

# Seusea and the Clanmaster

At sundown, Seusea awoke from her nap. After stretching her limbs and flexing her fingers, she made her way down from her loft bedroom into the parlour of the home she shared with her brother Lothmire. Tonight, the ambition she had harboured for years would see fruition and the thought of being near Clanmaster Thenson Trowheald quickened her pulse. He may ignore her letters to him (if he got them at all) but he would find it hard to ignore her physical presence.

‘Sister-lady,’ Lothmire said from his customary chair. ‘How is your arm?’

He was referring to an injury Seusea had received on a previous mission, where a poisoned blade had nicked her arm. ‘Fine,’ she said, bending the arm in question. ‘More than adequate for what I have in store this evening.’

Her brother winked at her knowingly. ‘Who would this fellow be?’

‘Oh, you are a clever man, Lothmire. I hesitate to say who as he’s well-known to you.’

‘You have no secrets from me, sister-lady.’

‘Oh well,’ Seusea sighed. ‘It’s Thenson Trowheald the Clanmaster.’

The Clanmaster was a boyhood friend of Lothmire’s and the two remained on close and cordial terms now, even though their social and political statuses were polar opposites to each other. Seusea had only ever seen the Clanmaster from varying distances and had never said a word to him, and had none spoken to her back. She doubted Thenson Trowheald knew she even existed, as Lothmire was not wont to discuss private or family matters with anyone, not even his closest associates. That Seusea was his sister was something known to very few.

A year ago, while Seusea had been roistering on Trowheald Island, she had backed into the Clanmaster and their eyes had met, though nothing was said and the two soon moved away in opposite directions. That memory was never far from Seusea’s thoughts and she had vowed since that time they would meet again, under conditions far more advantageous to her.

‘I wasn’t aware you two were acquainted,’ Lothmire said. ‘In fact, I know you’re not so precisely how do you intend to meet him?’

'I propose to sneak into his Castle and see him,' she answered.

'It'd be easier to sneak into the dark fires of Hjoll itself, sister-lady. Of everywhere in Fenstre, only the Clathe and the Fort are better guarded. The Clanmaster's Equitant Men are both vigilant and capable, so you're best served by simply appearing at the gate and requesting an audience.'

'I've thought of doing that countless times,' Seusea said quietly. 'But I fear his rejection. He'd turn me away from his gate and I wouldn't know how to live with myself then. In truth, I don't think I'd want to live at all.'

'It remains your only chance, sister-lady.'

'You must know a way in there!' Seusea cried. 'There must be a sewer inlet into the Castle!'

Lothmire smiled at his sister. 'Must there be? Must? The Castle is older than Fenstre itself and was standing proudly long before either we or sewers were ever there.'

'Please, there is a way into the Castle. You know there is – I can see you know of one.'

'I will get no peace from you, sister-lady, will I?' Lothmire lit a tabacit and inhaled deeply. 'There is one secret way into the Castle, but if you are caught, you will die. I cannot save you and I will disavow any knowledge of you if my name is mentioned.'

'Only Thenson Trowheald will catch me,' Seusea said. 'And I won't die to him.'

'As usual, I admire your confidence. All right then, travel to Trowheald Island via Mill Island. When you are in Trowheald Island, swing under the bridge across the Inn Canal and count thirty six bricks to your left from the leftmost pylon. You will need to use tackle as there are no easy holds. At the thirty-sixth brick, tap the top leftmost corner of it and a way will open for you. Inside the sewer, take all left turns until you reach a stout and impenetrable iron door.' He rose from his chair and went to a bureau and from a drawer, he took a large and elaborate metal key. 'You will need this. Secure it on your person and if capture is imminent, dispose of it where it will not be found.'

'Where does this door lead to?'

'I'll let you discover where.'

Seusea had to be content with that, as Lothmire would say no more. She cleaned herself up and dressed in her best night-work clothes; dark close-fitting leathers with many pockets and pouches for all the accoutrements she would need on her sortie. After stuffing her blonde hair beneath a black

silken bandanna, she crept out of the house into a dark and misty Fenstre night, the air full of the threat of rain.

Along the narrow, twisting turns of the Marchway she went, south through the closed-in chaos of Old Town, and into the uninhibited pandemonium of Hired Skull, with its myriad of furtive stares and thousands of unmapped alleys and crannies. Born to Fenstre, Seusea regarded these locales with a practiced caution, always alert but still comfortable in her familiarity. She also moved swiftly; a deeper fleeting shadow against the dark of the vines and shrubs which lined the Marchway. It would take more than the just a rabble cutpurse to mark her tonight.

An hour later, she reached the confines of Knebber Point, the location of the previous night's escapades. The near-miss with death was still close in her mind and her steps became far more circumspect. Keeping herself inconspicuous, she followed a caravan wagon down the Marchway through the middle of Knebber Point, then crossed Northgaol Canal to reach Gaol Island. Once, centuries past, Gaol Island did indeed hold a gaol, but no longer. In Seusea's time, it was owned by the Geriarchs for the exclusive use of the Fenstre Militia and most of it was walled off, inaccessible even to the Hallilan. It contained the barracks and marshalling grounds for the thousands-strong Militia and to trespass beyond its tall, silent walls was death. It was also one of the more exposed areas in Fenstre, an aspect which always made Seusea uncomfortable. Watchers on the wall and parapets of the Gaol could see passersby a long way off, long before they were seen themselves, and Seusea walked inconspicuously, blending in with the caravan tenders. But she was not discomfited for long, as she took a right turn and crossed a rickety old bamboo and wooden bridge onto Mill Island.

Mill Island was the smallest of Fenstre's official districts and nobody knew why it was its own borough, complete with tradition and heraldry. There was naught on the island except the eponymous mill and a number of surrounding granaries and warehouses. There were no houses or settlements, which meant in the eyes of the Hallilan, there was nothing of value there. It simply sat between the opulent power of Trowheald to the south and the political might of the Clathe to the north. Yet despite its small size and relative unimportance, as a district, it attracted its own guards, even if there was nothing to be particularly vigilant against. In Seusea's experience, they were an obnoxious and intrusive crew, always seeking to spice their wearisome guard duty with some cavort. It did not matter to them if the object of their cavort was a willing member or not, and in her younger days, Seusea frequently had to run from their lascivious grasping.

She avoided the main road which traversed Mill Island west to east, and instead followed the towpath down the island's eastern and southern edges. As she came into view of Trowheald Island to the south, her heart missed a beat. At the bridge leading to Trowheald Island, she paused and re-evaluated what she was doing. A lot could go wrong. The Equitant Men were merciless to trespassers and rarely if ever handed them over to the Militia for justice. If discovered by them, she would be raped then unceremoniously murdered, to be just another floating corpse on its way out to the Fairge and oblivion. Life was cheap in Fenstre but Seusea was not of a mind to price hers so low. This entire exercise was riddled with so many negative possibilities, she almost felt like abandoning the idea and returning home to Old Town.

Almost.

Nothing ventured, nothing achieved, so the maxim went. Taking a deep breath and consigning her fate to Ydrys, she snuck up to the rear of a carriage making its way over the bridge and hung off the back of it. Once on Trowheald Island, she leapt off and slid over the left side of the bridge as Lothmire instructed. The wall to the canal below was twenty or more feet high and covered in the detritus of the ages. Midway down was a long horizontal line of bricks embedded into the wall; a decorative feature one of the canal builders must have placed millennia ago for a long-lost aesthetic purpose. Donning a pair of hand-claws, Seusea slowly worked her way down the pylon to the brick line. Panting from the effort, she waited for her eyes to adjust to the gloom and then counted off thirty-six bricks. With her legs dangling over the foul black water, she clawed a path to the left, one brick at a time. Something plopped below and she froze, her body poised for danger. Fish rarely lived in the canals of Fenstre due to the filth latent in the water, but kateans occasionally swam in from the delta swamps, looking for easy prey amongst the young and infirm. While Seusea felt confident fighting off a single katean on solid ground, she was vulnerable hanging from the wall. The spindly, pale creatures could leap high and if Seusea was dragged into the water – the katean's element – she would likely perish to it. And if she survived its attack, the muck in the canal water would soon cause a virulent illness she would be fortunate to survive, even with her Hallilan experience.

Seusea dared to look down and saw nothing to her relief. It could have been anything that fell into the water, and she muttered a silent prayer to Ydrys in gratitude, but now her arms began to ache from the fatigue of hanging by her hands. Summoning hidden reserves of strength, she sidled along the wall, patiently counting one brick after the other. Finally, she arrived at the thirty-sixth brick and she dislodged one of her hand-claws, to hang from the wall with her other hand. Carefully, she tapped on the brick as Lothmire had instructed and to her delight, she heard the release of a catch.

She wiggled a boot under the now loose section of wall beneath the brick and pried it open, then managed to heave herself inside the dank sewer entrance.

Hidden sewer exits were called *tenebrae* in the parlance of the Hallilan, and Fenstre was replete with them. This one was especially well hidden and Seusea wondered who else apart from her brother knew it existed. The sewers and their *tenebrae* were not depicted or recorded on any map Seusea knew about, unless they be only in the custody of the Geriarchs, who would show them to none, in keeping with the guardians of secrets they were.

After first ensuring how the door opened and unlocked, Seusea closed it again, then she found her small vial of glow-light in her pouch. Its phosphorescent green radiance showed a long straight passage extending away into the darkness and it was built like no sewer she had seen previously; where all the sewers in Fenstre were generally squat and rectangular, this one was tall and narrow with an odd, corbelled roof. The walls were also constructed of a type of dressed stone unknown to her experience and not the sandstone so prevalent in Fenstre, but a darker, heavier looking stone.

In truth, it resembled no sewer, as it carried no water or effluent and the floor was sandy and dry. As Lothmire had noted, Trowheald Castle predated Fenstre's founding and as with the Clathe, Lake Village and the sacred Hexaquer of the Geriarchs, it was there when the settlers first began to inhabit the area. Who built them and why were mysteries that had never been solved, even after nearly nine millennia of constant inhabitation. The Trowheald clan had dwelt in the Castle since its discovery and if they knew the secret of the Castle, they kept it to themselves.

For the first time in her career and her life, Seusea felt as if she was on foreign ground. Usually, there was a kind of odd comfort to be taken from the crumbling bricks and mortar that comprised Fenstre's sewers, like they were old friends willing and able to guide her steps in the rare event she took a wrong turn. They were her element and she travelled their gloomy ways with facile poise.

This was something else. It was too clean and well-made to be anything crafted by a Societor and it felt uncomfortably out-of-place in the squalid world Seusea knew so well. Even the soft echoes of her footsteps as she padded down the hall sounded strange. At the first intersection, she heeded Lothmire's advice and turned left. A few yards on she found something that brought her back into her familiar world: a dead katean. She knelt by it and examined the shrunken, pallid thing. It had been dead for some time, days maybe, but she couldn't see what had killed it. There were no obvious signs of injury, and Seusea had another moment where she reconsidered the wisdom of the night's sojourn.

Kateans were deceptively frail appearing creatures but they were both lithe and resilient. Once they latched on with their suckered hands and lamprey-like mouths, they were notoriously difficult to detach, and for anyone inexperienced who was surprised by one, it inevitably led to death.

So what killed this one? Seusea had no answers and a cold dread began to seep down her back.

Onward she went, taking the next left turn. Farther down, there was a three way junction with the rightmost way barred by a heavy iron door. Despite her brother's advice, she tried the door but the handle would not budge. She heard a sound and putting her ear to the door she could discern a slurping, sloshing sound, like waves breaking against rocks. The door was secured into the surrounding stone by a large steel pole and the hinges were of a kind that had their joints folded around and out of sight. Seusea suspected with both time and the right tools, she might be able to work past whatever lock held the door fast but she had neither tonight. The key Lothmire gave her did not fit. Whatever was beyond the door making that odd sound would remain a mystery.

At the next left turn she found another dead katean. This one had a lurid wound in its chest, with its ribcage torn open and its viscera wrenched from its body. Seusea estimated it had only been dead a day at the most. She loosened her steel poniard in its scabbard and studied the way ahead of her anxiously. Kateans were clever enough to stay out of Fenstre's sewers, knowing they would be easy prey to any prowling member of the Hallilan that found them and, by rights, should not have even been present in these tunnels. Of course, the obvious corollary was that there was another way into them, a way fit enough for even the claustrophobic kateans to venture into.

Seusea extinguished her light and pressed on, keeping a hand on the left wall for guidance. She could move silently when needed, and the need was upon her now. Several times as she went there were snuffling noises from somewhere, and once she swore she heard a door open and close in the far distance.

Ten minutes hence, she estimated she had to be underneath Trowheald Castle by now as only the southern half of Trowheald Island was occupied by the Castle. The northern section was the home of some of Fenstre's well-heeled and well-to-do; quiet and reserved people with none of Knebber Point's conceit or vainglories. Years ago, Seusea had carried on an affair with a merchant from Trowheald Island, slyly visiting him at Trowheald Tavern while his wife remained at home. He loved her to death, so he said and he spent lavishly on her, ploughing her with dresses and jewellery, exquisite scents and powders imported from far away. He liked to watch Seusea dance for him, wearing naught but a diaphanous white slip and jingling bangles on her wrists.

The affair was an amusing and occasionally invigorating excursion for her, and all was going well until his love-making took a turn for the violent. One night he tried to choke her in his passion and only her habit of keeping her poniard at hand saved her from an erotic death.

His blood had showered her face as she slit his throat. He had been the second man to ever die from her hand. Later that evening, she left all of his gifts at his wife's doorstep and knocked, not waiting to see who or what answered the door.

Now she was crawling through the dark, on her way to see a much different man, a man she knew had far gentler tastes. She was thinking of Thenson Trowheald when she came to the next left turn, and noted a faint glimmer off to the right. Crouching on her haunches, she waited for her eyes to adjust better. The light was coming from under a door as she saw, and she crept forward, her curiosity too much for her sense of caution. She felt for a handle and found one, and with expert hands, she unlatched the door without a sound. It swung open silently and she opened it a crack. There didn't seem to be anyone inside, but "seem" was never good enough for someone in Seusea's profession. Opening the door further, she saw that the light was coming from a single tall white candle, sitting on an altar or dais of some kind, and not enough to light the room brightly.

Convinced there was nobody in there, Seusea quietly snuck in and took stock. The room was fairly large, square and perhaps forty feet to a side and ten in height, the walls made of a dark polished stone. There was another closed door directly opposite from where she stood that she of a mind to check on in a moment. But as she gazed about, she formed the opinion that the room was a temple of some kind. Giving credence to this was a large rectangular slab in the middle and on that reclined the life-sized statue of a shapely woman, naked but with her head veiled. The candle was burning from a small sconce directly in front of the statue. There was nothing else in the room though the walls were covered in both a strange writing and portraits of the statue, all of her nude and veiled. Seusea was very literate by Fenstre standards, having been taught letters and numbers as a youth, but this writing was beyond her experience. It was a beautiful, flowing and cursive script and she traced some of it with her finger, wondering what it meant.

The statue itself was a work of art; burnished black stone and it was altogether lifelike and properly proportioned. Seusea marvelled at it, musing over who she depicted. It was not one of the Coiga of Fenstre, the pantheon of gods Societors worshipped. There were only two females among the Coiga and neither were this statue. Mniops, the goddess of the hearth and childbirth, was always shown as a short, matronly woman holding a placenta. The goddess of luck was Irtys and her symbol

was a circle evenly divided into black and white. She was never represented as a woman in any graven image, icon, picture or statue.

This statue was of an *antemer* goddess; something foreign and most likely prohibited. Little wonder it was down here in the dark where none knew of it, not even the all-seeing eyes of the Geriarchs apparently. The lit candle meant she had worshippers, and those could not have been far away. The candle had about three hours left in it by Seusea's reckoning.

Her thoughts were disturbed by a noise from behind the far door. Quickly, she scooted to the door she'd come in and closed it softly after her. Just in time, as she heard a bevy of voices, male and female, as the far door opened. Seusea's heart stopped when purposeful footsteps grew louder. As quietly as her skills allowed, she retreated down the left hand passage and threw herself flat to the ground, her heart thumping against the cold stone of the floor.

There was a sound and somebody said something Seusea couldn't make out. Then she heard more footsteps and her heart sank when a strong, narrow beam of light bobbed her way. She rolled over to the meeting of wall and floor and pulled her hood over her face, leaving only a slit for her eyes to see. Somebody rounded the corner holding a storm lantern with a directed mirror. The light flashed and played down the hallway, and Seusea prayed silently to Ydry's for thieves' luck. Still, she flexed and tensed her muscles, readying herself for flight or fight.

'Nothing?' asked a female voice, close by.

'No,' answered a male voice, the one holding the lantern. 'It may have been a katean, though I thought we cleared them out.'

'How do kateans get down here anyway? Yuill told us that the Warrens are sealed off from the top. Where do they come from?'

Yuill. Seusea's ears pricked up at the name. It was a name she knew from somewhere, but couldn't place it.

'There must be a well that leads down here,' the male voice answered. 'They don't like tunnels or sewers much. What's the word? Claustrophobic. They get claustrophobic in confined spaces so there could be a well up on Trowheald lands that drops right down here. Maybe they fall down and can't get out.'

Seusea held her breath as the two moved about. She sensed the beam of light passing over her and down the hall and she gave another quick prayer to Ydry's.

‘Whatever it was closed the door behind it,’ the female voice said. ‘Are kateans that considerate?’

‘There’s nobody,’ the male insisted. ‘False alarm. Come on Gladei, there’s nothing out here.’

The two of them strode away and the light disappeared. Wary of tricks, Seusea stayed put until she was sure neither of them were nearby. Then she picked herself off the ground and dusted herself off, thanking Ydrys and good luck for her run so far.

Gladei was a name she did know. Gladei Townmure was a singer who had a residency at the Trowheald Tavern and she was a lush, full-figured woman in her late thirties, exotically beautiful with her long black hair and equally dark eyes. The Hallilan had long suspected her of being a sorceress of some kind and what Seusea had witnessed now added considerable weight to that suspicion.

She was also the oft-times lover of Thenson Trowheald. Seusea chewed on a thumbnail, currents of envy beginning to trickle out into her system. A year ago, she had dared to come back to the Tavern, the scene of her murder in self-defence, and surreptitiously crept into the crowded common room, disguised as a man. Her quarry was the Clanmaster, and sure enough, he was there with a handful of his Equitant Men and Seusea sat quietly in one corner, mulling over one dreamy possibility after the other. Tonight, she vowed to introduce herself to him and ply the man with every charm and wile she possessed. But Gladei was there singing that night, accompanied by a small orchestra. Seusea had been enchanted by both music and songstress, but that soured immediately when the object of her desire took Gladei by the arm and disappeared to the upstairs rooms of the Tavern.

Seusea had spent the next week seething in unrequited fury. There were men in her life too, pretty things that had wandered into the Saint’s Kitchen, but none were Thenson Trowheald and none satisfied her in any deep or lasting way.

But she would have wagered every osm in Fenstre’s treasury that Thenson Trowheald had no idea that Gladei was down here in these tunnels this night. But that was a potential wedge right there, and Seusea smiled to herself for this seeming stroke of fortune. Emboldened, she set off, keeping one eye out behind her in case she was followed. After two more left turns, she came to a dead end. Her hands felt cold metal and she produced her glow-light, shaking it into action. Before her, the corridor ended at a massive steel door that she immediately knew she would never be able to open with her underworld skills. It was solidly secured into the stone around it and it lacked a handle or knob. Instead, there was a small plate in the centre, which slid aside to reveal a keyhole. Biting her lip, Seusea fit the key in it and felt a satisfying click as it unlocked. A gentle push was all it took, and the

door swung on silent hinges, revealing a long corridor or chamber beyond with a concave-curved ceiling. The chamber was illuminated by a weird green phosphorescence in the rock, and Seusea came in cautiously, feeling exposed in the faint yet garish light.

She took the key out of the door and pocketed it, and the massive door closed behind her. She gritted her teeth against the clamour, but instead it simply shut with a soft click, much to her relief. Bathed in the eldritch light from the walls, Seusea moved on. Just ahead, there were rows of biers along either side of the walls and Seusea soon realised they were tombs.

The Canal Society viewed death as the natural end of life and rarely celebrated or commemorated it. With few exceptions, the dead were either buried out in the communal graveyard at The Resting over in Ipty, or were simply dumped into the canals, where the currents would wash them out into the delta and eventually the Fairge. Assuming nothing fed on them first.

There was little if any ceremony – the dead were simply more refuse that needed to be disposed of. Mausoleums and tombs were foreign things, indicative of customs that belonged to faraway *antemery*.

But these were unmistakably monuments to the deceased. Each of the biers were rectangular white marble, seven feet long, four feet wide and that in height. On each rested the outline of a person and when Seusea examined them closer, she saw they were corpses wrapped in linen swathes. The linen had decayed with age in some of them, exposing the bones or the brown wrinkled skin of the corpse beneath and Seusea walked along the middle of them, fascinated by the tableau. There were hundreds she could see; the chamber was enormous in length, two hundred yards or more. All kinds of people were buried here; the elderly, children and all ages in between. Though she could only read some of the names on the faceplates, there was no doubting the sex of the deceased, for the linen covering clung tightly to the bodies. Were all these people Thenson's ancestors? There must have been dozens of generations of Trowhealds entombed here.

Two-thirds the way along this sad memento of human frailty, there was a wooden door set into a wall to the left. Seusea tried it and it opened up to a long set of narrow stone steps that ascended into the darkness.

Now nerves threatened to get the better of her. The world of Thenson Trowheald existed at the top of these stairs and Seusea could envision him walking about the halls above, lost in his own thoughts, oblivious to the prowling of one amorous and besotted young woman. So much could go wrong from now on, Seusea's heart neatly gave out on her just thinking about it. But no, she was not about to fail

on the threshold. With resurging confidence, she began to climb the stairs in darkness, as the phosphorescence faded behind her. She counted the stairs as she went, amazed at how deep the tomb was and at the two hundredth step, she paused and brought her glow-light out again. There was another doorway ahead, approximately sixty or so steps and she lightly bounded up them. Once at the top, she put her ear to the door and listened. It was as silent as the realm of death she had just left. Pushing on it, the door opened with a slight creak and she froze, sweating nervous drops of fear. She tried it again, and like a wraith, she slipped out into the corridor beyond. It was dark, but there were lights lit in the middle distance to her left and right. Things twinkled in the soft light and she soon understood there were objects of crystal and glass along the walls. Her eyes caught sight of chandeliers, mirrors and other fine accoutrements; the furnishings of the opulent. To walk among them in daylight had to have been a true joy and Seusea hoped that day would be hers to enjoy soon.

Now she was at a quandary. Left or right? 'Come on, girl,' she whispered. 'Pick a direction and take it.'

Before she moved, she recalled Lothmire mentioning that Thenson's rooms faced eastward, overlooking Gaol Island. Her Hallilan-honed sense of direction underground had failed her in the strange tunnels below and she had no idea what direction she faced now. On a whim, she went left and crept along the carpeted floor like a shadow. Lothmire had also said that no Equitant Men guarded the Castle interior. There was no need as the place itself was under constant vigilance. So maybe, Seusea thought, my task tonight may be that much easier without the chore of having to avoid sentries and guards.

The corridor ended at a T-junction. Off to her immediate left and front, a broad set of steps led down. The other way, a corridor bent around to the left about ten feet away. There was a man off to the left at the end of the corridor reading something under a light, and Seusea withdrew swiftly back into the shadow. There were muffled footsteps heading her way, and she hunkered to her knees, making herself smaller.

The man came to the landing, holding a small piece of paper. He was about to descend when he sniffed the air, glancing this way and that. Then he grunted and sauntered down the stairs and Seusea caught breathe again. Now she wondered what he had smelled. Her clothes were clean – she'd had them laundered earlier in the day, and she had been in no sewers to stink them up. Was it something she had picked up from the floor of the –what had Gladei called them? The Warrens? No, it was just dust. She wiped a leg speculatively and sniffed. Nothing.

She uncurled herself and stood up. After a brief glance behind her, she took a step out into the corridor beyond, to be confronted by the business end of a longsword. She stopped in her tracks and met the eyes of the grinning man holding the sword. 'Slowly,' he said, beckoning to her. 'Turn about and put your arms above your head.'

Defeated, Seusea did as she was told. She felt a hand roughly pat her down and he clucked when he found her poniard. 'Interesting. Who were you going to knife tonight, thiefling?'

'Nobody and I'm not a *thiefling*.'

'Oh, a girl. Curious.'

'A *woman*. May I turn about?'

'Of course. I hope you're pretty.'

Grimacing, Seusea spun back around. The man still had the sword held to her neck, and was hefting her poniard in his loose hand. He was ruggedly handsome, early forties, his greying brown hair loose and stringy. His eyes were mild and narrow and to Seusea's thinking, he was more amused than outraged at finding her in the Castle.

'So am I pretty?' she asked.

He lifted up her hood with the sword point, and strands of blonde hair fell out. 'Now that's different,' he murmured. 'Unusual hair colour for this part of the world. What's your name?'

'Seusea.'

'Hmm,' he said, dropping the sword to her chest. 'Familiar, but I can't place it. Fill in the gaps for me lass, why are you familiar?'

'I am Lothmire's sister. We share a mother.'

'Hallilan! So you are a thiefling,' he said, smiling. 'A little Hallilan girl, breaking into places she shouldn't be. How did you get in here?'

'You haven't told me if I'm pretty or not,' Seusea said, bristling at being called a girl.

'You are, for sure. I'd run away with you if I had the time and desire. All right, I believe I asked you a question.'

'I got in here the old-fashioned way we *thieflings* normally do things.' Her tone became serious. 'Please, I'm not here to steal or murder or do anything...*untoward*. I'm here to see the Clanmaster and I'll be damned by Cydain's balls if you stop me. I just want to see him.' She let out a long sigh. 'Be with him.'

The man's expression said it all and Seusea cursed her romanticism. 'Oh, he has an admirer, hey?' he asked.

'I'm sure I'm not the only one,' she admitted. 'I encountered another of his admirers tonight and I believe he may be interested in knowing where I encountered her. It could be she is involved in something contrary to how we do things in Fenstre.'

The man gave Seusea a hard and long stare, and then surprised her by returning her poniard. 'Seusea, I'm Omis, of the Orstrey River Soldiers. Thenson's uncle. There's something sincere about you that puts me at ease, so I'm going to let you go and find Thenson. I doubt he's asleep as he's had a thoughtful day today. If he asks why you're in the Castle, tell him I let you in unless you decide to spill the truth to him. You owe me an explanation too and as soon as you're able you're going to give it to me. Do you know where the Soldiers' barracks is in Southmer?'

'I do,' Seusea nodded.

'Come there at your earliest convenience, preferably tomorrow during the day.' He sheathed his sword. 'I'm a good judge of character, Seusea, so don't disappoint me.' He gestured off to the right where the corridor bent around. 'Follow that and his door is at the end of the hall.'

Seusea, elated, stepped forward and surprised Omis by kissing his cheek. 'Thank you. This means everything to me.'

Omis raised an eyebrow, 'Keep that up and you'll never make it to his room, lady. I have a nice bed in here you know.' He smiled broadly. 'To put you at ease, you're pretty good at the footpad stuff. Most people wouldn't have known you were there. I'm not most people though. Thirty years of fighting everything under our sun has sort of whetted away my blunt edges.'

'So I don't smell?'

'Ah, that was for show,' Omis said, laughing. 'No, I heard and saw you but like I said, you're good.' He threw her a wink. 'Alas for you, I'm better and be grateful there aren't many like me. Enjoy your night, Seusea.' He strode away down the stairs.

'I intend to,' Seusea said quietly.

Once more, she offered her thanks to Ydrys and then set off down the corridor. She was shaking and she paused at the corner, willing herself to calm down. A burning ambition was about to be fulfilled – hopefully, and she didn't want to fall into his room like a moonstruck fool.

Down the dark, quiet corridor she went, and she saw his door ahead, a crack of light pouring out from under it. Her bowels were threatening to invert themselves as she came up to the door and she stood there shivering. She put a hand to the latch and pushed down – the door gave way and she saw a large and lavish room beyond, lit by four large candelabra in each corner. She had a vague impression that the room was richly appointed with all kinds of things she usually would've devoted greater attention to, but her focus was on a man sitting against a window at the far end of the room. Thenson Trowheald was turned slightly away from her, staring out at the night beyond, and so didn't see her come in. Seusea paused in the doorway, her eyes hungrily taking in the entirety of the Clanmaster, then she crept in and went behind him. Coming up on the unsuspecting man, she gently placed her hands on his shoulders. He flinched and tried to stand, but she whispered in his ear. 'Sit please, Clanmaster. I'm not an enemy or a thief, but someone you mean a lot to. I don't want you to see me and I don't want you to know who I am. Not yet.'

Thenson relaxed, though his head was turned at an angle toward her and she knew he could see her from the waist down. 'Why not yet?'

'Oh,' Seusea answered. It was not a question she was expecting. 'Maybe I want to be a mystery to you, like you are to me. Then perhaps I'm not an enigma to you. Have you not gotten letters from a woman who has admired you?'

'No,' he answered. 'I haven't. May I ask how you got in here?'

So he hadn't got her correspondence! Buoyed, she said, 'I was let in by your uncle. He knows I'm no threat and that's why I'm here.' She gave in to an impulse and kissed the crown of his head. 'I want to do so much more but I will not throw myself at your feet like a cheap meretrix. I think I like this game we're playing and I want to remain an enigma to you...at least for a while.'

'I have many admirers,' Thenson said, not taking his eyes off her legs. 'Some do write letters, others do throw themselves at my feet. Have we met? Please answer that.'

'We have, though we've never shared words.' Seusea caressed his shoulders. 'Never shared anything. I imagine you would have many women pursue you. You are Fenstre's pre-eminent citizen

and a wealthy and powerful man but that's not what motivates me with you. I've known wealthy and powerful men and I've slept with some of them. They've beguiled me with trinkets and blandishments, they've wooed and said sweet insincere things to me. I need neither wealth nor power, Clanmaster. I'm content living without either and I make my way in this world by my wits and courage. I don't seek to rise above my station by unjustly being at your side. I just...' She chewed down on what she wanted to say, then said it anyway. 'I just want to love you and I yearn that one day, you will love me back. I could not care less if you were Clanmaster or you were an Ipty outcast.' Leaning into his ear, she whispered. 'But if you were an Ipty beggar, you would've been easier to come and visit.'

Thenson was silent for a moment, then he said, 'You're sure I can't see you?'

'For the time being.'

'I could easily find out who you are, you know? Track you down or have you followed. Frankly, I have too much mystery in my life and you with your soft voice is a beguilement I'm possibly better off without.'

'Maybe you are better off, but you would never know, would you?' Seusea said. 'Come, take me as I am. As far as you can see me at the moment.' She gave his shoulders another squeeze. 'Perhaps you can tell me what this mystery is that bothers you? Call it the first sharing of our hearts, if you like. I can help.'

'It's a woman,' Thenson said, 'A woman who has a soft voice like yours. Like you, she wants me to love her back but she won't tell me anything of herself.'

'Gladei Townmure,' Seusea said, her heart cooling. 'Do you not love her?'

'She makes it hard for me,' Thenson admitted. 'How do you know her?'

'I've heard her sing at the Tavern on this island.'

'Ah, so you watch me often?'

'Not as often as I'd like,' Seusea said. 'I live in another part of Fenstre and our worlds don't coincide often. I've known you – of you – since I was a girl. For fifteen or so years now. We come from the same part of Fenstre originally, and our mothers were both meretrices. They may have even known one another. But you ascended to Clanmastery, and I went from Southmer to Cynosure Point

and now I live in Old Town. I know something of Gladei Townmure that perhaps you don't. Do you know of the ways beneath your Castle and island?'

Thenson sat up and Seusea felt him tense under her hands. 'Ways? What do you mean?'

'Tunnels, or the Warrens as some call them.'

Thenson's voice was steely, and Seusea wondered if her game was about to end. 'How would someone like you know of them?' he asked.

'I didn't until tonight but down in them is a fane or a temple of a foreign goddess. She lies on her side like a seductress, devoid of clothes yet she wears a veil over her face. A beautiful goddess and I think Gladei worships her. I found it quite by chance.' It dawned on Seusea then that Thenson Trowheald could be a confederate of those in the hidden temple below. Why, by Ydrys, had she not thought of that? The answer to that, she told herself, was quite simple. I am smitten by this man and my judgment has been skewed as a consequence. It could all end here...

'There's no way you got into the Warrens "quite by chance",' Thenson said. 'None at all as before this evening, they're a secret that was known to my Clan and the Geriarchs only. Oh, I suspect one other knew too.'

'Please, it doesn't matter,' Seusea said, wondering if this was a fool's mission after all. 'They're a secret I'll keep and keeping secrets close is something I'm very good at.'

'Which means Omis did not let you in to the Castle.'

'No,' Seusea admitted. 'But he did let me here to see you.'

'You're either a meretrix or one of the Hallilan,' Thenson said. 'I'm beginning to suspect the latter as no whore I've ever known can walk softly like you. Yes, Gladei does worship this goddess, but until now, I didn't believe the Geriarchs' allegations.' Seusea could feel his shoulders slump under her hands. 'Now what they say is true,' he went on, in a quieter voice. 'She is the priestess of an *antemery* cult and worse, they moot in the Warrens despite her lies to me to the contrary. Who else was there?'

'A man whose name was never spoken, but they mentioned a Yuill.'

'Yuill Drivandad,' Thenson said. 'He lives here on Trowheald Island and works with Gladei's brother Sponnand. The other man you saw was likely to be Sponnand.' A sound of disgust left Thenson's lips. 'He is rarely more than twenty feet away from his sister. You've solved a mystery for

me, my secret admirer and I am grateful.' Thenson turned his head more, and Seusea adroitly stepped out of his vision. 'But wait...you went into their temple? From what I was told by the Geriarchs, it's surrounded by an ensorcelling field, some vile magic they can conjure up. You should've been snared by it.'

'I can dodge magic,' Seusea said delicately. 'I have an immunity to it and that is perhaps why I got out safely but who is this goddess? She is beautiful, whoever she is.'

'Her name is Lhusk,' Thenson said. 'From what I've been told her faith is not from the Three Rivers, but from some hot continent far south of the Fairge, beyond Luwedne even. Her cult is devoted to love, though I've been led to believe it's not the sort of love ordinary people would want. Their priestesses are Dynes and their worship involves living sacrifices. Needless to say, it's something the Geriarchs do not want in Fenstre.' He laughed briefly. 'They don't want the competition.'

'I dealt with a Dyne last night,' Seusea admitted, referring to her previous mission where she encountered a murderous sorceress. 'Not the kind of person I want to involve myself with again.'

'You are Hallilan then?'

'I won't begin our acquaintance by telling you lies,' Seusea said. 'So I won't deny what you're asking.'

'Women among the Hallilan are rare.'

'That is true.'

'Since you aren't going to lie to me,' Thenson said. 'What would you have said to me tonight if you hadn't encountered Gladei in the Warrens?'

'What I said already,' Seusea answered. 'How I'd like us to be in love and that one day we could share each other's lives. My motives would have been no different, Clanmaster. Seeing Gladei was one of those serendipitous things that Ydrys occasionally graces us with. You may be thinking I'm jealous of the woman and at a basic level, I am. I've seen her on your arm and I felt jealousy but I'm not motivated by envy, even if everything suggests I am. You said the woman was playing mysterious games with you and so I helped you solve some of that mystery. Serendipity.'

'It's certainly worked in your favour.'

'I cannot deny that, bless Ydrys. If Gladei is a Dyne then you are in danger, Clanmaster. I've seen what a Dyne can do and Gladei will slaughter you in the name of her goddess.'

'The Geriarchs said the same thing.' Thenson reached for a bottle and refilled his glass. 'All right, you've given me much to think about too. What will you do now?'

'Go home,' Seusea said. 'I've done what I've set out tonight to do, and that is be with you, as trite as that sounds. I'm known to you now, and while I have no way to prove it yet, I will be true to you. I will wait until Gladei is either gone from your life or she firms in your mind. If the latter happens, I will not bother you again. Not ever.'

'She will not firm in my mind,' Thenson said. 'She has played me completely and utterly false. Played Fenstre and the Society completely false. No, strange lady, she won't be my helpmeet and confidante any longer.'

Seusea said nothing for a moment, then kissed the top of his head again. 'I'll be away then and we'll meet again and soon. Oh, and don't watch me leave please.'

'I won't, but I'll say this. I do look forward to our next encounter and tell Lothmire that he was clever not to tell me much about the mystery sister he had, the one whose father was an outlander sorcerer from some northern country. That could only be you, mystery lady. Can I have the key Lothmire gave you, please?'

Grinning, Seusea reached under her blouse and found the key. While Thenson kept his eyes averted, she gently placed it in his lap. 'I love you, Thenson Trowheald, and the day you say you love me back draws near. Fare well.'

**Seusea will return in Seusea and the Threat of Peace**