

# FORTUNE'S FAVOR

A woman with her hair styled in an updo, wearing a long, flowing, dark blue dress, sits on an ornate balcony. She is looking down at a small object she is holding in her hands. The background is a dramatic, painterly scene of a city at night, with lights reflecting on a body of water. The sky is filled with dark, swirling clouds, punctuated by bright, ethereal light beams and a glowing sun or moon. The overall mood is mysterious and magical.

Jo Graham

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Jo Graham



First edition published 2023

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Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data  
In Progress

ISBNs: 978-1-952456-18-3 (paperback), 978-1-952456-19-0 (digital)

Cover art by Eleni Tsami  
Book design and composition by Athena Andreadis

Editor: Athena Andreadis

Proofreader: Kelly Jennings

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For my father,  
who told me to go have some adventures.





## PROLOGUE

**T**heo watched the Lesser Twin grow in the viewscreen, no more than a great golden ball, its brilliant light filtered by the cameras.

“Notify Menaechmi Control that we are inbound and our estimated arrival is seventy-three minutes,” the captain said. She was a middle-aged woman with a no-nonsense manner, the golden honeybee badge of House Melian displayed on her blue shipsuit though this was a merchanter, not a warship. She looked at him and smiled. “Have you ever seen the approach before, Theo? It’s impressive.”

“No, Captain,” Theo said politely. “I appreciate you letting me watch from the command center. I can’t see anything from my cabin. There’s only one screen.”

The captain smiled indulgently. “Well, you’re what? Twelve? If you’ve an interest, it’s not too soon to learn how a ship works. Your sister Aurore is a fine pilot.”

“She is,” Theo said. Aurore was his favorite sister out of three, more than twice his age but always willing to join in whatever games he played or to introduce him to better ones. He did occasionally get tired of Aurore this and Aurore that, but it was hardly her fault that she impressed people or was fourteen years older.

The merchanter’s three screens shifted, two showing views of the Lesser Twin, the third a starfield in which there was a small

sphere, half-eclipsed. Home. Theo felt his heart leap. This had been his first trip alone, sent to Lono to stay with a factor of the House for his education. He'd learned a lot and some parts had been fun, but he hadn't quite realized how much he loved home until he was gone. It would be good to see his father and to play on beaches that were sandy and warm instead of rocky and cold.

"Captain, we are being hailed by another vessel," one of the crew said.

"Onscreen." The captain's manner was easy.

One of the displays changed, showing instead the brightly-lit interior of a ship, a man in close-up. He had tightly cropped hair and a scar on his chin prominent enough that Theo wondered why he hadn't had it erased. Only the collar of his shipsuit showed: Calpurnian red. "This is the *Liberty*. You will shut down your main engines immediately and prepare to receive a boarding party."

The captain's pleasant demeanor vanished in an instant. "On whose authority?"

"On the authority of the Calpurnian Senate, with myself as its representative." His mouth twisted a little, an expression of contempt. "I am Altissimus Cassian, duly rendered honors by that body."

The captain gestured to one of the crew beneath the level of the camera view on her, but her voice stayed even. "You are in the Menaechmi system. We are a merchant vessel with Menaechman registration inbound to our home port. Your authority does not allow you to detain us."

Theo felt a rush of fear. The Calpurnians had attacked Menaechman vessels before. But that wasn't supposed to happen anymore, not since his father and three other Guardians had given Altissimus Iulus a lot of currency. He sat down on his acceleration couch, sliding back and reaching for the straps.

"We see your registration, *Light Dancer*. What port are you inbound for?"

“We are inbound for Beira. We are the property of House Melian.” Another gesture below camera level, and she swung the arm of her couch across her in the chair, her right hand moving on the board.

Theo bit his lip. The helmsman turned around and gave him a thumbs up. Theo pulled the shoulder straps across his body, fastening each at the opposite hip.

The man smiled. It wasn't a nice smile at all. “Shut down your main engines. We have business with your passengers.” Theo's eyes widened. He was the only passenger of note.

The captain's voice was even. “I'm sorry, but we cannot allow that. You have no authority to detain Menaechman citizens in the Menaechmi system.” Whatever the Calpurnian might have replied was silenced as the captain cut the comm. “Give me full power!” she said, and the screens tilted dizzily as she put the helm over hard, the Lesser Twin filling the screen, diving for the sun's gravity well like a sea bird fleeing a kestrel.

As the screens changed, Theo saw the other ship for the first time and sucked in a breath. It was a Calpurnian warship fully three times their size, black and sleek against the stars, enormous drive pod integrated so that it looked as slim and deadly as one of the massive toothfish that hunted in Menaechmi's seas.

“Captain, our structural integrity won't handle the coronasphere,” one of the crew said.

“We're not going in. We're just going to try to lose them in the gravity well.” The Lesser Twin grew on the center screen. “We'll put the Twin between us and then...”

“They're launching missiles!” another crew member shouted, their voice scaling up. Theo's hands tightened on the couch arms. He could see the flares of ignition on the screen with the rear view, the Calpurnian ship turning to follow as the missiles sped ahead of it.

“Send a distress to Menaechmi Control,” the captain said. “And to Beira.” Grimly, she angled the ship more steeply. “The

structure will hold better against the coronasphere than it will against a pair of 500s.” 500s. Theo swallowed hard. Those were the big missiles, ones that could punch through military armor. *Light Dancer* wasn’t even armed.

“Missiles are closing, captain.” Theo could see them on the screen. It didn’t matter if the Calpurnian ship could catch them if they simply wanted to destroy them. Theo clenched his fists. He wasn’t going to make a sound. “Impact in seven seconds.” And then the missiles detonated astern, a rain of visible light as the ship shook. Alarms sounded.

“Captain, we have a breach in the stern hold!” one of the crew shouted, voice shaking with fear. “The compartment is sealed.”

“The Calpurnians are hailing again,” another said.

The captain dropped her eyes. “Put it on.”

The man looked happy, Theo thought, like he was having fun. “The next missile won’t be detonated short,” he said. “Shut down your main engine and prepare to receive a boarding party. I will not warn you again.”

She took a deep breath. She didn’t look at Theo. “Yes, Altissimus. We are shutting down our engines. We protest this unlawful action and require you to inform House Melian.”

Cassian’s smile grew. “Don’t worry. We’ll inform House Melian.”

## CHAPTER ONE

**T**he double suns of Full Day streamed down on the streets of Beira, their shared light dissolving all shadows. Beyond the seawall the whitecapped ocean broke in endless swells, a haze of evaporation hanging over it. No one was in sight. The heat was deadly. No one would venture from behind reflecting façades until the Lesser Twin set in five hours.

Caralys looked out through the mirrored glass of the sleek white trundle purring slowly through the port quarter. There was a low building with steps leading down to a door limned in blue light, now faded out in daylight brightness. “Stop here,” she said. It was a live driver, not an automatic, and she pulled up as close to the building as possible. “Wait for me,” Caralys said. “There’s no traffic.”

The driver nodded her assent, and Caralys braced herself as the side door opened up and out, making a small, shaded spot as though beneath a wing. The heat hit her like a physical blow. She swung her feet out, golden sandals better suited to indoors, but it was only a few steps. She hurried across the verge and down the steps, hearing the trundle closing up behind her.

Cool, dark—Caralys stopped just inside the door to get her bearings. The foyer was dark purple, a pair of chairs to one side, a standing desk to the other, all dimly lit by gold sconces. The curtains were drawn back across the inner entrance. An officious disson

came round the desk, clearly ready to run off the unwelcome, and Caralys lifted a hand covered in jeweled mesh. There was no badge upon it, but it hardly needed one. "I'm meeting someone," she said.

"Of course, Gaura." They stepped aside with a gesture that would have swept back the curtains had they not already been parted, a place with greater pretensions to exclusivity than it had. In reality, it was simply one of the nicer starport establishments.

Caralys passed into the first room. It was larger than it first appeared, islands of tables separated by lush greenery, lit almost entirely by the aquariums that lined the walls and provided privacy between groups of tables. Most of the tables were empty. It was Full Day before a high holy day. Even though the holiday hadn't officially started yet, people had already begun their mourning. It wasn't seemly to be in a bar.

In the back, half behind a pruned bank of trees, there were two xalepieae at a table. And that was her party. Caralys made her way toward them, unhurried.

They lifted their heads as she approached. One was short and slight, wearing an ordinary brown shipsuit that didn't disguise her Menaechman origin, while the other was clearly a stranger, a dark-haired woman in a black, sleeveless top that showed tattoos on each shoulder, a star on one and an accretion disk on the other. The Menaechman stood up from her plush blue armchair as Caralys approached.

"Captain Ravit," Caralys said. "As always, a pleasure."

"Gaura Caralys," Jamila Ravit said with a deep nod, "the same. Allow me to introduce my associate. This is Bister. It's at her request that I've asked you to meet with us."

"I am delighted," Caralys said politely.

Jamila Ravit gestured to the attendant. "Beautiful Poison for us all. In ice."

"I appreciate you taking the time to see me," Bister said. Her face was weathered, though her voice and arms showed her to be

not much more than fifty. "I represent..."

"After our drinks have come," Jamila said, taking her seat again as Caralys slid into the third plush chair, the one on the outside of the table. The wall behind was an aquarium, dimly blue-lit, with rocks and the waving fronds of sea plants. An octopus curled among the rocks, a tentacle or two lazily sampling the current.

"Your pardon," Bister said. "I am not Menaechman, so I hope you will forgive me if I don't know all the conventions."

"Of course," Caralys said. "And I am always pleased to meet a friend of Captain Ravit's. She has long been known to us." Caralys folded her hands; the gold mesh covering the backs of them attached to rings on each finger set with manufactured rubies, square cut and large, which then fastened to bracelets on each wrist. As she folded her hands, she discreetly touched the stud on the bottom of her right bracelet that activated the recording device.

Bister glanced at her hands appreciatively, or perhaps at the rubies, calculating their resale value. "Are you an Adept?"

Jamila shifted in her seat, but Caralys laughed. "Lord's Skirts, no! Offworlders think Adepts grow on trees, which they don't even on Menaechmi. I am simply a gaura in service to a single House. Captain Ravit has handled delicate trades for us before, and so I am here to listen to what she has to say. Which I presume is what you have to say."

"Just so," Jamila said. "And I appreciate your time." She gave Bister a warning look, a hint the other woman took immediately.

"I take no offense," Caralys said as the attendant approached with the drinks. "On Menaechmi sex is public and currency is private."

Wordlessly, the attendant presented three cold holders, each containing a cup made of ice. Into them he poured a stream of spirits and citrus syrup, setting them together at the center of the table. "Leave the pitcher," Jamila said, and he nodded and backed away.

Bister reached for the nearest cup, and Caralys followed. "That's a good punch," Bister said as she tasted it. "What is it?"

"Lime and kumquat," Caralys said. "And fermented succulent nectar." She took a sip. "And this is well made." The ice cup melted on the rim at the touch of her lips, but the cooler it sat in would keep it intact until they finished. "And now we will talk business if you like."

Bister glanced at Jamila, then directed her gaze to Caralys. "I represent Inanna," she said. "We've traded with Menaechmi before often enough in spite of the Isolation. But now we've warred with Calpurnia and made common cause with Eresh. We need a more robust bargain."

"And what would that bargain entail?" Caralys asked.

"We need official recognition from one of the member states of the original Alliance that imposed the Isolation. We need one of the signatories to the punitive bond to declare it is no longer valid and that Inanna is self-governing." Bister's eyes met hers squarely.

"You ask a great deal," Caralys said. She took another sip. "You do know that what you ask may not be possible?"

Bister spread her hands. "Go on."

"Firstly, Menaechmi has no planetary government. The Cities of the Coast are like jewels on a thread, seven sisters along the continental edge between the desert and the sea, each ruled by a Guardian. Sometimes we cooperate and sometimes we fight. Six million people live in Beira or its hinterlands, but we speak for no other City than our own. Beira's Guardian has no authority to treat for Menaechmi."

Bister lifted her cup with both hands, looking over the rim. "I've heard that Beira's Guardian can often move events in the direction he desires. Isn't he the Husband of the Golden Lady?"

"That is true," Caralys said, tilting her wrist to put Bister in a better camera angle. "But that power must be used sparingly. Which brings me to my second point. We do not have a fleet.



When the Altissimi park warships in orbit and politely request our cooperation, we have little choice. While we greatly appreciate your removal of Altissima Gnea, her death does not entirely solve our problems.”

Bister nodded, acknowledging the compliment. “But now Altissimus Iulus is also dead and the Warlady of Morrigan has defeated the Calpurnian fleet.”

“The Warlady of Morrigan has run their Navy out of Morriganian space, and the current Altissimi would be foolish to try Morrigan again. But as I said, that does not solve our problem. Various factions contend for Calpurnia. Even weakened, any of them have more starships than we do.”

“Forgive me, but why don’t you build some?” Bister gestured around the lovely room. “You have money. You have tech. Why don’t you build a fleet?”

“If any City should attempt such a thing, the others would unite against it.” Caralys shrugged. “It would be presumed that it was a weapon to use against our neighbors. If Beira began building warships, we would be attacked by the other Cities within a Day.”

“So instead you remain at the mercy of Calpurnia when you don’t have to be,” Bister said.

“Calpurnia is distant, and so far their demands have been bearable,” Caralys said. “While our neighbors are close and jealous.” She took a sip of her Beautiful Poison. “To formally recognize Inanna would invite Calpurnian repercussions.”

“Now less than before,” Bister said.

“That is true,” Caralys said. “None of the Altissimi are as strong as Gnea or Iulus, and many ships were lost at Morrigan.”

“And Eresh,” Jamila Ravit said. “I took one myself and put a prize crew on her.”

“A formidable achievement,” Caralys said, though she imagined it must have been one of the smaller ships. Still, there was a rising tide here that could not be ignored. “I will discuss

your request in certain circles.” She looked at Bister. “What do you offer, theoretically, in exchange for recognition of Inanna’s independence?”

“Our friendship and open trade,” Bister said.

Caralys tilted her wrist just a little. “Forgive me, but you also have no fleet, and we do not need foodstuffs from offworld as Eresh does. What do you have that we need?”

Bister didn’t flinch from her gaze. “Once we were mighty.”

“But you are not anymore,” Caralys said quietly. “If this were in the days of the Alliance when Inanna was a great power, it would look different. But you are a low-tech agricultural world with a small population. I do not dispute that one day you will be powerful again. But in this day, we live with what is. We have no cause to love the Isolation. I doubt most Menaechman even care. It could be renounced without looking back. But what does matter is that we cannot declare ourselves the enemy of Calpurnia.”

“Rather than a client state.”

“If you like,” Caralys said. “If Inanna reenters the spheres of the great powers, you will learn that being a client state is better than being a smoking ruin. We learned from your fate, did we not? Would any world be so stupid as to invite war and retribution?”

Bister let out a long breath. “No, of course not. No reasonable Guardian would wish the Isolation on his people. I’ve heard your Guardian is reasonable.”

“If you had a proposal that were mutually beneficial,” Caralys said, “I am certain the Guardian would hear it. And I am sure he will follow your progress with great interest.”

“You sound certain of that,” Bister said. “Is it possible to reach him?”

“I believe so,” Caralys said. “And there may be some intermediate steps that can be taken toward friendship that stop short of the full recognition you ask that may be beneficial to Inanna. I will contact you if I have ideas on that. And do not

hesitate to communicate with me again if you have further matters of interest." Caralys stood up, putting her cup on the table. "Captain Ravit, a pleasure as always. Bister, I was pleased to meet you."

"And I you," Bister said as they both got to their feet.

"Until we meet again," Jamila said formally.

Bister watched Caralys walk away, scarlet dress and chestnut hair bound in a golden caul that matched the mesh on her hands. "That was clear enough," Bister said. "Come back when you've got something worth trading."

"Still," Jamila said, taking a sip of her drink, "she's the best contact I have. You wanted highly placed. That's my best shot."

"A prostitute?"

Jamila winced. "A gaura. It's a different thing. A gaura is employed by one House, sometimes for decades at a time. She's not for sale."

"I wasn't judging," Bister said mildly. "There are lots of ways to make a living in the big world. Plenty of people find it expedient to make themselves likeable to someone able to support them."

"On Menaechmi we have rules about that," Jamila said. "Who can contract under what circumstances, what the rights of all parties are, what obligations are required. Even a pick-up in the starport requires ticking the disclaimers on their handheld to say that you've agreed to the terms of the contract." Jamila drained her drink. "That's true regardless of everyone's genders. I've always thought it odd you only have three instead of five."

"It's a big world," Bister said. "Are gauras all..." She searched for the word. "Elegant? Feminine?"

"Five genders instead of three," Jamila said again. "She's hapalia, but gauras can be any gender."

"Do you really think she can reach somebody's ear?"

"She's had some very interesting jobs for me in the past," Jamila said. "It's amazing how someone might want to travel to Calpurnia and not go through customs on the way in. You'd have

no way to know they were even there.”

“You’ve smuggled people onto Calpurnia?” Bister asked.

“And out.”

“That’s a lot harder than goods,” she said.

“Tell me about it.” Jamila pursed her lips. “And it pays commensurately.”

That was Jamila, always about the bottom line. “Who did you smuggle?”

“Presumably some of the House’s agents. Nondescript people with undefined business. Somebody keeps a close watch on what goes on in the Calpurnian Senate. But I couldn’t tell you who the principal is. They like to keep it that way.”

“If you don’t know, you can’t say,” Bister said.

“Just so.”

Bister shook her head. “I’m not seeing an in. Maybe I should have gone with Perisad to Morrigan first.”

“And what does Inanna have to offer Morrigan?” Jamila asked. “They don’t need shiploads of bulk consumables either. Also,” she paused, “no offense to Perisad, Morriganians are weird.”

Bister took another sip of the punch. It was really good. She wondered what a kumquat was. “Maybe I’m thinking about this wrong,” she mused. “When I ran pharma, this was the deal: I’d get a load of agricultural produce and fresh meat from the clans up to Eresh and then sell it on Eresh for hard currency to people with limited growing space and no grazing space on an airless moon. Then I’d take the hard currency to Morrigan with Perisad and hit the shops where pharma is cheap, and load up on analgesics, sterile bandages, anticoagulants, antihistamines, you name it. Pick up a few entertainment data chips for nearly nothing, batteries, and anything else the clans need. Then smuggle all that through Eresh to Inanna where it’s practically priceless. Then start all over again trading it for agricultural products.” She looked at Jamila. “There wasn’t anything Inanna made that Morrigan wanted. But

run it through a third party, and suddenly everybody's problems are solved."

"So who's the third party and what do they want?" Jamila asked. She looked intrigued at the thought of a profit.

"I don't know yet," Bister said. "But that's got to be the deal, doesn't it? Somebody's got something the Guardian needs. We get it for him, and Menaechmi gives us what we need. Galactic politics isn't any different from a smuggling run."

Jamila laughed. "Sure. It's that simple."

"It might be," Bister said. "I just need to figure out the angle." She drained the rest of her drink. "Jamila, what's a kumquat?"



The trundle pulled around the back of the building, passing through two electronic checkpoints. Heavy watertight doors opened and then closed behind her each time, as the trundle descended into a basement garage two levels below the street. Caralys stepped out into cool air, white concrete walls as thick as she was tall providing both security and comfort. She lifted her bejeweled left hand to her face. "Assistant, where is the Guardian?"

"The Guardian is in his salia," a crisp voice replied. "Four Guild members are present. Shall I put your call through?"

"No," Caralys said. "Just a discreet chime. Thank you." She went in through the metal doors to a narrow lobby carpeted in rich blue, the carpet thick enough that her thin-soled gold sandals sank into it. A single bench was built into the far wall. A concealed compartment swung open at a touch, showing a dozen pairs of shoes and various wraps and outerwear. She stopped, slipping on tall pattens in scarlet that added a handspan of height, and then added a translucent gold shawl. The interior cool was chilly on her bare shoulders and back. Then she ran her hand over the call plate and stepped into the lift. "Twelve," she said briskly.

The inside of the lift was paneled in precious burlwood, a faint cedar scent clinging to it. When the doors opened, it was to a similarly opulent view. The entire wall to the right was a single panel of mirrored glass. Beyond it, Beira stretched up to the mountain's feet, the volcano like a sleeping beast beneath a blanket of green. One tiny puff of white showed at the summit. "The Old Man is snoring," as the old people said. In the heat of Full Day, you could practically see the vegetation steaming. As soon as the Lesser Twin set, condensation would begin. The Greater Twin would not be far behind in its decline, eleven hours of Greater Day until twilight. Then the storms would roll in from the restless sea.

The rest of the room was muted in color, the better to emphasize the beauty without. A low table held a long rough stone planter of sprouting grain, a concession to the holiday. Discreet detectors flared as Caralys turned to her left and passed through the archway into the next room. The assistant looked up from their workstation, one hand pausing over the security button, then moving when they saw who it was.

"In his salia, you say?" Caralys asked.

"Yes, Gaura. Do you want me to send anything in?"

"That won't be necessary." Caralys gave them a smile. "What is on the schedule next?"

"Given the holiday, there are no further plans until the last hour of twilight," the assistant said. "I presume since the Guardian is not sleeping during the middle of the Full Day...." They let their voice trail off.

"You presume the Guardian must sleep at some time, yes. I will call for a meal if it is wanted." She patted the assistant on the shoulder as she passed, then paused a dozen feet down the hall, her tall pattens leaving impressions in the thick carpet. "Which Guild members?"

"Callista, Haro, Themistin, and Lesk."

Hardly favorites. "Thank you." Caralys continued down the

hall, running her hand over the entry plate and opening the door at the end, sweeping in with a smile.

Along the near wall stood a small shrine to the Golden Lady, graceful and masked, her foot on the prow of a starship and a cascade of treasure pouring from the pitcher she held. Three indigo couches were arranged in a semi-circle at the far side of the room, each with a little table beside it, facing the windows that looked to the sea. The city of Beira lay at their feet, and beyond the cerulean waters rolled ever onward, a few clouds gathering far out to sea. The tempered glass dimmed the Lesser Twin to a ball of gold even now descending to the waves, perhaps twenty degrees above the horizon. Its light caught on the skin of an incoming starship, boosters flaring to tilt it upright for its landing at the starport. Small, Caralys thought, but with a missile tube from the shape of it. That was interesting.

All eyes turned to her entry. Callista and Themistin occupied the two side couches, Lesk perching nervously on the foot of Themistin's. Haro stood by the window, his pale blush skirts of many layers of silk moving in the cool air blowing from the ceiling vent, his long chiffon coat open at the front with no shirt beneath it. Bare-chested was not a winsome look on him, Caralys thought. At a certain point in one's life one should either abandon it or spend a great deal of time in the gymnasium. The pectoral of pale amethysts he wore only emphasized his paunch. Themistin was also a heavy man, but his clothes gave him gravitas rather than making him look like ram dressed as lamb.

"And there is my dear Cara!" The Guardian Helios Melian reclined on the center couch, leaning on his left arm. His silks were one shade darker than the upholstery, a color that complimented his saturnine complexion and dark hair artfully streaked with white at the temples. The smile he gave her was genuine as he reached for her with his right hand, and Caralys came around the couch and dipped to kiss it, eyes cast politely down. When they flickered up,

she saw the lines of stress around his smile.

“I am so glad to see you all,” Caralys said, sliding in to sit beside him in the curve of his body, her back against him, rather a trick to do gracefully in the pattens. “I don’t mean to interrupt your business.”

“Nonsense, Cara. You are never an interruption. We have been discussing very boring things for quite some time.” He spoke to her, but she saw Haro stiffen.

“Does this mean that you are prepared to take action in the matter of the water works, Guardian?” Haro asked.

“It means that I will carefully consider it,” he replied.

“I should hope that you...” Callista began. She was the Guardian’s own age, her hair pinned up beneath an elaborate headdress.

He waved it off. “I’ll consider it. Business, business. Do none of you have any pleasures to go to?” He squeezed Caralys’s waist. “And you are a vision. Is she not lovely, Callista?”

“Very fetching,” Callista said dryly. “And I’ve said as much for several years. Now about the matter at hand...”

“We’ll discuss it after the holiday. It’s Full Day and late for a rest.” The Guardian looked at Caralys like a besotted boy. “Surely it can wait until the Golden Lady has had her due.”

Lesk caved in first. “Of course,” he said. “Then I will take my leave of you, Guardian. And of you, Gaura.” He got to his feet.

Of course the others had to as well. Part of the meeting could hardly remain after it was over. Caralys ushered them to the door, making pretty compliments to all and sundry and apologizing profusely for interrupting such important business. She thought that Themistin might be genuinely charmed rather than irritated.

When they were all out the door, she turned around. Helios was decanting a cup of wine for her from the standing urn along the wall, the pearls and gold on his fingers catching the sheen of the descending Twin through the window. “I thought they’d never



leave." There was nothing light in his voice, his back stiff even as he bent to fill the chased silver cup.

Caralys kicked off the pattens and crossed the floor quickly. "My dear, what terrible thing has happened?"

He handed her the cup and then turned to refill his own. "There is a Calpurnian warship in orbit."

The silver was cool in her hand, but she didn't drink. She watched him decant a second cup. "Yes, that's a serious problem. Which faction?"

"Altissimi Cassian and Junia." Helios lifted the cup to his lips, but barely sipped. "The assassins themselves. The ones who killed Altissimus Iulus after his return from the disastrous military action against Morrigan. I gather from their presence with one warship between them that they're on the run from other factions."

"And so they want currency," Caralys said. She shook her head, stepping around the couch to sit facing the little table.

He joined her, sitting at the head of the couch, his shoulder almost touching hers. "They want currency. If that was all they wanted, I'd simply give it to them. But they demanded skilled merchant spacers to be culled from Menaechman ships and raw military recruits for the Calpurnian Navy, young people to enter their service." He turned the cup round in his hands, apparently examining the scene of revelry upon it. "I told Cassian that was impossible."

"Obviously it is," Caralys said. "You don't have the authority to simply seize young people from their families and send them to the Calpurnian Navy, no matter how desperate Cassian is for raw recruits! Or to press unwilling merchant spacers. That's not the kind of thing we've ever done. You're not an autarch with that kind of despotic power. There's no law that provides for that."

"Cassian responded that I'd better make some law." Helios's mouth set in a grim line. "Or he should have to become more persuasive."

She took a deep breath. “Or they’d attack Menaechman ships?”

“They already have.” Helios met her eyes. “They have Theo.”

Caralys felt a cold wave drop over her. “How?” she managed.

“His ship was inbound from Lono. The captain tried to flee by ducking close to the Lesser Twin, but they flushed them out with missiles. Theo was unhurt. Cassian presents to me his hopes that he remains that way.” Helios’s jaw clenched. “They will pay for this. If one hair on Theo’s head is harmed, I will tear him apart like the entrails of the Bull.”

“I know you will,” Caralys said. It was moments like this that she was glad she was cold, glad of self-discipline and mental tricks that allowed emotions to be put in neat little boxes and shoved into storage for later. Helios was never cold. “What about Aurore?” she asked. Theo’s oldest sister was no slack strategist.

“Aurore won’t be back for at least four Days. This venture on Freya demanded her eyes, and I can’t imagine it will go any faster than that.” Helios put the cup down with a click on the marble surface of the little table.

Four Days, two hundred and fifty-six hours. No, Helios couldn’t possibly stall Cassian that long. “And there’s the high holiday,” Caralys said. “Do you think they timed it this way on purpose?”

Helios snorted. “I doubt Cassian has any idea of our calendar or the significance of any particular day. Junia? Perhaps.” He spread his hands. “It certainly increases the pressure, doesn’t it? If word of this gets out, or that I am considering acquiescing to their demands....”

“You wouldn’t.” Caralys stared at him.

“Our young people against the entirety of Beira?” Helios got up, pacing over to the windows, the city at his feet in the light of the setting Twin. “Their missiles would kill tens of thousands if they fired on us from orbit. Perhaps hundreds of thousands. They could level much of the city with five missiles, and they probably carry twenty on a ship that size.”

"They will say it is for Theo." She stood up.

"Of course they will." He didn't look at her. "I told Cassian I would negotiate." Caralys said nothing. "That it would take me time to fulfill his demands. What else would you have me do? Tell him to start shooting? Watch him torment Theo on camera? I need time. I need room to maneuver." Helios jerked his head sharply. "Delivering what he asks for is the last resort."

Caralys came to stand beside him, the cup in her left hand and her right arm around his waist. "Very well. Currency is easy."

"The amount he wants will very nearly empty the discretionary fund. But there's nothing to be done about that. And of course they want Calpurnian currency, but I can exchange for Calpurnian datasticks. There are enough of those in Beira." Helios shook his head. "No, the currency isn't the problem. The first is to get Theo off their ship safely. The second is to prevent them from using their missiles against us if we don't turn over the recruits. I can almost see how to solve the first but not the second." He held up one finger as if thinking, his profile against the endless sea and sky.

"So, how do we do the first?" she asked.

"The party that goes aboard to deliver the currency datachips frees Theo and takes him with them."

"Ah. Of course. So simple," she said.

"I said I could see how to do it, not that it would be easy." He tapped his hand against his lips.

Caralys took a sip of her wine. The cup rang against her bracelet. It reminded her of something. "Actually," she said slowly, "I have a useful asset. I met with a smuggler today who's gotten agents onto Calpurnia for me. She might be able to get someone on a Calpurnian ship. She had an associate who isn't Menaechman who struck me as capable." She disengaged her arm from his waist, lifting her right wrist and holding out the bracelet. "I'll show you." She pressed the replay, the tiny image projected on the white wall beside the window.

“Of course, my treasure.” He watched thoughtfully as the entire conversation played out, Bister and Jamila Ravit discussing what it would take for recognition of Inanna.

“I said we couldn’t anger Calpurnia, but under the circumstances—” Caralys said as the recording ended.

Helios spread his hands, the pearls on them catching the ruddy light of the Greater Twin. “If we steal Theo back and somehow prevent them from launching missiles, angering them is the least of our worries. As for the Isolation?” He snapped his fingers. “Frankly, who cares?”

“That’s what I thought you’d say.” Caralys smiled.

“There’s no advantage to enforcing it. If there’s an advantage to repudiating it, why not?” He tilted his head back, taking a deep breath. “You think this xalepia can get onto the Calpurnian ship and get Theo?”

“It’s possible. But what then?”

“That is the next problem. What is to stop them from simply pounding us from orbit?”

Caralys paced halfway around the room, stopping in front of the shrine of the Golden Lady. “We lure them here? To celebrate the holiday or something?”

“And then kill them?” Helios stood behind her, one hand at her waist. “They’d have to be incredibly stupid or incredibly arrogant to do that. I expect you could get Cassian to lose his wits, my love, but Junia is made of sterner stuff. And if you recall, I will be very busy.”

“I know. The rites require you.”

“To say the least.” There was a touch of irony in his voice. “I doubt the Golden Lady will excuse me. She will want her Husband.”

“If Aurore were here...”

“We can’t stall that long.” Helios was silent for a moment. “Sabotage the missiles and destroy the ship?”

"If my contact can do it," Caralys said. "That's much more difficult than just getting Theo off. It's a warship. Its missiles surely aren't lying around where anyone can get to them."

"Hardly." He looked thoughtful. "I'd gladly deliver them to the rival Altissimi, but we have no idea where they are, and I suspect if we sent a ship to Cassandreia they'd want to know what we were doing. We'd need to capture them and hold them. Which brings us to the holy day again. It might be possible to get one of them as a counter-hostage."

Caralys put her head to the side, considering. "Do you think Junia would trade Theo for Cassian?"

"Possible but doubtful. More likely Junia would lob a missile at one of the other cities and demand his return. And Cassian certainly wouldn't trade Theo for her." He looked ruefully at the statue. "And that wouldn't do. The Golden Lady wouldn't like it." Caralys's eyebrows rose. It always disconcerted her just a little when he talked like that. "Why are the eyes of statues always empty?" he asked.

"Because they're stone," Caralys said.

"They should be sea-colored."

"I suppose." She leaned back against him. Theo was his favorite child, much as he loved all four of them. He was taking this hard. "Have you eaten?"

He shrugged. "Just wine with the Guild members."

"Then I will send for a meal," Caralys said, "and afterwards you should try to sleep. I'll reach out to my contact again and find out what she can do. It may be that she can at least get Theo away and deprive them of their bargaining chip. If she can get people off Calpurnia, perhaps she can get him off a Calpurnian warship."

"Perhaps so," he said, but didn't argue. Instead he carefully tipped a little of the wine in his cup into the bowl at the foot of the shrine. "Fortune's favor," he said.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to extend her thanks to those who kindly read and commented on *Fortune's Favor* before its publication: Victoria Francis, Melissa Scott, Lena Strid, and my wonderful partner, Amy Griswold. I would also like to thank my editor, Athena Andreadis, who has improved *Fortune's Favor* immeasurably with her editorial suggestions.





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