

Seusea and the Savage Heiress

A summer night's storm raged in the ancient city of Fenstre, and torrential rain slammed down on the weathered cobble-stones outside of The Saint's Kitchen, the largest pub in Old Town. Inside, things were no less tempestuous. A brawl raged in one corner, caused by a disagreement over a die roll. Mad laughter and drunken shouts shot through the air. The trio of musicians on the stage played a noisy and merry tune, and scantily-clad Lake Village dancers snaked about, smiling winsomely when coins were thrown their way. Smoke from three score tabacits turned the interior into a murky den, and the barmaids stepped adroitly out of the way when questing hands reached for their shapely and bare backsides.

It was here in the 'Kitchen that Seusea first heard about the inheritance of Ilarle. She was sitting in her habitual corner, leather-clad legs on the table, absently watching the commotion in the common room. Out of one eye, she spotted a familiar figure make his way over to her. Her brother Lothmire, the greatest rogue in the Hallilan's ranks, sat beside and then leaned over to her. 'The word is Ilarle's mistress, the Chatelaine Sera, has inherited his house and all within it.'

'Who killed Ilarle?'

'We don't know, sister-lady. It matters little as Ilarle was *antemery*, a foreigner. Do we mourn the loss of one foreigner in the deep streets of Fenstre? No lass, he will not be missed.'

Seusea smiled and watched the crowd some more. In truth, she was barely outside of being a foreigner in Fenstre's reckoning herself, having a paternal grandfather that hailed from the mysterious land of Oloi far to the north. She and Lothmire were half-siblings, having different fathers, though such things mattered little amongst the common folk of the Canal Society where marriages were rare and children were raised in the most desultory way.

The most obvious sign of Seusea's heritage, her wispy blonde hair, was usually kept hidden under a leathern skull-cap and she showed it to few. Blonde hair, like pale skin, were markers of strangeness amongst the dusky Society and Seusea's trade demanded she blend in, not stand out.

For Seusea was a house-breaker and thief for the Hallilan, the thieves guild of Fenstre. On most nights, she crawled the sewers of the old city, or softly trod on mouldering tiles in the heavy rain, stealing from those whom the Hallilan deemed had goods and money excess to

their needs. Most importantly, she raided the warded and fortified homes of sorcerers which were ordinarily off-limits to the cautious Hallilan. Seusea had not only inherited blonde hair from her grandfather, she also possessed a peculiar immunity to magic in all its forms. Wizardly fire and ice harmed her not and no trap forged from the irons of magic was a barrier to her. With facile grace, she could pass unharmed through them all.

It was this trait that led the Hallilan to recruit her and now she sat comfortably in their middle ranks, respected by most and feared by a few.

‘What do they want me to do?’ Seusea knew her brother’s mentioning of Ilarle’s house was a sign she would be busy tonight.

‘Ah, yes.’ Lothmire lit his pipe and drew a lungful in. ‘Chatelaine Sera is a Dyne lass, if our investigations are correct. Our masters would be pleased if any personal papers and notes were seized and delivered to them.’ He handed his sister a folded piece of brownish paper. Seusea opened it under the table. It was a diagram of the manor, showing a rambling structure of three storeys with an underground cellar, perhaps for the storage of wine. Seusea committed the layout to memory and gave it back to Lothmire.

‘A Dyne? Strange the Geriarchs would allow her to be within the environs of the city.’

‘It’s suspected she is one,’ Lothmire corrected. ‘If she is one for an invariable fact, you are to deal with her in a terminal manner.’

Seusea curled up a lip. Rogue though she was, an assassin she wasn’t. She prided herself on her skill in thieving and breaking without resorting to what the Hallilan termed “wetwork”. Only three times in her twenty-five years had she needed to kill, and each of those occasions had been a dire situation of life and death. Nonetheless, the Geriarchs had a long-standing proscription against any kind of unsanctioned sorcerer in the city, and a Dyne was certainly of that ilk. Dynes were female wizards of a realm of magic scholars named the Field of Peace. It was a mystery to Seusea why it was called that as all she had heard to date bespoke the Dyne as sorcerers of power and malice. If there was peace involved, it wielded a big stick.

‘You will be well rewarded,’ Lothmire was saying, seeing the doubt in his sister’s eyes. ‘Fenstre is enamoured of those who rid her of noisome sorceresses.’

‘That may be, but to kill a defenceless woman?’

‘Bah, if she’s Dyne she will not be defenceless.’

‘She will be to me, brother. Her magic will slide past me.’

‘Pray to Ydrys that it does.’

At that moment, a drunken patron swaggered over to their table and leered at Seusea. Lothmire rose and moved his waistcoat aside, exposing the braided handle of a whip. The man’s ardour died in his eyes and he staggered away, hands held up in supplication. Seusea grinned. Fenstre feared the famed swampwhips of the Hallilan, whose ungentle touch delivered an agonising and purulent death.

Seusea also rose from the table. Giving her brother a kiss on the cheek, she slipped out of the ‘Kitchen and into the balmy and wet Fenstre night.

Pulling her oilskin cloak about herself, she scurried southward down the Marchway, along the edge of Lake Village, from where came a thousand sounds of the Fenstre night. To her native-born eyes she saw nothing amazing or noteworthy. To any foreigner who might be on her road, he would be astounded at what he saw. Fenstre was a maze to the unwary and nowhere more so than the convoluted ways of Old Town and Hired Skull. Even on a road as delineated and plain as the Marchway, many millennia of half-purposeful building and rebuilding had rendered the civic landscape a morass of timber, shrub, tile and dirt. Vines grew everywhere, obscuring and shielding houses from the prying eyes of passersby. Houses rose up crazily and narrow, bedecked in bushes and creeping plants from the jungles.

It was said that a man could stand on any Fenstre road and not see more than twenty feet either way, such were the turns and crooks. The Marchway, one of the city’s widest, was still a twisting thoroughfare of sudden bends and angles.

It was all an indication of the mindset of the Canal Societor, as Fenstre’s citizenry were named. Rather than openness, they chose to dissemble. Rather than tell, they hinted. Rather than speak fact, they gave half-truths. Subtlety was a virtue praised and loved above all. Reticence came before garrulity, and glances were favoured over stares. To a foreigner (whom they termed “*antemery*” collectively) the average Societor was shrewd and unsmiling, a man who kept his own counsel and sought to swindle and mislead the outsider.

Seusea was a Societor true and born, but often felt the yearning to go beyond Fenstre’s jungle borders, to lands strange and faraway. In her quieter moments, she would pore over the books and scrolls her brother would bring home; ancient works of lore and leather-bound histories of places and events remote to Fenstre. Then, with an unhappy sigh, she would lift up the slats of her blinds, push aside the bushes and stare forlornly at the rain. The mountains and the snow so well-drawn in the books were nothing more than fanciful figments when confronted with the humid reality of Fenstre.

Ten minutes later, Old Town gave way to Hired Skull and the urban confusion grew worse. The streets were narrower, the houses grew closer over the roads and the bushes and vines grew unfettered. Hired Skull was the heart and soul of Fenstre, the very embodiment of its psyche. Its mere name hinted at subterfuge and danger. Everything was for sale in Hired Skull – pleasures of the flesh, drugs, murder, robbery, vice...it was a no-man's land for foreigners. One simply did not venture into Hired Skull with innocent or carefree intent. While the Geriarchs reigned over Fenstre with an even-handed tyranny and sent the Militia to patrol all districts and quarters, they traditionally left Hired Skull alone. It was the province of the Hallilan and their law was enforced by dread, swampwhip and blade. Slavery, though illegal throughout Fenstre, was a real phenomenon in Hired Skull and many of the naïve and unwary had been ensnared in coffles, to live out their piteous days serving as sexual toys to crime lords, or drudging in deep kitchens and workshops, never to see the grey skies of Fenstre again.

Seusea's first taste of masculine lust had occurred in the dank back alleys of Hired Skull. As a young lass of fourteen, she foolishly ran an errand for a tanner's apprentice, only to be waylaid by him, the tanner and five others in a lane not fifty yards from where she now walked.

An hour afterward, naked and bleeding, she struggled back to her home in Cynosure Point where she revelled in dark thoughts of revenge against them all. After getting it out of her what had happened, her brother disappeared. Later in that evil day, Lothmire told her with a grin that all of them were dead and would never ravish another girl. It was then she was introduced to the Hallilan and was taken in by them, and learned their secrets and ways. Her brother, unbeknown to her at the time, was a sworn member and had been since his eleventh year.

That day of rape was the last callow moment in Seusea's life.

At the crossroads where the Marchway met the Hired Skull Path at the bridge to Lake Village, she turned right onto the Path and so came into the district known as the Middle. If Fenstre possessed a genteel spirit, the Middle was most likely it. Where Hired Skull was poverty and vice, the Middle was guarded civility, relative opulence and understatement. The timbers of the buildings here were newer and the greenery was kept under planned control. The roads were wider, straighter and cleaner, and people didn't generally shit and piss in the centre of them. They had more presence of mind here.

At the ninth hour of night, Seusea reached her destination: Knebber Point. Knebber Point was an exclusive nook of the rich, carved into peninsular form in the south-western margin of the Middle by winding canals. It was encircled by a high metal and palisade fence that kept the unwanted out and the precious in. Fittingly, it sat across a canal from the Clathe, the seat of the Geriarchs – power and government faced one another smugly.

The branch road that led off the Hired Skull Path down into Knebber Point ended abruptly at a very large iron gate, guarded by a dozen well-paid and regrettably incorruptible hired hands. Seusea blended into the shadows and covertly watched the gate. She knew from experience that the gatehouses on either side had doors that led into Knebber Point and so bypassed the main gate, but there was still no way past. The guards were not only immune to financial inducement, they denied themselves other, more intimate, persuasions.

There'd be no way in there tonight that way. Alas for Seusea, she would need to get a little wetter and a touch smellier before her tasks were completed this rainy evening. Moving silently through the tangle of bushes, she reached the canal facing the Clathe. Across the forty feet of slowly-flowing fetid water, lights flared from cressets placed every five yards. Caparisoned Militia marched in bored formation along the broad avenue leading to the huge and weird crescent-shaped structure of the Clathe, but they did not care what was on the far side of the canal.

Coming out of the bushes, Seusea dashed across the towpath beside the canal, and clambered over the edge, to cling on to the slimy old stones of the canal wall with well-practised fingers. Taking a deep breath, she manoeuvred along the canal face, mindful of the spluttering lights of the cressets on the far side.

After five minutes of careful effort, she pulled herself up and over the edge. Looking around quickly, she crouched and concealed herself under her oilskin. She flexed her fingers, working the fatigue out of them, and then planned her next move. The manse of Ilarle was situated on the southwest end of Knebber Point, facing Trowheald Island diagonally. Keeping to dark places, she ran at a crouch south along the towpath, her soft leather shoes making no sound on the tamped earth.

A few moments on, she stood before the wall that surrounded the manse. Wistfully, she gave Trowheald Island to the south-west a lingering stare. Over there, in the ancient stone edifice of Trowheald Castle, dwelled the object of a long-standing desire of hers: Thenson Trowheald, Fenstre's most powerful man. Since she was a girl, she coveted the tall and handsome Clanmaster of the Trowhealds, but for all practical purposes, he may as well be on

the moon. Once, a few years ago, she had gotten within bare feet of the man and even locked eyes with him, but that soon had passed, and he'd moved away, surrounded by his entourage of bodyguards and lackeys.

Regularly, she'd written letters addressed to the Clanmaster and gave them to his Equitant Men, who were his personal army and were among the few in Fenstre who went by horse. She hoped they were passed on to Thenson Trowheald, where he would read them and spend long hours wondering who this strange woman was that loved him from a distance. But it was all an unknown to Seusea if he did or did not wonder. Neither the Clanmaster nor any representative of his had sought her out and her unanswered desires continued.

No time for lovelorn reminisces now, thinks she, as there's thief-work to be done tonight. She gave the wall the most cursory of inspections. Without grappling hooks and ropes, it was impossible to scale. However, the Hallilan were blessed with many alternatives when it came to the fine art of housebreaking. Blowing on her fingers, Seusea knelt at the side of the canal and peered down into the murk. The first thing she saw was a naked body lying face down in the canal, floating by slowly. Then another one came into view and Seusea examined it from her vantage on the canal's side. They were young and female, and she pulled one closer with a long branch. Turning the body over, Seusea saw a number of hideous wounds in the chest and torso. Canal leeches had already begun to feed on the corpse, and Seusea knocked them away with the stick. Then realisation came to her – the corpse had been drained of blood. It had an unnatural pallor, and Seusea involuntarily recoiled from it. Now even more corpses began to drift into view, and Seusea's heart started to beat faster. While dead bodies in Fenstre's canals were an everyday thing, bodies bereft of their lifeblood were not. And those wounds were not made by random slashes of the blade.

Seusea shivered and wished for an instant she was at home, drinking in company with her brother and his comrades. A sentiment reinforced when she heard a soft splashing off to her right. Moments later, another young woman whose life had been stilled in its youth drifted by, her face drawn into a rictus of horror and disbelief. Seusea swallowed down on a dozen fears and watched warily off to her side, wondering what abomination was at work tonight.

But her own toil had to be done. Along the sides of the canal, about twenty feet away, was what she was looking for: a sewer outlet. Shimmying over the side, she edged her way along, using her feet to sense where the lip of the sewer pipe began. When she found it, she hooked her toes around the metal grating – a skill a decade in the learning – and eased her slender figure down the wall, where she crouched inside the narrow outlet. Her nose no longer

registered the fetor coming from the sewer, such was her acclimatisation. Yet, others did register it and for that outcome, she had a contingency plan.

Reaching through the grate she found a concealed latch and pulled it. The grating came free and she swung it open, and crawled within the dark pipe. As she closed the grate gently behind, her eyes grew used to the eternal darkness that existed in Fenstre's labyrinthine sewers.

Intense training had honed her sense of direction, and before long she'd navigated the tangle of tunnels and pipes under Knebber Point to her destination. A series of cleverly disguised twist-latches opened a trapdoor, and Seusea pushed it carefully upward, not daring to make any sound. When it was open enough, she crawled through and pulled herself into a dark and dusty room. She gave a silent thanks to Cydain that nothing had been placed over the trapdoor, a somewhat common occurrence in Fenstre's homes.

It was the cellar, and the only light came from under a door at the far end of the room. She crept over and put her ear to the door. Silence. She tried the handle, and found it unlocked but now she paused for a few minutes, ordering her thoughts and quieting her nerves. The faces of the dead women haunted her and she vacillated, wondering if tonight's escapade was truly worth it.

Sounds of conversation snapped her back into the harsh present.

'Get those lizards out of here,' bellowed a distant male voice.

'Your order, chamberlain,' answered a closer voice, also male.

'If the Chatelaine sees them traipsing about as free as a Westmer wastrel, she'll have our balls.'

Lizards! Seusea listened closer and heard the distinctive patter of clawed feet and knew there were bunes outside. Bunes were short, bipedal reptilian creatures, used by the more opulent members of Fenstre society as low servants and guards. Seusea remembered they had a keen sense of smell and she stepped back from the door, biting a lip.

The bunes trooped along the corridor outside the door and Seusea's misgivings were momentarily eased when they didn't stop. When all was quiet, she opened the door a crack and examined her surrounds. There was a narrow hallway that led to a stairway going up at one end and a dead end the other. Along the opposite wall were a series of doors, each with a barred window. Seusea stepped out and went to see inside the nearest one. Three young women sat huddled in a corner of a cell, shiftless folk from Ipty from the rags they wore.

Pretty young faces hidden by layers of grime and filth, born into crushing poverty and fated to be no more than cheap whores for those without the coin to pay for quality Southmer meretrices.

Except these were destined for a fate much worse than drudging for men. On impulse, Seusea tried the door; it was locked fast. Boot steps sounded from the stairway and Seusea retreated into the cellar. Two men came down the stairs, and one unlocked the door nearest. They dragged out several women, stopping to rip the rags from their filthy bodies. One of the men made lewd comments and the other gave a woman a sharp rap on the backside with his hand. The screams and demands of the women fell on cruelly uncaring ears, and they were hauled away by the hair.

Seusea felt the cold steel of her poniard and debated whether to give chase. She reluctantly decided against it as there was no sense in trying to right all of the wrongs of Fenstre. No sense at all, as she would die and the wrongs would continue.

But now she had a problem. Lothmire's floor plan didn't take these cells into account, only the cellar and the stairway to the ground floor was meant to be thirty feet away on the far side of the cellar area, not where it was.

Each of the cells contained small knots of women save the last one which held a solitary katean. This indigene of the jungles surrounding Fenstre was a man-like creature, five feet of height, sleek of build, and with pearly-white skin shot through with blue veins. As a denizen of the swamp, it had webbed hands and feet, and the digits ended in claws. Its face was vaguely human, with narrow-set black eyes, an upturned nose and a small pucker-like mouth full of tiny razor-sharp teeth. Fish and snakes were its diet but it was not above taking a child or a small adult human for a meal when it could.

As of now, this one sat cross-legged in its cell and stared back at Seusea, wet mouth set in a grimace.

'Why do you stand there, oh girl?' it said in a low fluting voice. 'Free me from this cage so I may return to my home on Scail Island.'

'Hist!' spat Seusea. 'Do not beguile me with your siren song. Who captured you and why are you here?'

'I know not the name of he who ensnared me,' it answered, rising and coming to the door. 'Nor why I am immured in this human prison. I call out to Zail to free me, but he does not listen.'

‘The Chatelaine Sera, have you seen her?’

‘Oh, the most gorgeous one. Hands drenched in human heart sap. She has the voice of a witch from the Codhbys and her eyes sparkle like burnished jewels in Cydain’s sky.’ It blinked, all four eyelids rapidly transiting the dark eyes. ‘Free me, girl. I do not want to die in this dry place.’

‘Why are there bunes here?’

‘Who knows why you humans keep such beasts.’ It widened its rubbery lipless mouth; an approximation of a smile. ‘Maybe the pretty girl can fetch me one as I am ravenously hungry. What say you?’

There was nothing more to be gained speaking to the katean. Seusea, after checking on the other cells, climbed the stairs with soft steps. Behind her, the katean wailed and bellowed from its cell, pleading for Seusea to return. She cursed at herself for bothering to speak to the creature and she hoped its caterwauling wouldn’t attract notice.

Upstairs, Seusea found herself in the pantry of a kitchen. She went over the manse layout in her mind’s eye and decided what to do. With care, she made her way through the empty kitchen into a long fest-hall decorated with garish paintings and erotic sculptures. The remains of a dinner sat on the table.

A blood-curdling scream shot through the manor and the hairs on Seusea’s neck stood on end. Again, she wished she was a long way from there, preferably with a cool drink at hand. Even the smoked-filled chaos of the Saint’s Kitchen was more welcoming than this place of death. In her heart, she knew this manse to be a charnel house most foul.

And things were going to get much worse, there was no doubt in Seusea’s mind about that.

Worse things happened immediately. She barely had time to conceal herself when the two men she saw before came into the fest-hall followed by three bowed shapes wearing long cotton robes that hid all of their features. One of the men barked an order and straight away, the three began to clear the tables and tidy the room. Seusea remained crouched behind a sculpture, dreading the prospect of capture.

To her relief, the two men left, with two of the cloaked figures following on their heels. The remaining figure was absorbed in its scullery tasks. Seusea waited one tense minute and then acted. Swiftly, she came up behind the unsuspecting figure and struck it across the back of the head with the hilt of her poniard. It collapsed into her arms. Seusea dragged it down the

stairs and into the cellar. The katean was still making a row, which she blithely ignored. Let the beast rant and rave.

The figure under the robe was a woman, or maybe a girl. Her long black hair and tawny skin hinted she was from Port Diales, a trading city a week's journey to the west. The jade bracelet she wore confirmed it – Dialesians (as they were known) held jade to be a sacred mineral and wore it much the way Societors wore fetishes on their hips.

Seusea took the robe off the girl, whom she estimated was no older than eighteen. Underneath, she wore a translucent slip which failed to hide the curves of her young body. Seusea stripped out of her own clothes and from a watertight pouch around her waist, brought out a thin long-sleeved black blouse and knee-length pants. She put these on, placing her old clothes back in the pouch. Over the top, she put on the girl's robe. With that done, she bound and gagged the girl and laid her beside the trapdoor.

Lastly, she produced a small jar of ointment from the pouch, and she applied this liberally to her face, hands and arms. She would no longer smell of the sewer.

Upstairs, she came out of the kitchen to almost walk into the form of the larger of the two men. She had no time to curse her carelessness as he seized her about the wrist, bending his face down to stare at her. His bloodshot green eyes bored into Seusea and his breath reeked of aniseed. 'Where have you been, lass?'

'I...I fed the scraps to the katean,' she lied.

'And did the Chatelaine say you could do that to her prize swamp creature? I'm sure she didn't. Come.'

Seusea was led from the fest-hall down a dim hallway that reeked of stale perfume. With her free hand, she speculatively felt the bump of the poniard at her hip and debated the merits of knifing this boor here and now. A sorceress she felt comfortable in dealing with – if they were alone, but if the Chatelaine was surrounded by guards her chances of fulfilling her mission were slim, not to mention remaining alive afterwards.

No, play it by ear, Seusea decided.

The fellow stopped outside of a closed door near a bend in the hallway and smiled slyly down at Seusea. He unlocked the door with a key and opened it, pushing Seusea inside.

'You're a strange one,' he told her as he closed the door, locking it behind him. Watching Seusea, he lit an oil lamp and then stood at the door, arms folded across his chest.

Physically, Seusea was no match for the man, that much she admitted to herself. He had half-a-foot on her, and his muscles bulged through the long cotton shirt. Seusea knew his kind intimately – heavies and thugs that could be found in plenitude at any gentry's estate. Paid brawn, and Seusea wondered further what else this fellow was paid to do. Easily, she imagined him kidnapping women from the muddy byways of Ipty and Westmer where the law was lax and easily paid off.

'You're no Dialesian,' he said. 'Where are you from?'

Seusea tried to control her breathing, but her heart raced in her chest. 'I'm not,' she admitted. 'I am from Hired Skull.'

'Then we're neighbours,' he said. 'I am from Old Town. I didn't know the Chatelaine had Societor maids.' A cunning smile. 'In truth she doesn't, so who are you?'

Seusea took two slight steps to her right, then launched herself backward. Her back hit hard iron and she fell to the ground, whooping in pain. The fellow roared with laughter and roughly lifted her from the floor. 'Chiasm's balls, lass! What were you trying to do?' With one large hand, he swept her hood back, knocking her skullcap off. Seeing her blonde hair, he whistled. 'What kind of *antemery* devil are you?'

'I'm no *antemery*!' she shot back. 'How about you leave me be, so I can do the work the Chatelaine requires me to do.' Ruefully, she glanced behind her. She hadn't seen the grid-work on the window. The bars were deceptively thin, but they were there.

'You're a rat in the house,' the fellow said. 'Blonde devil.' While Seusea stood numb with resignation, he yanked down on the robe, tearing it off her. It fell in tatters at her feet. 'I don't wish to ravish you, lass as you're going to be a quite willing madam this eve, aren't you?'

'May I have your name?' Seusea asked, quietly, in a forced neutral undertone.

'Why do you need that?'

'So when I cut your throat, I can send you announced to the pits of Hjoll. The devils do not like nameless guests.'

Another guffaw of laughter. 'You? You slip of nothing, girl. I doubt you could slice me a mouthful of head cheese without working up a sweat.'

Seusea kicked out savagely, only for the fellow to casually deflect her. He pushed and she fell across a pallet. 'My name is Torince. Why fight me, lass?' He stepped out of his trousers,

exposing his erect manhood. 'Why struggle on this wet balmy night? Out of those stalker's clothes and come hither.'

Seusea watched his approach, deciding whether to fight the man or accept his amorous advances. Fenstre women, as a rule, were not dainty or coy and chased and frolicked with as much gusto as the men. Precious emotions such as bashfulness were things for story books and legends, or the extreme, idle rich. Seusea was no exception to the general rule and it was rare for her to deny herself erotic pleasure if the circumstances and the inclinations were there. And as of now, they were there. Not for the sake of amour itself, but for expedience. Smiling, she stretched out on the bed, unsheathing her poniard and placing it on the floor on the far side. No doubt it would come into play soon. Torince might have some sport with her tonight, but would soon pay for his arrogance.

Torince sat on the bed and ran a finger across her midriff and down between her legs. With little effort, he lifted Seusea up and removed her pants. 'As upstairs, so downstairs. A blonde girl for sure.' Leaning over, he began to pleasure her, his free hand reaching under her blouse, to feel erect nipples.

Despite the delight she was receiving (and she was surprised at how adept he was), Seusea had to resist the temptation to crush his testicles. They were there, an inch from her face, swaying in their creased sack in time to his movements. She gently felt one, then the other, sensing their progenitive power, feeling the vital forces at play as they flowed through them. She had a fancy of them being remorselessly crushed in her hands. It was a temptation to do it too, they were right there...she breathed out loudly and put her hands back by her side.

Torince got off her and removed her blouse. 'Why stop?' she purred, as her breasts were exposed. 'I was enjoying that.'

'Lass, you'll savour this as much, if not more.' He nudged her legs open and entered her, grinning like a mad thing.

He was true to his word. Seusea's cries resonated through the small room and Torince laughed at his own prowess. For several breathless minutes they were a human tangle then it was over. Breathing noisily, he got off the bed and stood staring down at Seusea's sweat-covered lissom form.

Adroitly putting her poniard behind her, Seusea pulled a sheet over herself and rose from the bed.

'Get dressed,' Torince commanded. 'The Chatelaine would not like to see you the way you are.'

Seusea made to kneel for her clothes, but viciously lunged at Torince's mid-riff. The large man took an easy step back and clouted her head with a meaty hand then he kicked the poniard from her hand. 'I said to get dressed,' he repeated, in a bored voice. 'Lass, whoever you are, your days of being a sewer mouse have ended.' He retrieved her poniard, examining the blade with narrowed eyes. 'This is an uncommon weapon for such a blonde trollop. What merchant did you steal this from?'

'It was my mother's,' Seusea answered, her face livid with anger. Seething with both impotency and rage, she pulled the black shift on, and the remnants of the robe. She was a mournful figure, standing motionless in her tatters. 'And I swear I'll get it off you.'

'Oh, you will?' Torince said as he dressed, always keeping his eyes on Seusea. 'You had your chance, lass, but you are weak and slow. If you survive this evening, ask your Hallilan taskmaster to better school you in the arts of blade-work and deception, for you are deficient in both.' He grinned. 'But I doubt you'll survive. The Chatelaine, bless her dark heart, will have use for you.'

Defeated, Seusea let herself be led away from the room, and up a wide stairway to a broad landing where there was a set of closed double doors. Torince knocked politely and stood back.

The door was answered by an extraordinary woman. She was early middle age, perhaps mid-forties, and she was attired as Seusea had never seen a woman dressed. On her tall and spare form, she wore an extravagant brown flounced dress of some fine material. Her fingers were be ringed and her nose, lips and ears were extensively pierced with all manner of studs and gewgaws. Her head was shaved bald save for a long strip of chestnut hair hanging freely down the left side of her pate.

Seusea noted all this in an instant, for her attention was drawn to the woman's eyes. The irises were tinted a light yellow and were possessed with such a malevolent intensity Seusea found it difficult to look aside.

The woman held up a pale thin arm. 'Who is this, Torince?'

'An intruder, Chatelaine. I found her in the guise of one of your Dialesian servants.' He handed the Chatelaine the poniard. 'One of the Hallilan's street sluts, no doubt.'

'No doubt,' Sera echoed. Her gaze returned to Seusea. 'Leave us be, Torince, for the time being. Presently, I'll require four more women.'

'Yes, Chatelaine.'

Sera made a gesture and whispered something. Seusea understood that mind-numbing sorcery was being employed and she made her stance rigid in response. If the Chatelaine saw through the ruse, she didn't let on. 'Follow.'

The doors closed behind them, and Seusea followed Sera with a well-acted stiff-legged gait, through a set of richly-furnished rooms to a chamber that nearly made Seusea faint with fear. Once, in more salubrious times, it had been a nobleman's bathroom, complete with a large travertine bath and ivory-inlaid fixtures. These had been removed and only tiles decorated the grim chamber. Every square inch of those floor tiles was covered in blood. The stench of it got to Seusea immediately and she retched.

Three young and naked women lay sprawled and dead on a concrete slab off to one side, their blood sluicing out a narrow channel onto the floor. Seusea, though she had seen lifetimes of death and decay, was not prepared for this. Again, she vomited.

The Chatelaine was watching her, a curious expression on her cruel and beautiful face. 'I just enchained you,' she said. 'But you are down there with your hands on the floor. How is it you avoided my spell?'

Seusea responded by kicking out a leg, striking the Chatelaine a painful blow on the instep. The sorceress cried out and stumbled back into the wall. Quickly, she muttered an incantation and Seusea felt the searing force of it shoot over and under her, and the hem of her robe singed. Seusea fell on the woman, and grappled her, forcing her head to the floor.

'The weak need to be defended from people like you,' Seusea said, panting. 'What evil compels you to slaughter women like this?'

'I'm not so easily defeated, girl,' the Chatelaine said. Seusea found herself face down on the putrid floor, her arms enfolding nothing. The Chatelaine had vanished! Alarmed, Seusea got to her feet and put her back to a wall.

'Help us!' screamed a voice. Two women were bound and held to the far wall with chains. One was unconscious and her head lolled, the other was staring at Seusea, beseeching her.

'Where is the key to this lock?' Seusea asked. 'Quickly now, the witch will return.'

'The man Torince has it on him.'

'He does? Good.' Cautiously, Seusea opened the door and crept to the main double doors. In a commanding voice, she cried out Torince's name and stood behind one of the doors, poised on the balls of her feet.

Moments later, Torince came up the stairway and stood on the landing, hesitantly peering through the door. 'Chatelaine?' He took several steps forward, to be walloped by Seusea with a stool. He groaned and sat on his haunches, rubbing his head.

Seusea stood over him, her poniard in hand.

'Oh come now,' Torince said, smiling his cat's smile. 'Did I not pleasure you? Cydain himself must've heard your cries.'

'Yes,' admitted Seusea. 'You were more than adequate.' She returned his smile and quickly before Torince could react, she slit his throat. Lifeless, he fell back on the carpeted floor. 'However, you are a slaver and a ravisher, and Fenstre is that much a safer place without you in it.'

And that, Seusea told herself, was the fourth person to die from my hand. Tonight, there would be a fifth, so she avowed.

Rifling through Torince's pockets, she found a key-ring and took it. She swiftly freed the two women and watched as they staggered down the stairs and out the front doors. 'Alert the Militia,' Seusea called after them.

In the meantime, the Chatelaine was still loose in the manor.

'Who are you with your blonde hair?' asked a voice that came from the clear air.

Seusea fell to her knees, holding the poniard out at the ready. There was no-one about. 'Show yourself, Hjoll-spawn.'

'I will,' purred the voice. 'I challenge you to find me. But come – tell me how such a patently foreign girl like yourself is in league with the Hallilan.'

'I'm not foreign. The foreigner here is you, Chatelaine. Murdered your lover for his manor and chattel, and now you kill women and drink their blood.'

The voice laughed softly. Try as she may, Seusea could not locate its origin. Knowing that things were slipping quickly from her advantage, she went down to the entrance. The doors closed and locked on her. Seusea's heart leapt into her mouth and she put her back to the doors.

'I don't *drink* their blood,' the voice said, ominously close by. 'What does a creature of the Hallilan care for waifs and meretrices? I am performing an *imwiet*, girl. An *imwiet* to clear the human dross of Ipty and Westmer Community. Does not the Hallilan murder the indigent of Ipty and Lake Village for their Geriarch masters?'

'I have never been part of an *imwiet*,' Seusea retorted. 'I have murdered nobody.'

'And what of Torince?'

'His end would've come sooner and not later, by my hand or the just hand of another.'

'Oh, and you are a judge of man's span of life now, girl? But answer me please. Do me that courtesy, as you are in my house uninvited. Where do you hail from?'

'I am from Fenstre,' Seusea answered proudly.

'What of your ancestry? Do I sense the blood of far Oloi in you?'

Seusea turned and pulled at the door knobs. They were held fast by something unseen, and even her sorcerous immunity failed against them.

'You sent two shiftless whores to fetch the Militia,' the Chatelaine's voice continued. 'Do you think the guards of Knebber Point will heed the bleating of two sheep? I am quite safe here in my departed Ilarle's manor, girl.'

'Show yourself,' Seusea challenged. 'Try yourself against me, you vile blood-drinking bitch. Or does the feeble mageling fear me?'

'Mageling?' The Chatelaine appeared ten feet from Seusea, standing proud and defiant on the first steps of the stairs. Seusea barely avoided the throwing knife the Chatelaine hurled at her. 'You dare insult me so?' Another knife, and Seusea didn't wholly dodge this one. Its razor edge sliced her left arm before it thudded into the door. Like a maddened tiger, the Chatelaine screamed and launched herself at Seusea. The woman was both strong and agile, and Seusea fought frantically to keep the taloned hands from her throat. 'I'm going to enjoy watching your blood drain into my cups,' Sera boasted. 'Rooftop-prowling slut! Good for naught but gallows-fodder.'

Seusea pulled at Sera's long hair strand, eliciting a scream of rage from the sorceress. Her cut arm stung, but she ignored the pain. The Chatelaine muttered a spell, but it merely bent around Seusea to dissipate harmlessly into the floor. The sorceress screamed again and tried to head butt Seusea, who managed to get out of the way, though her ear was crushed by the onslaught.

'Why are you in my house?' the Chatelaine asked between breaths. 'For what reason?' She threw a misguided punch at Seusea's face that was readily avoided. 'A stripling bitch that has naught better to do than sortie into the homes of her betters.'

'Bettors?' Seusea avoided another wild punch. 'There is nothing better about you. You are a depraved murderer. You may call those women dross, but the only thing most of them possess is their lives, and you were callous and demonic enough to take that from them.' Seusea gave one huge and final effort and got the Chatelaine in a headlock. Praying to the god Chiasm for strength, she tightened her grasp about the woman's neck and squeezed. The sorceress struggled and Seusea wore many blows to her ribs and thighs from sharp elbows.

After a few moments, the Chatelaine became still and slumped in her grasp. Seusea pushed herself away from the sorceress and got to her feet. Then she swooned, and her vision went cloudy. As a sickening sensation in her stomach took hold, she realised the knife that cut her arm was envenomed.

The front doors burst open and Seusea fainted.

She came to in her brother's house, her arm bandaged and her head feeling light. Lothmire saw his sister waken and handed her a small cup. 'It's arrack. The bite of it will do you good. You won a good fight tonight, sister-lady, against a Dyne of some power.'

Seusea found the strength to joke. 'You were right, Lothmire, she wasn't defenceless.'

'No, and the meretrices of Ipty will breathe easier knowing their blood can stay in their veins.' He tossed a small pouch on a nearby table. The clunk it made when it landed sounded satisfyingly full to Seusea's ears. 'You've earned that.'

'She was engaging in an *imwiet*,' she said. 'The ritual slaughter of the poor and weak to appease the gods of Fenstre. But she'll slay no more whores or anyone else for that matter. Her spirit is in Hjoll where it belongs.'

'There's more like her out there,' Lothmire said. 'The manse contained many interesting and curious notes, papers and artefacts. I'm sure the Geriarchs will have more work for us soon, following up on it all.'

'Good. I'd rather not be idle.'

‘Then rest up,’ Lothmire said. ‘You have this look that there is unfinished business out there. Business that has naught to do with the Chatelaine Sera. You are eager to be somewhere else, I see.’

Seusea recalled the lights of Trowheald Island and nodded slowly. ‘That there is. I’m going to pay someone a visit tonight. He’ll ignore me no longer.’

Seusea’s adventures will continue in SEUSEA AND THE CLANMASTER.

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