and Velda.”

“Being hustled, were they?”

Velda leaned closer and spoke softly. “A very select party, made to order. Word went out two days ago` Pegeen was looking for talent of a particular kind, Clarisse here tried for a slot, but didn’t make the cut.”

“You don’t say.” Someone was going to a lot of trouble to give these Contys a good time.

“But Emil did,” Clarisse sniped. “If I’d know that was the kind of party it was going to be, I never would have bothered.”

“I never thought Pegeen would go for a male-male setup,” Velda commented “Someone must have greased her wheels with gold, not just silver.”

“Emil? A joyboy? At Pegeen’s?” That definitely didn’t add up. Pegeen’s Pleasure Palace is one of the most discreet Licensed Houses in Lorr, but strictly male-female. Same-gender couplings are accepted in other houses, but not Pegeen’s.

“Don’t ask me why.” Clarisse’s shrug nearly shifted her frontage loose from its moorings.

“I hear they were a frisky lot,” I said. “Someone scolded them for being too rowdy on Post Six.”

Clarisse sniffed. “All I know is, they went in on foot, they had their fun, they came out, and were taken home by hired pedi-shaws. I was just going back to my digs when they passed me. Couldn’t mistake them, not with those crazy blue trou!”

“You didn’t happen to notice a tall young male, fair hair, beginnings of a beard, among the survivors?”

She shook her head. “Couldn’t tell one from another. They were all howling some Conty song, or maybe

it was a hymn. Something about a bear and a mountain. They weren't in any condition for seconds, that's for sure."

"Interesting." I turned to go.

Velda caught my arm. "Why the interest in Contra-monters?"

"I have a client who thinks he left something behind at the party. Thanks to you, I know where the party was. I'll pay the debt at Smokey Joe's tonight. See ya there!"

And off I went, before she got too curious.

iv

I cruised along Entertainment Row, passing various Entertainers on shift change as well as people going to and from the warehouses on the Waterfront. Licensees tend to work at night, but the casinos run full-time, no breaks, and rotate their shufflers and rakers.

The cletstands between the casinos were doing a healthy business as people stopped to get their fill before or after work; and street hawkers bawled come-ons for meat-pies and other small treats to tide the passers-by over until they could have a fuller meal at home or at a foodshop.

I stopped at one of the cletstands wedged between the casinos. I can't stand clet—to me it smells and tastes like wet socks—but I was starting to feel the wind's chill, and this place sold hot chai as well as clet, so I got a mug of that. The server was a hardbitten ex-Licensee with an eye for the passers-by and a mouth full of invective.

"Interesting crowd," I commented, shoving aside a female in a cotton skirt and scarf who reeked of fish, and

a male in leather trou and vest who sported the sigil of the Fatsos on the shoulder. “Looks like everyone’s come to Lorr before the winter storms set in. Pangkoti, Norlanders. I hear there’s even a delegation from Contramont in town.”

“Contys? Sure thing. I saw them last night, marching along, gawking at the lights and the females like they’d never seen one. Probably hadn’t, either!” She snickered.

“On their own?” I hinted. The chai wasn’t bad, lightly spiced and not too sweet.

“Oh, there was some youngster with them, in some of those new duds. Showing their knees? What good’s that? Unless it’s to make it easier to get what’s underneath!” The snicker became a guffaw. “Which, from the look of him, wasn’t much.”

“Small? Skinny?”

The server winked. “Nothing to be scared of, that’s for sure.” She handed the Fatso a cup of clet. I finished my chai and moved away.

I sensed someone behind me. I got a whiff of an expensive scent over the usual fish-laden air of the Waterfront and the mixture of clet and cooking oil from the foodstands. Definitely not a perfume the usual residents of either Fishmarket or Waterfront would wear. Maybe Upper Tier gone slumming?

I turned around, casually scanning the crowd, but I didn’t see anyone who matched that scent. I didn’t know if someone was following me, or just out for a stroll; but I’d remember that scent if I ever encountered it again.

My olfactory powers aren't as good as they are when Ficus is in full leaf. It was gradually recovering from its near-extinction, its stem hardening enough to carry a leaf or two; but even with applications of clet powder and bonemeal, it was struggling. I helped as much as I could, but plants have their own sense of time. At least, Ficus had given me a small spritz when I breathed on it that morning. Not much, but enough to give me a slight sensory edge on the rest of humanity.

I sauntered along, trying to catch a glimpse of my follower. Not easy in a street that was starting to fill up with mechs and techs heading to the bridge leading to their homes across the river in Flatlands. I thought I caught a flash of a gaudy pleated skirt as I turned the corner into the alley lit by a red lantern. No need for a signpost—those who wanted pleasure knew this was where to come for it.

Just a row of attached houses built in the old style—cinderblocks faced with brick, windows on either side of a wooden door, red-glass lantern over the door to signify what lay inside. No one knows why a red lantern—it's something from Old Earth, but there it is, and it hasn't changed since the Founders decided to make sex legally available for a fee as part of the Landing Operation's Rest and Recreation.

I scanned the row of blank-faced houses. One was Pegeen's, but which? I decided to trust to chance and knocked on the largest door, which was carved with a suggestive squiggle that could have been male and female organs intertwined.

A large male answered my knock. “We’re closed.”

“I’m not here for a futter,” I told him. “I just want a word with the manager.” I showed him the sigil from the Assassin’s Guild.

“We don’t want no trouble with the Fatsos,” the doorkeeper assured me. He left the door open while he looked within for more instructions.

“There isn’t any,” I said, easing past him. “I just have a few questions, and I’ll be on my way.”

I was left in the front hall, a narrow space with a selection of interesting drawings on the walls, while the doorkeeper went up to the next floor in search of Pegeen.

She descended the stairs, a regal female about ten years older than me with pale hair swept into a high puff and classic features—oval face, straight nose, level brows. I immediately recognized the elegant trou-and-jacket ensemble as the most recent creation from Jake and Holly’s. Clearly, a female of taste and refinement, not to mention coin.

She looked me over with a hard pale-blue gaze, and led me through the hall to her office. It might have been a match for mine, except the furnishings were a lot more comfortable, the desk was uncluttered, and the cabinet behind it held neatly stacked ledgers instead of scraps of paper.

“Pola Drach.” She pronounced the name with a twist of the lips and an accent that tried to be Admin but wasn’t quite. “What brings you here? If you’re running an errand for Master Assassin M’Farr, you can tell him I run a clean house, according to the regs. I’m in good

standing with the Entertainment Guild. And I am not going to knuckle under to the demands of rowdies, no matter whose sigils they carry.” She glared at me. “They may *not* arrive unannounced, and I will *not* remove paying customers to accommodate them.”

I’d heard some of the new Pangkoti recruits were getting out of hand, but now I had direct evidence. M’Farr may have bitten off more than he could chew when he took them into the Guild.

“I’m not here for Fee M’Farr,” I explained. “I just used the sigil to get your attention. I’m here on behalf of a client who says he lost something in this house last night. He doesn’t care how or when it’s returned, he just wants it back. No questions asked, and he’s willing to advance a reward,” I added.

Pegeen’s expression hardened. “I’ve told you, I run a clean house. There may be some people who abuse the trust of their patrons, but not here. I will not have thievery. I have told my staff, anything left behind or dropped in the course of events must be turned over to me immediately, to be returned to its owner.”

“Very honest of you,” I said.

“Just good business,” she replied. “An establishment like this depends on its reputation for fair dealing. It’s not worth losing over gewgaws and shinies!”

“The lost item wasn’t a gewgaw. It was a book.” I watched her face carefully.

“A book?” She looked totally blank. “I don’t think any of my people found a book.”

“It was left here last night,” I repeated. “By one of the Contramonters.”

She grimaced. “Oh, them!”

“Not your regular patrons?” I suggested.

“Certainly not!”

“A private party, then?”

She nodded. “Arranged by one of my most loyal patrons.”

“I heard you hired extra staff,” I said. “Even joyboys. Not usual, from what I’ve heard about this house. The patron must be really generous.”

“I do not usually hire outside help,” Pegeen confirmed. “But the patron suggested one or two persons who would, ah, amuse his guests. And since he paid the bill, I could not refuse.”

“I see.”

And I did. Houses like Pegeen’s Pleasure Palace depended on wealthy Upper Tier patrons for their survival, no matter what the regs said about equality. I knew better than to ask the identity of the mysterious patron. No matter—I’d find out sooner or later. Better sooner than later, but I’d find out.

“According to my client, he had intimate relations with a joyboy called Emil,” I said. “What can you tell me about him?”

“Very little,” she said through stiff lips. “The patron said he would send several young males around. He thought some of the guests from Contramont might desire a change of pace, as he put it. Emil was one of them. The patron swore he had been seen by a medico in the last week, and there was no reason to doubt him. I interviewed Emil myself. He was personable, not pushy, and

quite polite. He was attractive, if you like them slender, dark, and sleek. I did not see him going upstairs, but presumably he did, since your client attests to his activities.”

“And when the party dispersed?”

“He left. I do not know where he went. There was... some disturbance...when the Contramonters were escorted from my house.”

“So I’ve heard,” I muttered.

Pegeen’s voice rose. “I have never had the Guards called! Never! I have already informed the patron. I will not have this kind of disturbance in my establishment. Bringing the Assassins to this place was bad enough, but inciting them to interact with paid patrons, and then summoning the Guards! I would never have taken the commission if I thought those people would react in that manner. Not for all the gold in Lorr! Drawing the Guards!” Her Flatlands accent overtook the fake-Admin in her agitation.

“Regarding Emil.” I brought her back to the subject at hand. “How did you contact him?”

“He came here on his own. He claimed it was at the request of the patron.”

“You must have some contact point for him, just in case you need him again.” I smiled confidently. “Not that you will, of course. But it’s always a good idea to have the information.”

Pegeen bit her lip. “I do not encourage male-male unions. However, as you say, just in case.” She turned to one of the ledgers on the shelf behind her, opened it, and ran her finger down a page.

“If you think he has this book you’re looking for, you might be able to find him at the Green Dragon Cafe, where most of the male Licensees gather. And I have been told there is a particular lodging-house on the border between Waterfront and Fishmarket, run by a female called Mama Gerda, which caters to the joyboys.”

That was all I needed to know. I stood to go, then turned back. “One more thing. May I speak with your cleaners? One of them might have seen this book and tossed it away, thinking it was unimportant.”

Pegeen’s bland expression hardened into a frown. “My people know better than to throw away something they find in a room after a patron has left it.”

“Still. Just to be sure?”

Pegeen thought it over, then said, “Come with me.”

I followed her through the hall to the cleaners’ quarters, a bleak room at the back of the house. There, three small brown females and a very young male sat on mats on the floor, ingesting something savory from bowls.

Pangkoti refugees. They aren’t citizens, they aren’t connected with any of the Guilds, and they take whatever work they can find for whatever someone is willing to pay them.

Pegeen announced, “This is Pola Drach. She wants to know if any of you have seen...” She looked towards me for more information.

“A book. Leatherbound papers,” I added, in case these Pangkoti had never seen such a thing. “Left behind last night.”

One of the females spoke for the group. “We clean rooms. We arrange bedding, we take damp sheets away. We do not take anything else.”

“Did you see the joyboy, the one called Emil?” I asked.

The youngster started to say something in Pangkoti, but the female shushed him.

“Let him speak,” Pegeen ordered. “If you saw something, you must tell me. You will not be punished,” she added.

“And you *may* be rewarded,” I said, producing a copper bit from my coin-pouch.

“I see Emil,” the lad whispered. “He go away before Guards come.”

“Did he, now?” Pegeen’s eyes glittered. “I don’t recall seeing him during the...the upset/”

“Could be it was he who called the Guards?” I hinted.

“If he did, I’ll see to it he never gets another patron,” Pegeen swore.

I handed the lad the copper bit, gave the women the Pangkoti blessing sign, and followed Pegeen back to the hallway.

“Thank you for your time,” I told her “I am in your debt. If there’s anything I can do for you...”

“You can inform Master Assassin Fee M’Farr that his people are overstepping their office, and there will be repercussions from the Entertainment Guild if they keep on the way they are going.” Two pink spots that were not facepaint flared in her cheeks. “And when you see

Emil, tell him he will never work in my establishment again, no matter who the patron is.”

“I will do that,” I assured her, and headed back into the growing crowd on Entertainment Row.

I was certain none of the cleaners at Pegeen’s had picked up that book. She wasn’t lying when she said she’d never seen it and had no idea what it was about, or why it was important, and the servants didn’t, either..

Emil was the key to this mess, and I set out to find him.

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