

"Redd and the Golden Assassin"

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Night descends upon Cibola, and the City of Gold takes on a new name; *la ragno*, the Spider. It's many streets and alleyways hold danger as poisonous as a black widow, and it ensnares the unwise and unwary, leaving their bodies on the streets for the guards to pick up in the morning. It takes a brave man to face the dangers hiding in the dark. That, or a stupid one, if there is a difference.

A prosperous merchant, wearing a fancy green cloak with white lace at the collar and on his sleeves strode down the *Primio Via*, confident and sure of the lamps and the guards. His dark hair rolled down to his shoulders in intricate curls, framing a solid face with brown eyes full of his worth. Giovanni Sarcona, preeminent merchant of the Merchants Quarter, strolled alongside the western side of the Main Way, admiring the stars. Occasionally, he deigned to doff his cap to a stone-faced guard in golden armor, then went on his way, happy and content.

And why should he not be happy? He was to be named to the Council of the Coin tomorrow, the highest office among merchants in Cibola. He hadn't been voted in yet, but it was merely a formality. He had impressed the right people, increased his profits considerably, and shown that he could bring more business to Cibola. And with the title of Councilman, he would be entitled to a seventh of all taxes collected. Not to mention being able to hold his fellow merchants accountable to *his* standards of quality work. A smaller man might have used such power to grind his enemies into the paved roads, but Giovanni believed a higher power would call his enemies to account. Much higher indeed.

He fancied himself somewhat of an amateur astrologer, and strolled along, contemplating the fate of his competitors in business. There, to the west of the third planet, The Guardian fell; clearly Georgio would be betrayed by his hired guards. The Lover rose into the ninth planet; Latelle, that hussy merchant who had swindled him ruthlessly, would clearly take the job of mother, which was the only work a woman was worth, and so be out of his way. Sarducci, that odious ass, he would...

A blackjack extended from a shadow-filled alley and knocked Sarcona out. In an instant, in the moment when the two guards that would have seen him, where they might have intervened if they weren't too busy counting their bribes, the shadows dragged the unconscious merchant back into the alleyway he was passing. The shadows lightened about halfway back, revealing a young man in a red cloak and breeches. His blonde hair was cut squarely at the shoulders. Two eyes, cold and blue and as hard as the streets, stared out from his black mask. Giovanni Sarcona had the honor of being knocked unconscious by Redd. He looked down at the green cloaked man, and shook his head.

"Afraid you chewed your thumb at somebody once too many times," he whispered, and went to his secret stash of ropes. Somebody had paid a good deal of money to see him roughed up a little, than robbed of everything he had. Redd always regretted the beating, at least. A little violence when needed was one thing, but he couldn't bring himself to enjoy breaking the ribs of a man, much less an unconscious one. But the money was too tempting; at least the merchant wouldn't feel it while it was happening.

Redd turned his head for a second to get the ropes and felt more than saw a swoosh. He looked back; the man he had just knocked unconscious was gone. Redd bit off a curse. No way that man got up and ran after that blow. His hands went to his side in a flash, and he retrieved two large and very ugly knives. Where had he gone? And if he could move that fast, why had he not been able to dodge Redd's blow?

Something soft and chunky hit the top of his hat, then another thing soft, along with a liquid careening off the side of his hat. Redd looked up just in time for a piece of red flesh to hit him in the face. He stepped back in disgust, looking at a waterfall of blood coming down from over the side of

the building. Something was wrong with the meat, though; it came over too regularly, almost as if...a face peered over the side, that of a bald man, though young. Dark eyes peered out of a golden face, and then he was gone.

An Ortan. These people of the east had migrated to the city some two hundred years ago, from a land at the far end of the Silken Way. They kept to themselves, and largely earned their pay by doing manual jobs that many of the citizens of Cibola, or the smaller towns around the river, would not stoop to doing any more. Since most of them lived in Don Jacobi's area, Redd had little contact with that minority, with one exception. After all, he couldn't steal where there wasn't money in the first place.

At this point, however, the thief didn't care if the man was a High Lord. Redd wasted no time. Giovanni had been his attack, and his orders had been clear; no killing. Whoever the client was, he or she had wanted Giovanni humiliated, not martyred. Running to a corner of the dead end, he quickly scampered up the wall and onto the roof. Over to the right, he saw Giovanni's body. His head lay in the v- of his legs, which were also split from his body. The gouges in the legs made it clear where the meat came from. But where had that bastard disappeared to?

The night air cooled Redd's blood, if only a little. His ears picked up on a grunt, and he turned his head to the North. The Ortan was running, and Redd took off after him. The Ortan jumped one alley after another, forcing Redd to keep up. Redd nearly missed one particular jump, and had to grab the edge of the rooftop with his fingers to keep from being squashed on the street below. "Gods, I hate the rooftops," he muttered.

The man was wearing that loose-fitting, dust brown robe characteristic of his people leaving and had a sword strapped to his back. Redd flicked his wrist towards the assassin; a knife flew from his sleeve to the silhouette ahead of him. The Ortan dodged the knife at the last possible second, splitting his legs and dropping flat against the rooftop. The knife whistled harmlessly above his bald head. He looked back.

Before Redd could get another knife out, the Ortan sped off, leaving Redd cursing. Redd ran off after him. "Come back, you son of a diseased whore!" he said. The Ortan kept running, veering off towards a spiral tower of a High Lord. Redd was gaining on him. And suddenly Redd realized that if the man had been able to sprint off like he had, he should have easily lost Redd by now. Unless, he didn't want to lose him.

The man threw his hand towards the spire as he leaped off the last roof. He jumped past the spire, falling to a certain death...and then jerked around it at an amazing speed. A thin line connected him to the tower. Something was gleaming on that tower, something at the end of that rope. Redd watched, dumbfounded, as the man wheeled around and kicked him flush in the chest. Redd slammed back, and only a chimney saved him from going over the edge.

Redd looked up, and a silver crescent fell towards his head. He slammed up a notched sword-breaker at the last second, and struggled against the man's strength. The Ortan was smaller than Redd by a good hand, but he was deceptively strong. He didn't even show any signs of tension on his face. Just a calm, accepting golden moon.

Redd rolled away, flipping up to a standing position before going over the edge, and silently cursed the fact that he had not brought at least a rapier with him. In an alleyway, or close quarters, a sword was much more of a hindrance than a help. But up here, with open room...he might have to rethink his opinion, if he got off here alive.

Only quick reflexes kept the sword out of Redd. He had to get that sword out of the Ortan's hand. Summoning the years of training Cenn had beat into him, he diverted the blade high with his sword breaker, feigning him into a low attack. *Come on, you bastard.* Redd thought. It worked. The Ortan slashed down low, expecting to cut Redd off at the knees. Redd jumped over the blade, then came down hard on it. He had expected the blade to break; it didn't, but the force so shocked the man that he dropped the blade. He slashed the man's arm, sending a rivulet of blood down his khaki-colored sleeve, then held the knife to the man's throat. The man smiled, and it didn't occur to Redd until much later to wonder why.

"I don't know why you took my target, but..." Whatever Redd was going to do was cut off by a

loud bang. Redd grunted; he felt like he had been stabbed in the side. But no one was around, except the Ortan and himself, and he had seen the man's hands. He looked down at his right side, blood flowed down it. He looked up; another Ortan, similarly garbed but with shortly cropped black hair, was kneeling with a stick in his hands pointed at Redd. The end of the stick was smoking.

"You may die now," the first Ortan said, pushing Redd down. He slid more than fell down the pointed roof. He was going to break his neck. All these years, and he had been cut down by...what was that thing that cut him down? The last thought he had was that he wouldn't be able to tell Cenn about...

"...the Ortan," Redd muttered, coming back to consciousness. A gravelly voice responded.

"What about the Ortan?" Redd looked up. He was on his back, on a pallet of some sort. He sat up slowly—there was a pain something fierce in his side—and he saw a bent, old man in elegant green and golden robes looking at him. Another Ortan.

"You were very lucky to survive that fall," the man said. "I am Zhao, a local healer. And you are..." But Redd already had his feet swung down to the floor. Nearly knocking down a table at the side. There was a bowl filled with blood, and something shiny in the middle of it. Some sort of bloodletting treatment? He didn't know, and didn't care.

"Leaving," he said curtly. "How long have I been out?" The man looked at him disapprovingly.

"A fine repayment for me saving your life," he said. "And you won't even tell me your name." Redd stopped, and turned to the man.

"I am Redd," he told him. He pressed some gold coins into the man's hand. "I'm sorry, it's just that I'm looking for a man. He killed a...an acquaintance of mine." Well, he knew who his target had been, at least. He doubted Giovanni knew who he was. The old man put the coins into a purse, and nodded.

"I doubt you will be able to find Lan, an *otusu* like yourself would not know one of my kind from another, however, you would stick out like a needle in a haystack," Zhao said. "Besides which, you did take a nasty fall. Bruised a couple of your ribs." With that reminder, Redd doubled over. His back felt like it was on fire.

"What did you call me," he asked the old man. A familiar female voice answered.

"*Otusu*, it means 'outsider'," Redd whipped towards the entrance. A tiny Ortan woman in a brown robe was entering, along with a hulk of a man so big it took Redd a second to realize that he was an Ortan. Most Ortans were no bigger than shoulder high to Redd. This man towered a good hand above Redd. He looked down at the young thief, and his face didn't show what he was thinking. Redd turned his attention to the petite young woman.

"Leanne, what are you doing here?" Redd asked.

"My brother heard you crash into the boxes and dragged you out," Leanne said. "Luckily, I described you well enough to him in the past. Not even Lan and his cronies would dare a fight with Bruneo."

"Bruneo?" Redd looked up at the taller man. Granite could not have been as emotionless as that face. He nodded slowly, making it look like it took all of his effort to shake his head. Leanne patted him on the arm.

"As soon as he brought you here to Doctor Zhao, he came back and got me. Redd, what is going on that would have you chasing Lan on the rooftops!"

"Lan?" Redd asked. "Whoever he is, he killed my target. I gave my word that I would leave Sarcona alive and beaten up, not as so much meat off the top of an inn."

"Lan is a very dangerous man, Redd, you have no idea..." Zhao cut her off.

"Lan is a very dangerous man indeed, and he has grown even more so," Zhao said, and immediately went into that birdlike language the Ortans used. Leanne seemed to be pressing the old man. Redd sat down, and bit off an oath. His side still hurt, and his white shirt had a ragged hole

through which the wind whipped against the bandage and the skin that was exposed.

Bruneo leaned against the doorframe, casting one eye out on the street and another eye on Redd. Redd looked at that face, and gulped. His hair, stopping high on his brow, was tied back in a pony tail. He wore the rough clothes of a tradesman, and those arms looked accustomed to hammering iron into wheels, if he didn't simply become bored with the effort and bent them with those hands. Why had that man saved him?

"Leanne told me how you saved her from one of her clients," Bruneo said. Redd didn't even know he had spoken.

"Ah yes, well, we really can't have people harming the girls, now," Redd tried to make his voice sound casual. He remembered. Redd, like all of the other men under Cenn's employ, had to take turns as bodyguards and bouncers for the "ladies". Unlike the others, however, Redd had never taken any sort of extra favors. Not that he hadn't been offered; there were many ladies in the Drawers who said he would make a fine husband if he wasn't a thief, and some who wouldn't mind that either. Some said it was because his preferences lay in another direction; the truth was, Redd was mostly tired when actually was on guard duty, and he had seen most of the men who employed the women. He would have sooner lay down with a midden heap than follow where they had trod.

Leanne had come in some months ago, a slight girl with downcast eyes and asked to speak to Cenn. She had been painfully polite, and it had taken her taking Cenn upstairs by hand to demonstrate what she could do before she could make the stout *don* understand that she was looking for employment as a lady of the night. Since then, she had been one of the more popular girls, and that's what had drawn Miguel de Sanches to her.

Unfortunately, Miguel had a aspect of roughness in his lovemaking, and he took it out on young ladies from the street, since the women of his station, nor of the station he hoped to marry into, would never have taken such treatment. Leanne had tried to hide the bruises, but you didn't become as good of a thief as Redd was without sharp eyes. The next morning, some farmers picked out a bag with a human corpse out of the river Eld. Redd didn't know that Leanne knew; what he had done. He didn't like to be favored.

Bruneo's eyes suddenly turned to the street. "They're coming," he said. Redd got a quick glimpse of men coming down the street towards the building, and then Brueno snatched him up and downed him behind some barrels. Redd grabbed a knife...at least, he tried to grab where he had a knife before. It was gone, as were his other knives. He looked around, and found the knives in a nice, neat pile at the far side of the large open room...with the candle light gleaming off of them. He saw the top knife, one with blood on it, right

He started to rise, and Bruneo's ham fist drove him back to the ground. Redd looked pointedly at the knives, and Bruneo nodded, starting cautiously towards them. He stopped, turned around, and folded his arms. Redd kept quiet as the men entered the building.

The bald-headed man at the head stopped in front of Zhao, and bowed formally. Lan. The same man that had taken his quarry from him. With him were half a dozen toughs, all armed with short swords. None of them with those sticks, though. If he had his knives...well, it might have been a tough fight anyway. Those men didn't hold those swords like they were bullyboys, with no idea of how to use them other than which end was the sharp one.

The two men talked back and forth for a while, using that same incomprehensible language. Lan's voice became agitated, though Redd noted a tone of respect to it. Lan pointed to the pallet that Redd had been on a short while before. There were several blood stains on it.

Zhao shook his head, and pointed down the exit to his right. The man Leanne had referred to as Lan bowed, then turned, his men all following him. Redd waited a few minutes, then flipped over the barrels and walked over to his knives. He re-sheathed the knives quickly. Zhao waddled on over.

"Most interesting," Zhao said. "Lan said you were a thief preying on the people of the Ortan district."

"I wasn't in the Ortan district," Redd said, then looked at Bruneo. "Well, not at first, but he was up there on the rooftops as well."

"I am not accusing you of anything improper," Zhao said. "At least nothing that Lan has not done himself."

"Lan heads one of the biggest tongs in the neighborhood," Leanne said. "He controls the opium trade into and out of the city."

"Opium," Redd growled. He had seen what had happened to those hooked on that new drug from the east, had visited one of the sons of a *capo* who had gotten hooked on the drug. He had felt bad about what he had to do until he had seen that breathing corpse. Redd hadn't understood why the *capo* ordered the murder, until he had come face to face with those shallow eyes.

There must have been something in his eyes, because Leanne clamped down on his arm. "Redd, you mustn't," she pleaded. "Lan's thugs aren't ones to be looked down on; even without their guns they'll cut you to pieces."

Guns? Was that the name of that stick? Redd opened his mouth to retort, and suddenly a man limped into the doctor's office, the same way Lan and his men had left. Redd had a knife in his hand in a second, then lowered it. Zhao snorted.

"Can't you see, that man's injured," he said, going over to the man. His face was a patchwork of bruises and blood, and the shards of his robe barely covered his body. "What is it, Donati?" Zhao asked.

Donati coughed. "A mob," he said. "They are raging through the town, killing any Ortan that they see and setting the houses on fire."

"Why would a mob be going through the neighborhood?" Redd said out loud.

"Otusu do not need a reason to destroy our houses and kill us," Leanne said. "To them, we are simply beasts of burden to be used until we get too much of a burden, then to be terrorized back into our place."

"They said something about rape," the man said, coughing. Zhao led him to a bed and started examining his wounds. "The mob was headed this way."

"I must examine this man's wounds," Zhao said. "Redd, you and Bruneo get Leanne to a safe place. As soon as I wrap them he and I will go to ground. Now move."

"How in the world will you...," Redd began, but Leanne and Bruneo each took an arm and led him out the way Donati came in. Outside the moon was still high in the sky.

"Well, at least I didn't lose any time on Lan," Redd muttered. Leanne looked at him.

"How can you think of that man at a time like this," Leanne said. "Besides which, if that mob is in here, Lan and his followers will take any opportunity to shoot you down."

"All right, I'll go for now, but I want to know what this new weapon is," Redd said irritably. He shook himself free of the two of them and started trotting along with them.

"Lan used the Imperial weapon on you, the gun," Leanne told him. "You were lucky he wasn't such a good shot, else you would have surely died."

"Hold on, what is this thing, the gun, you're talking about," Redd said. Leanne and Bruneo shared a brief look.

"He is otusu," Bruneo said. "He must not know."

"If he doesn't know, he'll go charging in after the man."

"You know what will happen if knowledge of that weapon reaches them."

"he doesn't have the brains to figure it out," Leanne said. She turned to a huffy Redd. "You have heard of fireworks, yes?" she said. "We have learned a way to concentrate the force and send balls of steel hurtling towards our opponents. Nothing can stand against it, not armor, not...," they reached the end of the alleyway and Leanne stopped. "Look!" she screamed pointing to the Northwest.

Redd followed her finger. In the darkness, a trail of smoke crawled up the sky like a snake up a tree. Fire. He should have known. Mobs tended to get careless with their torches. His eyes darted down, and quickly he had Leanne by an arm and was dragging her down another alley to the right of them. Bruneo followed, his arms tensed.

"Mob," he said to Leanne, putting a hand across her delicate mouth. Leanne's eyes widened, but she didn't make a move. A moment later, ten men appeared, carrying torches

. They had the rough brown cloaks of working class men, and even from this distance Redd could smell the liquor on them. The leader, a scrawny man with white long hair, pointed the way they came. His hand was caked with blood. "There's where one of their witches live," he said. "Kill them!" he pointed with his torch like a sword commanding men to victory.

"Death to the yellow monkeys!" they screamed, going down that alley. Redd cursed. There was no way Zhao could work fast enough to get himself and that other man to safety. Bruneo gave Redd a look. Redd winced; he had paid Zhao. On the other hand....

"All right!" he whispered harshly. "Just move fast, big man, and whatever you do, don't look at the lights." Bruneo nodded. They waited for the mob to move down the alleyway, and Redd drew his knives, wrapped his red cape up around his neck and mouth, and charged around the corner.

Ten against two would have been odds for a dead man, if the mob hadn't been blind drunk. Redd slashed the throats of the last two men and threw himself into the rest. Bruneo grabbed two of them up and snapped their necks, and the fight was on. Redd didn't bother with more than a blow per person. Slash at their throat, at their stomach, and move on, move fast. When he had to, he could move faster than the night. When he had to...he didn't need the Shift for these people, not yet. In thirty seconds the fight was over. Redd doused the torches that hadn't been extinguished. Redd turned around. Bruneo was standing there, looking at the men he had killed.

"You are not bad with your knives," Bruneo said.

"You know what I did with that one guy who was pestering Leanne," Redd said. The two of them went back to the alley. Leanne wasn't there. "Gods!" Redd exclaimed. Where did she go?" But Bruneo was already halfway down the alleyway. Redd ran to keep up with him. "You have an idea?" he asked.

"The only place she could go," Bruneo responded. "Let's get going."

After a few alleys, and a couple of close calls with bigger mobs, Redd and Bruneo emerged slowly at a square opening. A large mob was gathered in there, around a tree. Redd saw the tree. A man, an Ortan with a single knot of hair, hung in the breeze. One fat man was shouting at the front of the crowd from the back of a gray horse. Redd recognized him. A Lower Lord, one from somewhere to the south in Goth. He wore a floppy brown hat and was drinking from a skein of wine, and looked immensely pleased with himself. Down to the left were several Ortans in grey shirts and pants. More than a few of them had purple faces and broken lips. Across from the two a house blazed in the light. Redd had to drag Bruneo back.

"Let me go," Bruneo said. "Our family is in there!"

"It's not going to do you any good if you get them killed rushing out there. That crowd is after Ortan blood, and I don't care how big you are," Redd said. They retreated into the darkness. "Look, I'll go into that crowd and get them riled up and running in the right direction, and..." At that point, he heard the same large bang that had preceded his injury, only this time louder, and more of them. Redd ducked behind the corner of the building.

The crowd scattered. Those too foolish or drunk not to dodge shook, then fell. Redd could see holes appear in the men, and blood flowing out of them. One man's head simply exploded. Redd turned away. That was their weapon? He had personally felt the impact of the weapon, but that had been only one. Redd looked to the left. On a tall building opposite the mob, Men stood in the twilight with those sticks that Redd had seen. After each bang they turned around and threw the sticks down, then picked up another set of the sticks. Redd's eyes picked out a small fire near the close end of the sticks on the men. The crowd started running. Several of the mob, men now interested in saving their necks rather than stretching the necks of Ortans, pushed their way past Redd and Bruneo. The Ortans were celebrating, shaking their hands towards the men on the roof, who were already fading back into the night.

Bruneo tugged on Redd's cloak. "Come on, let's go," he said. "They didn't put out the fire." Redd and the Ortan raced across the now empty square. A girl's scream issued from the burning house.

"Ianse!" Bruneo said. A group of figures came out of the alley to the right of the house. Leanne was there, as was an elderly woman in a flowered robe. A small boy huddled at her side. All of them were sooty.

"She's gone, Bruneo," Leanne said. "There's no way that we can get up there in time!" But Bruneo had already jumped into the burning building. Leanne turned to Redd. "Please you have to help him!" she said. "Please Redd!"

As of right now, Redd had had enough of playing the hero. At least, that's what he told himself as he dove on in with Bruneo. He kept telling himself that as he wrapped himself in his cloak. Bruneo was staggering around blindly; the big man was sucking in more air than there was in the room. Redd could barely see himself, but enough to rush right past Bruneo. The stairs cracked under his feet, and more than once he had to leap to keep his leg from going right on through.

At the top of the stairs, he screamed out. "EEE-anne!" he said. "Aw, screw it." He was about to go back out, he heard something, it could be a little girl. Running as fast as he could, he sprinted through the golden flames and ducked past the hanging beams to the last room. Inside, a girl stood in the middle of the room. Most girls would have been crying at this point, or trying to escape, or something. She just looked at him with large black eyes. She looked up calmly; a burning plank of wood was tumbling down. There was no way he would reach her...that is, had he been anybody else.

With practiced concentration, he drew in on himself, then released, Shifting. He did not understand it, but this gift gave him inhuman speed. Sometimes, he could almost think that he was moving between seconds of time itself. The world slowed, like the air had become the gel in a candle maker's mold. He moved slowly, but he was a hare compared to the tortoise of the world. Scooping, he grabbed up the girl, all the while fighting an enormous pressure on his chest. The girl had to be no more than four or five stone, at that. In the world of the Shift, however, she made a boulder seem featherweight. Mustering all the strength he could, he scooped her up as the flaming board grazed his hat, then took her and leaped through the window, crouching as he landed. He had learned the hard way what taking the impact with both legs extended would do.

Redd quickly drew his soul back, and the slow, muted roar became a sharp boom in his ears. He let the girl down, and she quickly ran to Bruneo, who picked her up. Leanne and the others went to the girl, leaving Redd alone. Redd felt like he had ran twenty miles, but still managed to stagger up, then went towards where the men had died in the streets. He started to pick up their purses. A few gold coins, but...

"I cannot believe you, Redd," an irritated voice said behind him. He looked back. Leanne was behind him, her hands on her hips, looking very exasperated. "Stealing from the dead, Redd? What next, will you go dig up the corpses in the Mortopolis?"

"That's Ryan's territory, not Cenn's," he said. "And while you're at it, you're welcome for me saving that girl from the fire." Leanne's cheeks reddened, and Redd now realized why she was the most popular prostitute in the Greased Pig. She was, how did that old saying go, beautiful in her wrath? Redd's stomach growled; he felt like he hadn't eaten in a month. "Never mind the thanks for now, let's get back to the Pig. I have some talking with Cenn to do."

"Are you insane? I can't take my mother to...," the elderly woman had walked up to Leanne's shoulder and was talking quietly. Leanne said something back, and pointed to Redd. The woman bowed, and took Redd's hands in hers, than kissed them.

"Uh, no, ma'am, that isn't necessary," he said, flashing her a smile. He turned to Leanne. "You have to stay somewhere for tonight at least. They can bed up in my room." She threw up her hands and then gathered the rest of them in, talking with them a short distance away. Bruneo nodded, holding the young girl in his hands. The young boy was by Bruneo's side.

She finally went back to Redd. "I'm a waitress, and nothing more," she snapped. "If you even mention the word whore I'll cut your throat." Redd held up his hands innocently.

"Where's that meek and mild Ortan nature?" Redd said. She looked at him, her black hair whipping around her head.

"I've learned much being around you barbarians," she said. "I'm not some porcelain doll that

will break on impact.

“...and that's when I finally got here,” Redd said, laying his cup down on the table. Across from him, a heavier, older man and a white shirt looked at him, circling his finger around the lip of a cup. He had short, reddish hair, out of fashion, but he wore a goatee on his chin and a moustache, traditional for Cibolan men. He was looking at the blonde thief, one hand resting on his chin.

“Weapons cutting through steel,” Cenn mused, as if they were discussing the latest dresses and suits being displayed on the *Fashio* Road. At 50, he was one of the youngest *doni* in the city, and hadn't earned that title by being surprised easily, or by showing when he was. “That would be something that I wouldn't have believed myself, if I hadn't called upon our customer last night.”

“What customer?”

“The one who asked us to do a number on Sarcona.” Cenn leaned forward in his chair. “The man wanted us to do a couple of other things to Sarcona at the last minute. Why these idiots...,” he realized he was drifting. “Anyway, as I was up there explaining that you were already out there, something shattered the window and went right through his head. I found this imbedded in the man's head.”

Cenn reached into his chest pocket and drew out a metal ball crusted red with blood, then dropped it in front of Redd on the table. Redd picked it up. “Such a small thing,” Redd mused. He wondered if he still had one in his side, then remembered that gleaming thing in the bowl.

“But it can do a whole lot of damage,” Cenn said. “I remember some Ortan sailors talking about weapons that could fire balls through steel. I thought they were simply too drunk. Maybe they were, but they were right.”

“Well, at least it means we don't have to pay that contract back,” Redd mused.

“That's the least of our problems,” Cenn said. “I've seen quite a few of these Ortan merchants dealing their 'Miracle Flower' around here under the table. The Senate has banned it, but the Senatorial Guard seems to have become lax in enforcing the laws.”

“Not that we have any right to complain,” Redd pointed out. Cenn ignored his comment.

“I'm trying what I can to keep the opium out of the hands of our kids, but they seem to run to the Ortans every time our backs are turned. Also, I've heard rumors that the tongs were involved in Don Jacobi's extended 'trip' into the countryside, and that the trip might be permanent.” Cenn stroked his beard thoughtfully. “If the Ortans are going to make a power play, we might have a chance to get in there and start to control that part of Cibola.”

“I don't know that I would like to go up against this,” Redd said, holding the ball on top of the cup of his fingers. “Funny, I'm now afraid of a ball.” But Cenn was rubbing his hands together. Redd knew that gesture all too well. He was planning something, and it was going to involve work on his part.

“Redd, I want you to gather up our gang and go through that part of Orton-town,” Cenn said. “Find out what you can and...,” he stopped at a huge sniff and the clink of a plate dropping down in front of him. Cenn and Redd looked up. Leanne, in a white dress and her hair up in a bun, was setting...something...in front of them. “Excuse me?”

“I am sorry, Master Garscea, it may not be my place to tell you when you are sending babes into a snake's pit,” she said. Redd looked at his plate, wondering whether he would bite it or it would bite him first. “It's a delicacy served in the Imperial Courts, Redd, so stop turning your nose up at it.”

“I'm sure the men Redd chooses will be more than up to the task,” Cenn protested.

“They'll be up to the task if they are going after otusu,” Leanne said. “You really do not understand the tongs, nor do you understand the Ortan. There are two sides, Ortan and otusu. Your men would learn as much from talking to a wall.”

“I'm sure they'll talk,” Cenn said. “These aren't polite courtiers used to taking 'no' for an answer.”

“Have you ever seen a man boiled in lead, an inch at a time? Or seen a man skinned and then forced that man to watch as his skin was tanned and prepared for boots?” Cenn didn't have an answer for that. “That is what the tongs do to those that talk, and they let it generally be known that the same fate can be expected for that man's family. None of them will talk to you.”

“How do you know about the seamy underside of crime?” Cenn asked. She poured some more ale into their cups.

“I am a...,” she cut off as the elderly woman—Redd had found out her name was Lao—Lao emerged from the kitchen with a pitcher of tea and started to serve the customers, who were more used to buxom ladies with more than filling a cup on their minds. The very presence of this little old lady caused a remarkable change of the bustling, bristling bar to someplace actually half-civilized. And if any anti-Ortan bigots were among the customers, they kept that fact to themselves, especially with Bruneo in the doorway, looking at each man as though deciding how, when, and in what order he would kill them.

“I am what I was,” Leanne continued, “and what I will go back to as soon as I find new housing for my family,” Leanne said. “In any event, you're likely to get Redd and his friends killed before they take thirty steps inside of the neighborhood. Is that how you treat your best friend?” Redd looked over at Cenn, and the man actually blushed! Redd took a bite of the...fish?...and actually found it was quite delicious.

“Anyway, I found out why that mob was out after Ortan blood,” Cenn said, hurriedly changing the subject. “Two Ladies got...accosted last night. The guards found them screaming naked in the streets, with all sorts of weird and strange symbols on their bodies. The mob got word of what had happened and decided to beat the judge to the gallows.”

“If all it took for a mob was a rape, we'd be storming the streets of the town each and every night,” Leanne said. Redd slammed his hand down on the table. Gods testicles, he was tired of this crap.

“Cut the righteous indignation for a second, will ya'?” Redd said. “I've never abused an Ortan in my life, and neither has Cenn. In fact, from what Cenn said, in your interview you were the one who...,” Leanne half-slapped Redd across his mouth, and held her hand there as Lao passed, offering them tea. “Both Redd and Cenn declined, and she bowed. “Is my daughter causing you problems?” she said with only a slight accent to her tongue.

“No, mad'ma,” Cenn said. “She's very quick on her feet.” Lao nodded.

“Although, she is much better on her back. I could have cooked that blowfish much better,” for all the world, Leanne's look of shock might not have existed to Lao. “You young people seem to forget that our minds do not wither like our muscles and limbs. Did you think I was a tottering old lady, a wind-up toy?” And with that, she went on to the next table. For a moment, the three of them looked at each other in silence. Leanne looked at the woman for a moment, then marched back into the kitchen, nearly knocking Char—the young boy who had been with them that night—over.

“In any event, we have to find out what they are up to,” Cenn said. “That type of a power vacuum gets filled up quickly, and with it just to our North, I don't want Don Lucione to be able to surround me like that.” Redd nodded; Lucione had been making moves to consolidate his power base, and several of his streetwalkers had been seen in Cenn's own district. “If we could only find out how they're producing this weapon of theirs, and where.”

“I know where,” Char said.

“You?” Cenn asked.

“Yes, me, fat man,” Char replied. He ducked easily out of the way of Cenn's backhand. He turned to Redd, “Keep him off me, or I'll never tell.”

“Where are they producing them?” Redd asked.

“In the old sewer line out to the River Circus,” He said. “On the Southeast corner of the city.”

“Southeast,” Cenn muttered. “That's a far piece away from Ortantown.”

“I know the way,” Char said.

“Really,” Redd said. “Well, we'd be very impressed if you could show us the way.”

“Yeah, right, you want to know the way, I want some coins,” he said, putting out his hand. “And don't even start with the copper. This is gonna cost you.”

Redd sighed, then pulled out a few silver pieces and a gold coin, then handed them to Char. Char smiled, and then went to the door. “Come on, I'll show you,” he said. Redd held up a hand.

“Tonight,” he told Char. “I need to get a few of my 'friends'.”

“You mean strongarms,” Char said. “Can I watch while you butcher them?”

“Char!” Leanne said. She had stepped back out of the kitchen, and had the young man by the arm. She was talking to him in that language again. The boy squirmed under that verbal barrage. Redd got up.

“Easy, Leanne, he wasn't doing any harm.” Redd said, and then leaned back when Leanne turned on him.

“You will not get him involved with your criminal activities,” Leanne said. “I have plans for this young boy, and they do not involve him swinging from a gallows or dead in the streets.”

“I told you, I am not going to be a painter!” Char shouted back.

“Yes you are, you have the talent and I'm not going to see you misusing it on pickpocketing, or anything like that. I've already had you apprenticed to Master Kerldin, and he's going to make sure that you receive an education that you deserve, and that's final.”

“You're not my mother, sis, so stop acting like it!” Char said. Redd had a bolt of inspiration, and stepped on in.

“You say he's an artist?” Redd said. “Why not just draw us a map, then?” Char looked sullen, but he nodded. “You do a good job, and you could earn a commission off of it.” His face grew bright, then went downcast again.

“Sorry, can't do,” he said. “All my stuff was lost in the fires, my paints, paper, everything,”

“I think we can remedy that,” Cenn said, “Redd, doesn't Count Georgio owe us quite a bit for certain services we have rendered?”

“Why I believe he does,” Redd said. Redd looked at Char. “Georgio is a painter of sorts, and he sometimes asks us to paint the...uh,” he looked up to where two of the whores were talking to a prospective client.

“Oh just say the word, for the sake of the gods, they're whores, my sister's a whore, it's a word!” Char said. He looked at Leanne, “Hell, everybody knows, so don't put on that martyred priestess look! We know, and we don't care, we still love you.”

At this, Leanne was shocked, and dabbed a tear from her eye. “You knew?” she asked.

“Of course we did. So this guy paints whores?” He asked Redd. Redd nodded.

“He once told me he liked to study their expressions,” Redd said. “Particularly in the act. I'm sure Georgio could be persuaded to ” He looked down at the young kid. “Are you sure you can draw good enough for them to follow it?”

“Trust me, I'm the best,” Char said.

“It's not you I'm worried about, some of the men Redd hangs out with can be...uh, how do we say it,” Cenn finished for Redd.

“They aren't exactly literary types,” Cenn said. “So avoid big words such as 'north', 'south', and so on.” Char looked up at him with an unreadable look.

It took a couple of days for Char to put together a few copies of the map, which was better for Redd, seeing as how he actually had to put together the drunken mob to go down to the sewers. Which meant having to plan out how much ale to serve them beforehand—not too much, mind, else they'd fall over in a stupor, but not too little otherwise they might wander off—as well as getting the real roughs who would do most of the action, and planning on the carts to carry off the loot. Late afternoon on the second day found him arguing with a heavy-set bald man with a flaming red beard.

“For the last time, Karlsdan,” Redd said, “No, your brother Norry can't come along, he's completely unreliable.” That and a fall down drunk, but Redd did not want to add that last part. He liked Karl, who was a good man in a fight.

“But Redd,” he pleaded, “He hasn't been to work in nearly a month now, the missus wants me to get him a job and fast.” Redd looked up at him with a long suffering expression. He knew he was going to regret this.

“All right, but you tell him this: he blacks out and passes out before he gets there with the wagon, I'm going to make sure that he blacks out for good.” Karl shook Redd's hand. Redd got up from the table and turned around. Cenn was holding up what looked like a breastplate of double-plated steel.

“I never knew there was so much planning involved in a good drunken raid. What is this?” Redd demanded. Cenn put the contraption over his chest. It had to weigh at least twenty pounds.

“Thought you might need a bit of a leg up against these guns,” he said. “Don't sulk like that, Redd; you'll be thanking me when this thing stops those balls from going right through you. Duke Alstrom probably wished that he had one of these on.”

“Didn't it go through his head?” Redd pointed out. Cenn grunted. He didn't like being corrected. Well, that was life.

“Ah, be that as it may, you may still need it. The five of you boys have them on. Tuck it into your shirt.” Redd went into the back room, and put the breast plate on, while strapping on the falchion—he still didn't like swords, but if they were armed with swords, he wasn't that much of a fool. Five of them – Piter, Karlsdan, Romey, Darlin, and himself. The five most trusted, most regular members of the gang. All members of the *Organizzazione*. The rest of the mob, about thirty, were going in without any protection save for their jerkins and their ale. The ale, at least, would make sure that they felt nothing.

Stuffing his shirt around the breast- and backplate, Redd looked up at the sky. Dawn climbed over the ridge line of the buildings in Cibola. It was time. Redd went back out into the main room of the Greased Pig and went over to a booth, tapping one of the men on the shoulder. All four men got up and walked out with him out.

Outside, the five of them went east and west along the road, carefully choosing a side road on which to go north. Redd went down Tae Pea Avenue, through the fish markets. Slowly five other men joined him, absently walking the same way. Once they were all gathered, Redd took a left and went towards the southeast, towards Wall Street.

The houses on Wall Street were shoved up against the wall. A motley assortment of shanties and storehouses littered the side of the city's wall. Redd led his men to one of the shanties, a piss poor building that looked like it would collapse at almost any second. Char's drawing had been rock on. Inside the building, Redd looked into the corner, then wrinkled his nose.

“Nothing is ever easy,” he said, ordering one of the men to remove the shit that hadn't fallen down the hole. Apparently it was still used, either that or somebody was doing a real good job of covering up the entrance. He shoveled it down the hole, then removed the large iron opening. A feces covered ladder was on one side of it. Redd and the others followed it down to the grimy sewer below. This, obviously, was not one of the main areas for the Sewer Sweeps to clean out. Redd hitched up his cloak and proceeded south. A couple of men lit torches in the back, making sure not to expose their eyes to the bright light.

One of the men handed Redd a stick with a large peaked piece of canvas. Redd accepted it, then led the men further down the dark grimy sewer. Redd heard tinkling, and quickly stepped away just in time to avoid a golden shower. The men formed a line behind Redd, and made their way down the sewer.

Halfway down, they saw another set of lights. Redd motioned the men to a stop, drawing out a blade from his belt. The light came closer until Piter stuck his head out from the sewer alley leading to the right. Redd nodded, then followed him. Already Romey and Karldin had met up with Piter. Darlin and his men were conspicuously absent.

“Have you seen Darlin?” Piter asked. Romey and Karldin were mucking around, looking for a relatively dry patch. Neither was a hothouse daisy, but neither liked to roll around in the shit either. Redd shook his head.

“We'll wait up here,” Redd told him. “Darlin was never really good with directions.” Piter motioned to a couple of men, and they went down the sewer hall, taking places at the opposite end to wait for Darlin. Or an enemy.

Time seemed to drag on for an eternity as the men waited, until Redd could take no more. “We head out,” he said. “Darlin will just have to catch up to us.” *And hope I don't tear him a new one,* Redd added mentally.

Piter whistled down the sewer, and the two guards came back. “Saw anything that looked like an ambush?” he asked them.

“No, Piter,” the men said. Piter looked down at the two men from that hawkish nose of his, then nodded. Soon the men were moving again up the main sewerway, towards the direction Char had motioned. They moved down the side walkways. Though the water that flushed the sewage into the river was shallow, no one wanted to risk any Ortan hearing the splash of water on leather. They moved quietly.

The plan they had formulated in the back room of the Pig was simple: Redd was to lead thirty men down into the sewers, to this secret base of the Ortans, and take as much of this “gunpowder” and “rifles” (as Char had called them) that they could grab. With luck, they would be able to grab the items, then get out of there without much fuss. Without much luck...Redd hoped the cold steel against his chest would be some protection. Had he believed, he would have offered prayers for the souls of the rest of the men.

As they turned slightly southward, Redd held up a hand and closed it into a fist. All the lights were extinguished. Slowly they saw a trace of light, and voices, though none of the men could understand what they were saying. Redd motioned to Karlsdan, a burly red-headed man with a full beard, to go to the other side. Karlsdan slipped into the water quietly, then moved to the opposite side, emerging onto the opposite walkway. Redd ordered the other men to wait, then he and Karlsdan slipped up towards the opening.

At the end, two Ortan men in the traditional heavy garb of Sewer Sweeps were pulling on two ropes connected to the wall blocking the sewer from the river. A crack of morning appeared, then more; apparently, these Ortans had fashioned themselves a little port. They swung the makeshift door all the way to the right side, revealing a couple of longboats. Ortans manned the boat outside.

In the center of the sewer at the inside of the “port”, they had a small cart on top of the sludge with a rope down its center. The rope went towards the inner part of the sewers for a few hundred feet, then turned down toward an alley. The Ortans started piling on boxes onto the little boat, chatting amicably in that birdlike language of theirs. Redd promised he would make Leanne teach him that language.

They finally decided that they had more than enough cargo on their boat, they got on and pulled it out fifty feet, then got back off and moved the giant door back into position. It was sealed up, and one of the Ortans, a fatter man, gave a quick tug on the rope. It fell from the door, and Redd saw that it was secured on a stout, yet painted spoke. Only the keenest eye would distinguish where it was. Even now Redd had a hard time keeping his eye on it.

That done, the two Ortans got back up on the boat and pulled it along the rope, stopping to turn it. When they were well out of the path, Redd motioned for the others to come up. They stepped quickly. Redd positioned the men to either side of the path the boat had went down and waited for the boat to move all the way down the corridor and turn right up ahead.

“Give me the word, Redd, and we'll slit their throats,” Piter whispered. Redd's sharp eyes could see the other men nodding. Redd shook his head furiously.

“We don't know where they are going, or how many men are up there,” he said. “There could be a small group up there expecting that shipment.” The men rushed down the corridor, carefully placing their feet, extinguishing the torches as they went along, leaving only the last two so the Ortans wouldn't get suspicious. Redd poked his head around the corner.

Up ahead, some fifty feet, the two men had docked their boat in front of a large hole, carved out of the side and reinforced with stout oak beams. They worked quickly, tossing the boxes into the room.

When the last one was unloaded, they both got on the boat again and pulled on the rope, pulling back the other way.

Redd frantically pushed his men back a ways, then he and Piter hid behind two columns as the men made the turn around the corner. The second they were beyond the columns, Redd and Piter skipped onto the barge and slit the two men's throats, covering their mouths. After a few seconds, the men slumped down, and the thieves carefully laid the bodies down on the boat.

"Push it up a little way," Redd ordered. The rest of the men did so, pushing it out of their way. Redd went back up to the corner, counted ten, then swept out, holding his knives in both hands. Easing his way up and across the sludge, he went to the side of the makeshift doorway and looked inside. Nothing but boxes.

He motioned the rest of the men out, and they came out, putting themselves at various intersections. The majority of the men went inside of the room, and started cutting at the boxes. Attempting to open them. Redd spied a crowbar on the top of one of the boxes.

"Don't ruin those blades," Redd told them, going up to one of the boxes in the middle of the room. He opened it, but already he noticed that the boxes seemed way too small for those "guns". Inside there were rows and rows of hemp..bulbs. Redd opened one up, and as he realized what it was, he heard the splash of sewer water a little too far ahead and outside of the room, and something else. Cenn always said he had the best hearing of any thief he had ever trained. It was the sound of.

"Ambush!" Redd screamed out, running out of the room. The two men at the end of the corridor where the shadow met torchlight turned around just as a loud boom and several of those guns cut them down. At this sound, the other men grabbed their falchions and clubs and ran in the direction of the sound, only to be cut down by more of those bangs. They echoed off the walls like the screams of the hellworlds, mixed with the yelling of Redd's men

Redd slipped back to the relative safety of that room, and swore. He had made a mistake. Darlin must have been cut down by those guns. Some small part of him screamed that was wrong, but Redd grabbed his falchion and went out, dodging as he did so. He wouldn't die in a useless battle, but hiding in the room would have been worse than useless, and if he had to die, he was going to take some of those bastards with him.

As he hit the crease of the shadow, he saw them, lined up perfectly like an army, and...he didn't hear any more of those bangs. The men were stabbing iron rods down their "guns" just as Redd and the rest of the men crashed into them. Redd buried his falchion deep into one man, then another, and felt something crack his skull. As he slid to the ground, he hoped that this time, finally, he would not wake up.

Unfortunately, he did wake up. He woke up to the sound of his own scream.

Pain enveloped him, then cold. Cold as crisp and unforgiving as air and death. He looked around, the fog of being knocked out slowly fading. He was in a large warehouse, with torches everywhere. Somebody had tied him to a post. He looked down. Blood seeped out of a fresh wound from his leg. He didn't think his leg had been broken, but he knew he wasn't going to be able to put his full weight on that one for quite some time. If he lived. Boxes were stacked up almost all the way to the roof. In front of him, a young Ortan boy held one of those "guns", no hair on that head. His face showed some signs of trouble. Behind him stood an equally bald-headed man in a loose-fitting dust-brown khaki outfit. Lan.

The man said something to the boy in Ortan, then patted him on the back. The kid left, setting the rifle on a free-standing rack beside a table. A man was tied down to that table, screaming for all his might while an old man cut on him. Zhao. Zhao's robe was spattered in blood. The Ortans had stacked the bodies in front of the table in neat stacks. Redd recognized some of the faces, at least, the faces that hadn't been blown off.

A moan drew Redd's attention to the right. Karlsdan was tied to a pole. His legs were a bloody mess. The legs had to be shattered. Then he noticed something. There was a strange vest, with some sort of wooden tubes, stuffed with another material. Redd looked down, he felt something around his

chest. The same type of breastplate, pock-covered with holes, adorned his chest. He felt something wrong. Something was...

"Missing?" Lan said, pulling the chest plate out from behind his back. He tossed it down onto a pile where three more lay. "I thought I might even the odds, when the time comes. And don't think about going for your knives." He pointed to a pile of them, laid out neatly on a table.

"Then what are these for," Redd growled. Lan smiled.

"I don't want Fuku-san here to kill you beforehand," he motioned to the little boy, who smiled and bowed politely. Despite himself, Redd bowed back. Another scream, and the man on the table expired. "Zhao, what in the hellworlds is going on?" He demanded. In two steps, Lan was in front of him, striking him hard in the nose. His world blurred.

"You will not talk so to the chief!" he said.

Zhao looked up after studying the man, then blinked, as if coming back to reality. "Ah, I'm so sorry that you got caught up in this, Redd," he said. His accent was gone; another ruse, Redd suspected. "But, wars are wars, and money is money. You and your *Don Cenn Garscea* are standing in our way of our heroin trade in the entire southwest section of Cibola, and we can't have that."

"But I saved you," Redd protested. "I saved Bruneo and his family! Doesn't that count for anything?"

"Yes, you did, very stupid of you," Zhao said. "Not that I don't appreciate it, but this is a war, and all wars have casualties." He pointed at the man on the table. One of Piter's men, from the look Redd got. "You Cibolans are very strong, very resilient." He noted. "I had the liver and his intestines halfway out before he expired. Fascinating, how in concert those organs work. Of course, the shock sent them into hystronics, but still..."

Lan touched him on the shoulder, bowing, and spoke to him briefly. Zhao nodded, and sent him off, "Of course, go, go," he said. Lan took off running, pausing only long enough to grab a long, black rope with a green stone attached to it. That wasn't all he took; he also grabbed up a green ring, stopped, turned around and grabbed the red one, dropping off the other ring.

"Yes, funny, you, who claim to be so cold-hardened, would allow a dottering old man to treat you?" he said. "Didn't you think that it was odd that Lan and his men would stop pursuing just because Bruneo was there? You've seen what those bullets can do. You've seen it twice. Why do you think they would stop for him? Other than the fact that he is my *atani*, my assistant."

"All right, if you wanted to kill me, why all this roundabout stuff? Why not just kill me that night and be done with it?" Redd looked up for a second, and saw a familiar face at the top of that mountain of boxes. A young, Ortan face. Redd rolled up his head, then back down. If he had believed, he would be praying right now. But he had no hope, except that he could keep the good doctor focused on him.

"Because we needed all of your gang members out of the way, so that we could get a clear shot at the Don. Right now, the Golden Assassin is moving into position. Soon, he will be done for, and the rest of the *doni* will fall into line. I would have hoped to have saved bloodshed and all, but you and your kind have made it abundantly clear Ortans are made for cleaning your sewers and carrying you around when your feet are worn out, and nothing else."

Zhao said a few words, and five men marched on in. They all wore the same close fitting clothing and had rifles slung over their shoulders. With practiced precision They took their places behind the young boy.

"Do not shoot unless they make a move towards me or Fuku does not finish them with one shot." He looked down at the boy. "I would take it as you not having learned your lessons if you deliberately injured them without killing," he said.

"No, my master," he said, bowing low, "I will not fail you, Father." There was a reverence to his speech. Zhao pointed to Redd.

"Now, shooting at a moving target, particularly at a human target, is difficult. It is not so much as the cats you have practiced on, but he will know what he is facing, and will try to dodge it. His wounds will make it a little easier, but I want you to face him as though he has all his wits about him."

He snapped his fingers, and one of the men marched towards Redd and removed the breastplate, then went behind him. He felt the ropes being loosened. He made a move, and the man grabbed his arm down hard and nearly broke it. The four other men raised their rifles right at his head. He stopped struggling.

“Just the hands, Itage,” Zhao said. Redd noticed only one of his legs was bound to the post, to a thick rope. Itage stepped back to the place, and Char dared to peek back over the boxes. He nodded to an opening in the roof. A full moon was out.

“On my signal,” Zhao said. The boy lifted the rifle. Zhao put his hand up in the air. “*Ine...Duato...*,” Zhao said.

“If you are looking for a target, why not try me?”

All heads whipped towards the opening. A man in a green cape and hat stood in the opening, looking down at them. Halfmoon-faced and beaming a wide smile, Darllin stood there, grinning. His cape flared out, despite the lack of a wind. Redd didn't have to see the small wires that held the cape aloft like that. Ever the player, Redd thought.

“Shoot him! Now!” Zhao said. All five rifles went up and shot. Bullets wizzed through the air. Immediately Darllin held his forearms up, fists clenched. Redd noticed two gold wristcuffs about half a hand wide, with a couple of strange runes on each. Five of those “bullets” stuck to the cuffs. Zhao ran through the opening of the box-piles.

“Where are the loaders?” he demanded. “Where are those men...?” His questions were cut off when a Cibolan stepped out and slashed his throat apart. Gasping to repair his ruined windpipe, he fell to the ground. Five rough bearded men ran into the makeshift room, screaming and charging the men. They were trying to use their guns as clubs, but not having a very good time at it. They were very professional, almost martial, but they were going up against Cibolan street fighters in close quarters.

“Redd!” A voice cried. Char had jumped all the way down to the pile of knives. He picked one up by its blade and threw it to Redd. It was at that point Redd realized the kid hadn't fired. He looked back down. The kid had regained his wits and now reaimed at Redd. Redd leaped towards the knife as far as he could. The kid followed him. He grabbed the knife. No time for actually cutting the rope, so he did the only thing he could think of doing.

He chucked the knife towards the kid.

The blade stuck in the hole of that gun. There was a boom, and suddenly that cold eyed killer was now only a kid, screaming and flapping two bloody, ruined hands in front of his face like they were wings. The rifle lay on the ground, ruined.

Char tossed Redd another knife, and Redd quickly cut through his bounds. He went over to Karlsdan and cut his bounds. Karl collapsed like a stone. The kid was still screaming when he turned around and ran through the shocked gang members. A couple turned to follow him.

“Leave him,” Redd ordered, “You have to get Karl out of here, find him a doctor.” The men moved to grab Karl and shuffle him out. Karl was still moaning. Redd looked up at Darllin, who was still up there, grinning.

“And you can stop showing off and get down here,” Redd said. “How did you get out of there alive?”

Darllin held up a finger and pointed to the entry way. Redd turned, then smelled cheap wine before a sottish sorcerer stumbled towards them into the light. Harold, the drunk wizard and outcast of his religion, was walking quite uneasily. His red hair was in a shambles, and his eyes were unfocused.

He shoved past Redd and fell to the dirt. Instead of throwing up, however, the wizard drew a series of complicated runes on the ground. He stepped back. Darllin crouched down, and started to jump.

“Holds on just a second!” Harold said. He made a slight adjustment to the rune, and smiled up at Darllin. “Wouldn't want you going six feet through the ground,” he said, giving Darllin a weak smile. Even Darllin's cheesy grin was tested for a moment. A moment later, the smile was there again, and Darllin jumped. Halfway to the ground, above the runs, he floated down slowly.

“Ah, Redd, the proverbial calvery to the rescue,” he said. “Though these men have never seen

that house," he said. "We must move quickly, ere the minions of death overtake us."

"Have any idea of what he just said?" Harold said. Char shook his head. "You think Redd can stop this Golden Assassin fellow, anyway?"

"I heard them talking about the Golden Assassin," Char told them.

"We all did," Darlin said. "This Lan seems formidable, but Redd can stop him." Char shook his head again.

"No, I heard them talk about it in our own tongue," he said. "Lan's not the Golden Assassin, he's obviously going to try and keep Redd busy while the real one does the job."

"And did they said who he was?" Darlin said. Char looked down at the ground, drawing in the dirt with one shoe.

"They didn't say," Char said. "But they used the phrase *ikania*, Assassin."

"And that's important?"

"Had it been Lan, they would have used the phrase *ikan*, Assassin."

"Hold on a minute," Harold slurred. "I may be a little tipsy, but didn't you say *ikania* meant assassin."

"It does," Char said. "It's the feminine form."

Redd hobbled across the rooftop streets as fast as he could, using the cord to breeze across some gaps that he normally would have jumped cross with ease. His leg hurt like hell, but he had to stop him.

He saw a man up on a rooftop, jumping around towards the North. Lan. He had to stop him, he...it was at that point that Redd slowed up. The last time he had followed Lan around here like a blind-goose fool, he ended up with one of those balls in his side, falling off a roof. That, and Lan had left one of those cords and rings behind. Why had he...at that point, he realized it. Lan wasn't going after Cenn. If he had, he would have been well towards the Greased Pig and have shot him. They were going...Redd suddenly broke away from him and headed back south.

He was in midleap when a cord wrapped around his neck and slammed him back onto the roof. He looked up just in time to see Lan jumping up, a sword held hilt up and slamming down towards him. He rolled out of the way, and Lan's blade struck the tiles. He didn't play around. The sword shot straight towards him. Redd brought up his falchion, forcing the blow away from him as fast as he could.

Now he knew what his error was. Before, and now, Lan was merely toying with him, setting him up for something else. This time, the man was a whirlwind. Redd was fairly good, but even he couldn't stop all the blows. Soon there were two gashes down his cheeks, across his chest. This time, Lan wasn't going to wait for some other guy to kill him. He would do the deed himself.

The two fought in concentrated silence for a bit, each using controlled, short chops at the other. Redd was quicker, which was why he was still alive, but he needed some room. He circled around the Ortan, careful not to get into range of his sword.

"Nice of you to leave me that spare cord," Redd said. Lan touched his hand to his brow in a kind of salute. "And I suppose you just forgot to see the men streaming on in,"

"I saw a shadow," Lan said. "And I have heard much of you, the Prince of Thieves, a man so talented as to be able to steal your eyes before you could blink. I assume Zhao is dead." Redd nodded. "I must thank your men for that. I could not touch the Father, but the chaff must be removed one day, and you have done it for me." With that, he launched into another flurry, but Redd had read his muscle movements perfectly. His leg screamed, but he didn't need it that much to block the blows. Still, he had to get a little bit of distance between the two of them, at least for a moment.

It didn't seem he would get it. Suddenly, Lan dropped, slamming his leg through both of Redd's. He fell to the flat rooftop. Lan thrust his sword towards Redd, and...a shadow slammed into Lan, tripping over Redd's legs. Bruneo carried Lan towards the ledge, but Lan reacted quickly, slamming his sword through the big man's stomach, then pushing him away. Redd went towards Bruneo, tried to

help him up, as illogical as it was. Nobody survived a gut-wound for long, or pleasantly.

Redd didn't have time enough to put him out of his misery as he should. Lan was running towards him, bloodied sword bared. Redd flung the cord towards a high tower just behind them, waiting until the claws took hold before pointing the ring towards it. He flew off towards the tower, then guided it away...and nearly slammed into Lan, who was circling the structure from the opposite way. Blades clashed, and the two cords wrapped around each other.

Now Redd's hand was jammed right up against Lan's. He pulled his hand, the one with the green ring away from Lan's, all the while keeping blade up against Lan's. Green, and the jems on his cord were red. He could see the red ring on Lan's hand, and noticed his hand was moving towards Lan's. Green and red, opposites, and attracting, which meant... He looked up. The other cord was jeweled with three green jems. Lan was slowly pushing the two blades towards Redd. If the two different colors attracted each other then what if...he threw his hand up towards his own cord. They rose in the air, entangled together. At the last moment Redd jerked his hand free, let Lan strangle him for a moment and pointed. At Lan's cord.

The cord released and pushed away from both Redd's cord and the tower. Redd twisted around to untangle the cords.. Screaming, Lan fell to the ground, three hundred feet below, leaving Redd stuck to the top of the pinnacle. Redd looked away, but he could hear the meaty thud at the bottom. He looked around for another tower, and set his cord towards that. He had to hurry back before it was too late.

Bruneo stirred for a moment. The pain in his gut was fire and agony. He only hoped that he had bought enough time for the thief to get away from Lan. *Lan, forgive me my brother*, he thought. Lan had never treated him any different than a pure blood, even though he was half-otusu, and therefore, full otusu. Animal, outsider, but he had had his orders.

A hatch opened up, and two Ortan walked up. They smelled like they'd been in the sewers all day, but when you were a member of the Imperial Guard, you did whatever was required, no matter how demeaning. One of them held the hatch. A woman in a bright kimono appeared, followed by a small girl. Why they had brought the Heir to the Rose Throne here.

Bruneo tried to bow. "Matra, I have done what I could," he said.

"It is no matter," she said. "I saw three of his gang racing down the streets towards the inn. The *doni* will return in time for them to save him. Still, you have done more than you could believe. With Lan's forces spread out, we can move in and destroy the guns."

"And Zhao?"

"Zhao has been taken of, I have Seen it. Odious man, he began to behave more like a criminal than a member of the Court. He honestly thought he could begin to rule openly, when we have been instructed to keep quiet. The lion dies where the mouse survives." She pulled a knife, very narrow, out from one of her long wide sleeves.

The girl stepped forward. "You will be remembered," she said. "When I come to the throne, I shall name the heir after you."

Bruneo smiled. Some saw the flower of the sun, the woman who would rule half the world and influence the other. He saw a small little girl that he had rescued when their caravan had been wailaid while crossing the Sands, a girl who was more concerned about him than he had been about her. "And if the heir is a girl?" he said, coughing up some blood. He looked away, so as not to splatter it on her.

"She will have a very funny name indeed."

The woman stepped forward and held his head back. "No," the child said.

"Majesty, he will not survive this wound, and this is cleaner, easier."

"I want to..." the girl stepped forward. "I shall send him to his ancestors." She held his head in her small hands. The woman said nothing, only put the blade, handle first, over the girl's shoulder.

"Matistu," he said, naming her as she sliced his throat open. Even with those young hands, she easily severed his throat. Death came for him quickly.

The girl turned around. She could pretend for the world, but that tear was no trick of the

moonlight. The woman stepped forward. "Majesty, we must go, the guards will take care of him so he is found in the street.

Dark, serious eyes looked over her shoulder at the man sworn to be her bodyguard, along with Leanne and Lan, at one time, before they had thought to rise above themselves. "Nothing good is ever easy." she said.

Redd ran into the Pig as fast as he could, jumping from an opposing building and rolling through the entrance. He heard a blood curdling scream from the second floor and a crash. He barely noticed Harold at the bar. Char didn't seem to be around, but that was only a thought. He sprung up the stairs. The door on Cenn's room was open. Redd went in.

Inside, Darlin held a screaming, kicking, and very naked Leanne, with a knife in her hand. She had a tattoo on her breast, a flower with a bird. On the bed, Cenn was naked, and shocked as hell. Redd noticed a suit of armor laying on the chair. Where the hell had he gotten that?

"Is Cenn okay?" Redd knew it was a ridiculous question the moment he asked it. Darlin just nodded, though. "Get her out here," Redd said. "We'll handle this, Don; don't argue with me. Just get clothed and go for a walk. Make sure everybody sees you." Seven minutes more than he needed. Redd and Darlin, with a subdued Leanne, went upstairs to an attic.

When they were upstairs, Redd turned around. "Why, Leanne?" he asked the woman. "Cenn took you in." Leanne broke free of Darlin's grasp. Naked, with her raven black hair loose and hanging from her corners, she looked every bit as though she wanted to be there.

"To be a trained whore for the *Organizzazione della notte!*" she spat. "Lan and I, we would have ruled this town, and would have fed off those fat fools feeding in the Town of the Gods. I see that Lan died. So, what do you do now? Do you add to your honor by killing a woman, or do you let me go. It's your decision Redd."

Redd walked towards the opposite side of the Redd slowly drew himself in, drew the essence of who he was in. He could let her go, throw her out of Cibola. Killing a woman was the most dishonorable of acts, an act that any leper would pause to spit on a man for Lan was dead, his organization was most likely in chaos. He could; but she was under their employ, as well, and she had attacked a Don. And Redd was Cenn's *tenente*; whatever had to be done, could not be on Cenn's hands. If there was blood to be drawn, it was his decision, his chore.

He turned around, expanding the essence of himself out, and made his decision. "Nothing that is right..."

Morning, and Ricardo was already three hours into what promised to be a long day of travel. All the way down, and towards the west, to Tae Pea, in a leaky tub of a boat with a full cargo of furs and meats. Two weeks journey, two weeks away from his beloved Cecilia, that red-headed beauty, fire as the sun and twice as hot. A woman that any merchant would sing of in the market.

But instead he had drawn the lot, and it was his turn to make the long trip to Boat Town. Three days there, trading for whatever fish that they would give him and watching the boat to make sure one of the trade guilds did not try to raid them. A whole lot of boredom, punctuated with brief moments of panic.

For the thousandth time he cursed his father for apprenticing him to a captain, and he wasn't even out of sight of Cibola. He looked back, and saw a cart approaching along the road. Two men up front. As it drew close, Ricardo could see them. The driver, who seemed slumped over, and the other, a man in a flaming red cape and hat.

The cart drew ahead of them and stopped, and the man in the red got in the back. He picked up a sack and hefted it into the river. The bag sank for a moment, then floated to the center, towards Ricardo's ship. It would likely get caught in the rigging.

"What's the idea, idiot!" Ricardo screamed. He got up and started cursing at the man, who had turned the cart away and back towards Cibola. The man turned around, got up, and flashed a sign with

his hand above his head. The sign of the *Organizzazione*.

“Non ho visto niente e se, stavo sognando,” he pleaded. He said a prayer to Poisos, the God of the Seas, that he really was dreaming. The man in red was already down and back towards the city. Ricardo looked over towards a cabin boy, who was staring stupidly at Ricardo.

“Well, don't just stand there, get it up here before it tears the rigging!” he said. The kid rushed to get a hook, and soon he, and a couple of sea men were hauling it up and onto the deck. Ricardo should have just left it closed. He should have, but the red stains made him too curious for his own good. He stuck his hand in and grabbed something out. The head of a woman, cleanly cut off and with a serene look in her eyes, like she had never seen it coming. Ricardo never looked at the rest. He was too busy puking his guts out.

“...is ever easy.”