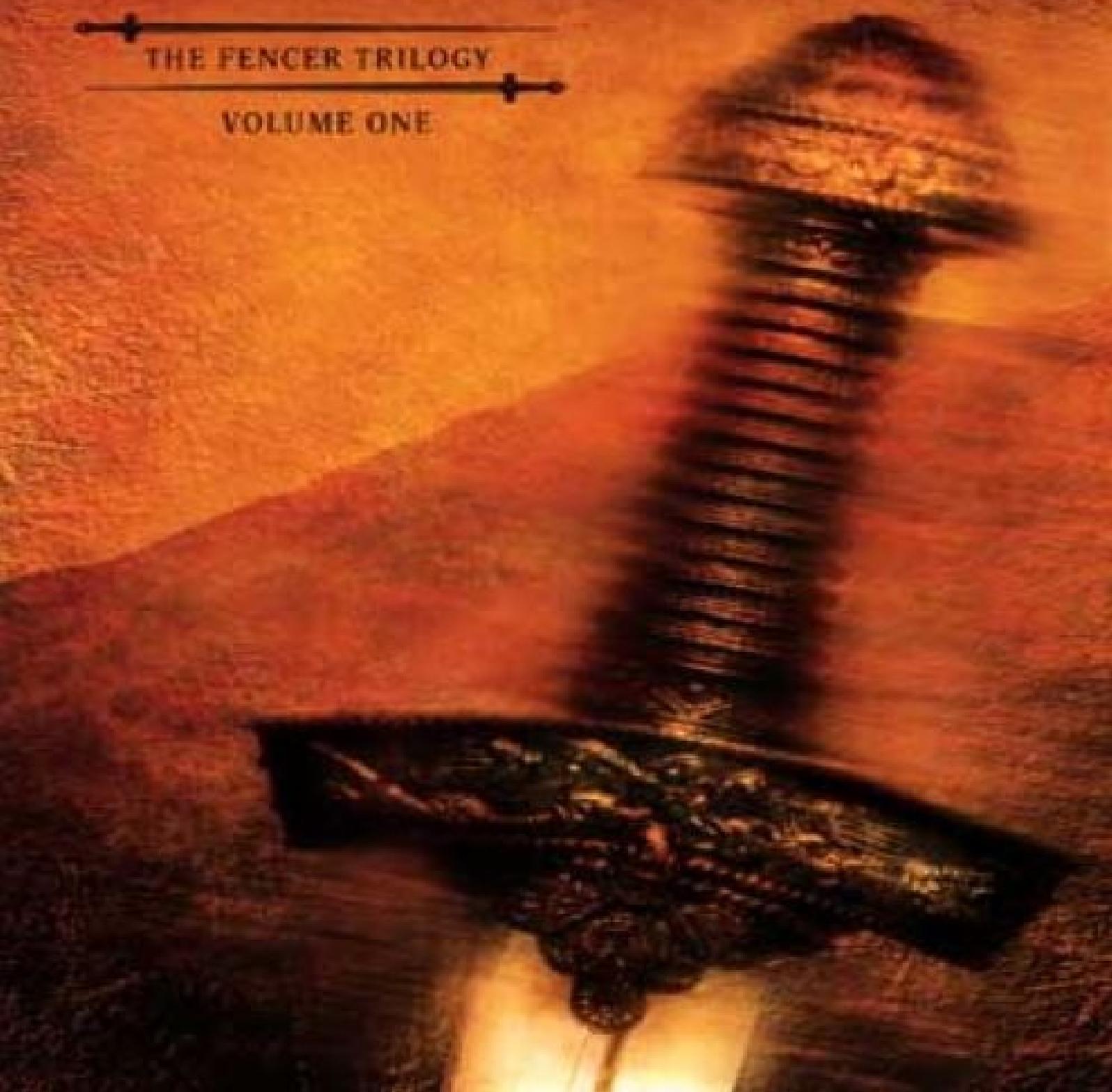


K·J·PARKER

COLOURS IN THE STEEL

—+—
THE FENCER TRILOGY

—+—
VOLUME ONE



Colours in the Steel

K J PARKER

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Having worked in the law, journalism and numismatics, K. J. Parker now writes and makes things of wood and metal (including prototypes for most of the hardware described in this book).

Parker is married to a solicitor and lives in southern England.

By K. J. Parker

THE FENCER TRILOGY

Colours in the Steel
The Belly of the Bow
The Proof House

THE SCAVENGER TRILOGY

Shadow
Pattern
Memory

THE ENGINEER TRILOGY

Devices and Desires
Evil for Evil
The Escapement

Colours in the Steel

K J PARKER

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For my father,
who made me want to make things.

CHAPTER ONE

It was just a run-of-the-mill shipping dispute, nothing more; a disagreement over the interpretation of a poorly worded contract, some minor discrepancies in various bills of lading, coinciding with a notorious grey area in the mercantile statutes. Properly handled, it could have been settled out of court with no hard feelings. Not the sort of cause you'd choose to die for, if you could possibly help it.

Everyone rose as the judge, a short man resplendent and faintly ridiculous in his black and gold robes of office, made his way across the wide floor of the court. He stopped once or twice, pawing the ground with the toe of his black slipper to check that the surface was even and true, and Loredan noticed with approval that he was wearing proper fencer's pumps, not the fancy pointed toes favoured by clerks and deskmen. Not all the judges in the Commercial and Maritime Division were ex-fencers, but there simply weren't enough to go round - and Loredan never felt comfortable with a lay judge. It was hard to have confidence in a man whose experience of the law stopped on the edge of the courtroom floor.

The clerk - elderly, short-sighted Teofano, who'd been here long before any of the current advocates had been born - declared the court in session and read out the names of the parties. The judge nodded to the participants, the participants nodded back and everyone sat down. There were the usual comfortable settling-down noises from the spectators' benches, the shuffling of buttocks on the stone seats, the rustle of straw as bottles were opened and snacks put handy where they could be reached without having to take one's eyes off the proceedings for even a split second. The judge peered at the documents in front of him and asked who appeared for the Mocenigo brothers.

Loredan looked up. On the opposite side of the court a huge blond boy was rising to his feet, his head instinctively ducking from a lifetime of low ceilings. He gave his name as Teofil Hedin, stated his qualifications and bowed. There was an appreciative buzz from the spectators, and money started changing hands among those inclined to speculation.

'Very well,' said the judge. 'Who appears for the defendants—' he hesitated and glanced down at the papers, '—the Dromosil family?'

As usual, Loredan felt a twinge in his stomach as he stood up; not fear so much as acute self-consciousness and a great desire to be somewhere else. 'I do, my lord,' he said, a bit too softly. He raised his voice a little as he gave his name; Bardas Loredan, fencer-at-law, of the College of Bowyer and Fletchers, ten years' call. The judge told him to speak up. He said it all again, detecting a slight hoarseness in his own voice. He knew it was the last stage of a mild cold, but the spectators drew their own conclusions and coins chinked softly on the stone.

The judge began to read the depositions. It was a stage in the proceedings that Loredan particularly disliked; it served no useful purpose and always left him tense and fidgety. The other man, whatever his-name-was Hedin, was standing gracefully at ease with his hands behind his back, looking for a

the world as if he was actually listening to what the judge was saying. Some men, particularly the older ones, had some little ritual worked out to fill this gap; a prayer of exactly the right length, mental checklists, even a song or a children's rhyme. Loredan, as usual, stood awkwardly and shuffled his feet, waiting for the droning voice to fall silent.

Which, at long last, it did; the cue for Loredan's hands to start sweating. At his side, Athli was fumbling with knots and buckles; if she's forgotten the ash for my hands, Loredan promised himself this time I'll wring her neck.

Without looking up, the judge called for any last submissions, assumed (correctly) that there were none, and gave notice to the advocates. Loredan took a deep breath and turned to his clerk.

'The Guelan,' he muttered.

Athli frowned. 'Are you sure?'

'Of course I'm sure. You have brought it, haven't you?'

Athli didn't bother to reply; whatever her faults, she was reliable when it came to equipment. He also knew that whichever one he'd chosen - the Boscemar perhaps, or the Spe Bref - she'd have said *Are you sure?* in exactly the same tone of voice, one which never failed to irritate him. She put her hand into the kitbag and produced the bundle of soft grey velvet, tied at the neck with blue cord. He took it from her and flicked open the knot. Perhaps the Boscemar, after all? No. It was his rule never to change his mind once he'd chosen.

The Guelan. He let the cover fall away - he'd never dream of telling anybody, but it always made him think of a bride's dress falling to the ground - and wrapped his hand round the plain grip, feeling for the slight grooves that marked the place for his thumb and little finger. Of his three swords it was the longest and the lightest, not to mention the most expensive, well over a hundred years old. Once there had been a design of vine leaves etched on the blade, but you had to hold it just right against the light to make them out now. It had seen him through thirty-seven lawsuits, nine of them in the Supreme Court and one before the Chancellor himself. Five nicks spoiled the edge (there had been others, but small enough to be taken out with a stone) and the blade was slightly bent a hand's span from the tip, the fault of some previous owner. The Boscemar took a keener edge and the Spe Bref was supposedly better balanced, but in a lawsuit what matters most is trust. After a century of hard work in these courts, it ought by now to know what to do. *Just as well one of us does.*

The usher gave the order to clear the floor. Athli handed him the dagger - at least he only had one of those, which meant one less thing to agonise over - and he slid it into the sheath behind his back, promising himself as he did so to fit a new spring to it, first thing tomorrow.

Yes. Well.

The judge raised his hand, savouring the drama of the moment, and called on the advocates to approach the bench. As he took his place under the raised platform, Loredan felt his leg brush against the other man's knee. He winced. It would be particularly unfortunate to die in a shipping case, at the hands of a tall blond bastard. All the more reason, therefore, not to.

As the other man handed his sword up to the judge for inspection, Loredan couldn't help noticing the flash of light on gilded inlay just above the hilt. A Tarmont, only a year or so old, scarcely used by the looks of it. There were hardly any stone marks to mar the deep polish of the blade; sharpened four

five times at most from new. Oddly enough, the sight raised his spirits a little. An expensive sword crafted by one of the five best living makers, but new and untried. It suggested overconfidence, tendency to assume that things will be as they should be. Ten years' call had taught him the assumptions like that can kill a man, if correctly exploited.

Having handed his own sword over and received it back after a perfunctory glance which he found mildly offensive, he made his usual neck-bob of a bow and walked to his place in the middle of the floor. Under his feet the flagstones felt firm, with just the right amount of sawdust and sand for the best purchase. He was wearing his oldest pair of pumps, long since moulded to his feet, the fairly new soles lightly scuffed with a rasp. Athli took his gown from his shoulders, and he shivered slightly at the chill. One close shave long ago had taught him to fence in nothing but a linen shirt, loose across the shoulders and arms, tightly laced at the sleeves, and a comfortable pair of breeches with no buckles to snag or catch at the wrong moment. He'd watched men die a sword's length from his face because they'd put on a heavy woollen shirt against the autumn chill. Ten years' call, and you learn that *everything* matters.

When the order came he was ready, and just as well. The other man was quick and obviously strong; the trick would be to stay alive for the first half-minute, and then for the three minutes after that. The first thrust came high, and wasn't at all what he'd been expecting. He was forced to parry high, and the weight behind the other man's sword was almost too much for him to deflect with only the strength of his arm and wrist. He managed it somehow, but he had to step one back and two right, opening his chest; no chance of a counterthrust. The next attack, predictably, was low, but none the less awkward for being what he'd expected. Two quick steps right got him out of the way, but his guard was still too high, and a cut to his unprotected right knee would have settled the matter.

Fortunately, his opponent went for another high thrust. Two steps back gave Loredan the room to parry forehand, his bodyweight behind the blade to push the other man's sword wide right; then he dropped his wrist for a short jab, more of a heavy push with the wrist turned over, straight for the stomach. The other man stepped back, but not quickly enough; the point of the sword went in maybe half an inch before Loredan snatched it out and, taking the risk of a cut across his right shoulder, threw himself down and forward for a sprawling lunge. His knee and left hand hit the ground together and he felt a twinge of pain as a ligament protested. The other man parried wildly, deflecting the thrust but not far enough, so that the first nine inches of the blade sliced into his right hip. Good work so far; but probably not good enough. Not yet, at least.

Loredan, kneeling on the ground, pushed hard with his left hand and leg to regain his feet; but his left knee didn't seem to work - cramp, of all the wretched ways to die! But the other man was too preoccupied with the sight of his own blood to notice Loredan's difficulties, and he somehow managed to force himself vertical on his right leg and fall back into a ragged imitation of a guard. Not a good time to try moving his feet; he'd fall over as sure as day. Everything depended on the other man, and how well he was able to handle being hurt. Waiting for him to move, Loredan cursed at shipping cases, all actions based on the laws of contract and all tall blond fencers ten years his junior. A lot of cursing to get through in less than a heartbeat, but speed is something that comes with long practice.

Mercifully, the other man seemed to have lost his nerve. Instead of lunging, as Loredan would have done in his position, he rocked back and went for a sideways slash at elbow level; as effective a way of killing yourself, Loredan reflected as he turned the blow neatly aside and leant into the inevitable

lunge, as jumping off a high tower. He felt the point of the blade encounter bone, saw it bend—

—and snap, clean as the stem of a wine glass, ten inches or so from the point. Disgusted, he turned the thrust into a short-arm cut, wrist power alone, that slit the other man's throat as neatly as a sheaf of parchment. There was a clatter as his sword fell - that extravagant, ill-fated Tarmont; never could he see the point in buying new - and a soft wheeze as the other man tried to draw breath down a throat that wasn't there any more. And lots of blood, of course, and the usual heavy thump as he hit the ground.

Damn all shipping cases.

The judge rapped with his little hammer and gave judgement, rather superfluously, for the defendant. A round of applause from the spectators - somewhat muted, it had been a very short fight with no really memorable strokeplay - followed by the shuffling of feet, the resumption of interrupted conversations, some laughter, a sneeze at the back. The other man's clerk gathered up his papers, tucked them under his arm, in no hurry to reach his clients at the back of the gallery. Athli had picked up the Tarmont - Loredan's property now, by ancient custom; worth ten times his fee but its value wouldn't buy another Guelan, even if he could find one. An unsatisfactory day, except that he was still alive.

'What happened to you?' Athli asked. 'I thought you'd had it there for a moment.'

'Cramp,' Loredan replied. He wanted to retrieve the front end of his blade, but he wasn't keen to get that close to the body. There'd be blood everywhere as soon as he pulled it free, and he wasn't in the mood. 'Look at that,' he muttered, staring at the broken sword in his hand. 'Looks like I've just acquired one very expensive carving knife.'

'I told you that thing had had its day,' Athli said. 'If you'd sold it, like I said—'

She held out the velvet bag, and he dropped the hilt-end in. She tied the cord and stowed it in the kitbag. 'How's the knee?'

'Better, but it'll need resting for a week or so. When's our next one?'

'Four weeks,' said Athli, 'and it's a divorce, so it ought to be all right. I'll let them know, though just in case they want to instruct someone else.'

Loredan nodded. Divorce, being an ecclesiastical jurisdiction, wasn't supposed to be to the death, although death didn't invalidate the judgement if it turned out that way. Nevertheless, it was only fair to warn the client if you were carrying an injury, particularly in a case where substantial marriage settlements were riding on the issue.

'I could always cut it down, I suppose,' Loredan mused. He was aware that he was hobbling, and the distance to the courtroom door seemed much longer than usual. 'Short blades are quite fashionable in some courts at the moment.'

'Not that short,' Athli said. 'Have it ground down for a second dagger. You could do with a spare.'

'Sacrilege.' A couple of porters were carrying the other man away, a sack thrown over him so as not to distress the public. 'Talking of which, since when have I been doing divorce work?'

'Since you started having trouble with your knee.' Athli looked up at him, frowning slightly. 'No offence,' she said, 'but have you given any thought to when you're going to retire?'

‘As soon as I can afford to,’ Loredan replied, feeling something bitter in his throat. ‘Or when the make me a judge.’

‘I thought you’d say that,’ Athli said.

Punctual as the mailcoach, the shakes came after the second bottle, just as he was about to open the third. Without saying anything, he handed it to his clerk.

‘You ought to go easy on this stuff,’ she observed, filling his cup. ‘For one thing, it’s expensive.’

Loredan scowled at the distorted image of himself reflected in the cup’s polished side. ‘Tradition,’ he replied. ‘It’s a mark of respect.’ He remembered something. ‘Did we buy his clerk a drink?’ he asked. Athli nodded.

There were quite a few spectators from the court in the taproom, and several of them were nudging each other and pointing. Loredan didn’t like that much; on the other hand, there was always a chance of picking up work in the tavern immediately after a hearing. He’d got the Khevren brothers that way and the cinnamon-merchants’ cartel. Several of the leading families sent men to all the hearings on the lookout for good advocates, usually bright lads talented enough to survive but still young enough to be cheap. Ten-year men were well enough known to potential clients, but there was the risk of pricing yourself out of the market; and lowering the fee was as good as admitting you were past it. The same went for taking divorce work; for a ten-year man, tantamount to a confession of decrepitude or loss of nerve or both. It’d be different, Loredan reflected, if I was getting better as I get older. But I’m not.

‘Well,’ Athli was saying, ‘you’ve done the easy part. Now I’ve got to get the Dromosil boys to pay me up.’

Loredan grunted. ‘Tell ’em we’ll sue,’ he said. Athli sniggered; professional debts, for example advocates’ fees, were a personal action, fought between the litigants themselves with no legal assistance allowed. In practice, however, advocates with a reputation of suing for their fees tended to find work hard to come by. ‘You’ll manage,’ he went on. ‘Not a bad day for you, with the sworn money.’

Athli shrugged. Her ten per cent would be a tidy sum, but she’d never admit to being pleased. ‘And every penny of it hard-earned,’ she said. ‘Drink up. We’re meeting the charcoal people in an hour.’

Loredan groaned. ‘Have I got to?’ he said. ‘Can’t you say I’m still recovering or something?’

‘That’d sound good. I’ve had to sweat blood persuading them you’re not a doddering old ruin who needs help going to the privy. And for pity’s sake don’t limp. You look about a hundred and six as it is.’

Defiantly, Loredan refilled his cup. ‘Where am I going to get another Guelan from?’ he asked gloomily. ‘Of all the bastard things to happen.’

Athli frowned at him. ‘Next thing you know you’ll be getting superstitious,’ she said. ‘Which is a dangerous hobby for a man in your line of work.’

Loredan growled. ‘Proper tools for a proper job,’ he replied. ‘Nothing superstitious about that. And I think it’s about time tools and equipment came off the gross. Other clerks do it,’ he added.

defensively, before Athli had a chance to speak. 'They accept that it's an essential expense of the business.'

'No chance.'

'Athli, it's my *life* . . .' He stopped, painfully aware that he'd broken the rules. Between advocate and clerk, the possibility of death was never recognised. He slumped forwards a little, ashamed of himself. 'When did you say we're meeting the charcoal people?'

Athli was looking at him. She'd been doing it a lot recently. Another unbreakable rule was that clerks didn't worry about advocates. They found them work, the best quality they could get; the fact that too high a class of work could get a man killed quicker than a lightning strike was strictly outside the terms of the relationship. 'It's all right,' she said. 'I'll say you had to go on to a victory party.'

'With the Dromosil brothers? Do me a favour.' He finished his drink and turned the cup over. 'I'd better come with you,' he sighed. 'Can't really trust you to handle difficult clients on your own. And *then*,' he added ferociously, 'we'll go out and get drunk. Agreed?'

'After an hour with the charcoal people,' Athli replied gravely, 'agreed.'

'This Principle,' said the Patriarch gravely, 'which of course we do not name, provides the power that makes these things possible. Never forget how limited it is, or how little it can actually do.'

He paused and looked round the hall at the packed benches. Five hundred eager young students, every one of whom had no doubt sworn a childhood oath to be a magician when he grew up. Alexios was a cynical man by nature, and achieving the Patriarchate had ground away what little idealism he had left, but even he admitted that he had one serious - even sacred - responsibility to each year's intake of novices. He must make them understand, as soon as possible, that they were *not* going to be taught how to be wizards.

'Fundamentally,' he continued, 'the Principle can be used as a shield; and, to a much lesser extent, as a sword. That is all; defence and offence. Its virtues cannot heal the sick or raise the dead, change lead into gold, make a man invisible or attractive to women. It cannot make anything, or change anything already made. It can deflect curses, and it can curse; and even these things are largely incidental to the true purpose for which the Principle exists. The power is a by-product, as leather, bonemeal and glue are by-products of pig-breeding.'

As he'd intended, the homely image caused a mild ripple of disgust among the members of his high-minded young audience. This wasn't the way they expected the Patriarch to talk. They had come here to be let in on a magnificent secret, the best and most profitable guild mystery of them all. With any luck, there would be twenty or so fewer ardent young faces gazing up at him by this time tomorrow, as the younger sons who wanted to learn how to turn their brothers into frogs, and the merchants' sons who'd been sent to learn how to raise favourable winds and summon genies for the purpose of bulk-freight carriage, packed their bags and went home again. If he did his job properly, he'd be rid of half of these young fools before the term ended.

'Tomorrow,' he said, 'I will explain to you the four great assumptions on which the Principle is founded. Once you have grasped these - if you manage to grasp them, which is by no means guaranteed - you will be in a position to decide which of the six aspects of the Principle to study, and

we will then be able to allocate you to appropriate classes and tutors. May I also remind those of you who still have fees to pay that you cannot be allocated until all sums due have been received. You are dismissed.'

So much for the education of the young. Back in his own cell, a square stone box with a plank bed, a massive oak book box and the most dazzling mosaic ceiling in the city, he shrugged off his robes of office and his ridiculous purple boots, sat on the edge of the bed and patiently struggled with flint and tinder until his lamp reluctantly gave him some light.

Directly below his cell they were setting up the evening meal in the refectory. Fairly soon, the head steward would knock on his door, asking permission to untie the knot that anchored the great chandelier that hung over the high table, so that it could be lowered and filled with the evening candles. The Patriarch couldn't help resenting the intrusion, even though it was part of the daily ritual; the noise of the evening meal disturbed his reading, and scarcely a day passed when he didn't stub his toe on the damned anchor-post as he pottered about in the gloom of his cell.

He had insisted on a room with no windows; lamplight, reflected in the thousands of gilded tesserae that made up the legendary mosaics, was good enough for a man to read by, provided that he leaned close to the flame and held the page a few inches from his nose. Alexius knew that he was fataly prone to distraction. If he had a window, he'd look out of it instead of reading his book. If there were tapestry hangings or frescos, he'd sit gazing at them instead of applying his mind to the dense arguments of the Fathers. And if he went down to dinner in the refectory, instead of making do with a loaf of coarse bread, a jug of water and an apple, he'd do no further work that day, or the morning of the next.

In consequence, he was held to be a great ascetic and given honour accordingly. He was - a good joke, this - probably the most deeply respected Patriarch the city had known in a hundred years. Not bad for a man who moved his lips when he read, and made no effort to conceal the fact. And if it took him twice as long as his colleagues to master each new development and hypothesis in the orthodox, at least he did master them. Lazier, more gifted men who didn't bother to read the actual text, relying instead on someone else's summary, made mistakes and could be confounded by a painfully learned quotation.

Some of them even liked him. He had no idea why.

The source of tribulation he had set himself to read this evening was a new discourse on the nature of belief; a short monograph apparently flung together in an idle moment by the young Archimandrite of one of the city colleges, a man who had more intuitive understanding of the Principle in his toenail clippings than the Patriarch had in his whole body, but who devoted most of his waking hours and a considerable proportion of the income of his House to the trotting races. In his treatise, the dashing young sportsman proposed that belief acted as a focus for the Principle in the way that a prism or crystal or glass can concentrate the light of the sun. The Principle, he argued, was as universal as light and as diffuse. Only when filtered through the willing mind could it become strong enough to illuminate subterranean darkness or burn a hole.

The Patriarch scowled. It was a succinct and accurate way of saying what he'd always felt about the Principle but had never been able to clarify properly in his own mind; clearly the boy had an exceptional gift, and this was only the first chapter of the text, the part usually reserved for stating the blindingly obvious premises of one's argument. The startlingly new hypothesis that had been

recommended to his attention lay in the seventy-eight chapters that followed. It was going to be a long night.

He was just starting to develop a headache (it didn't help that his copy was vilely written on thick, used parchment) when he heard the knock at the door he'd been expecting this past half-hour. He grunted, and a blade of light appeared in the doorway.

'Sorry to trouble you, Father.'

He grunted again, trying not to look up from the book. For some reason it wasn't the hall steward tonight; he hadn't recognised the voice, but it was young and female, one of the housekeeper's girls, presumably, and if he was to stand any chance of wrapping his slow brains around this confounding hypothesis—

'Sorry to trouble you,' the voice repeated. 'But if you could spare me a few minutes—'

Damnation, it was a *student*. 'I'm reading,' he growled, bringing the page up against his nose. 'Close away.'

'It won't take long, I promise. Please.'

Alexius sighed. 'Patriarch Nicephorus the Fifth,' he said severely, 'on being interrupted while reading the scripture *All Things Shall Cease*, let fly such a curse that the unfortunate fool who had disturbed him was at once struck by lightning. Only with great difficulty was the victim later identified as Nicephorus' own daughter, who had come to warn her father that the house was on fire. I suggest you see me after the lecture tomorrow.'

It is well to avoid distractions; but if distractions refuse to be avoided, far quicker to let them have their way. He picked a rush off the floor and laid it in the book to mark his place, then looked up.

Maybe this wasn't going to be such a serious distraction after all. She was long and bony, with a thin face and pale blue eyes; fifteen, maybe sixteen years old, wearing her body like an elder sister's coat she'd be sure to grow into eventually. It's always the scrawny ones who get pushed off into the trade. He had been just as stringy himself at that age. He relented a little.

'Hurry it up, then,' he said. 'What can I do for you?'

The girl knelt on the ground; not obeisance, just the instinctive habit of someone who came from a house where they had no chairs. 'I'd like a curse, please.'

Alexius closed his eyes. It was starting early this year. He was about to say something fierce and dismissive, but somehow didn't. There was something appealingly - what was it? - *businesslike* about the child that almost tempted him to do what she asked.

'What for?' he asked.

This seemed to strike her as a silly question. 'I want to curse someone,' she said. 'Could you teach me the right words, please?'

I could explain, Alexius thought. I could start with the four assumptions, work on through the theoretical basis of the Principle, briefly summarise the role of belief (which might be said to resemble a glass used to concentrate the rays of the sun . . .), explain the reciprocal effect of action and reaction and the futility of unfounded use of the powers, and so make her understand exactly how silly her request has been. Or I could just say no.

‘That depends on who you want to curse and why,’ he replied instead. ‘You see, if a curse is going to do any good - sorry, I didn’t mean it that way - if it’s going to work, it has to have a firm foundation in something the victim’s done. The old saying *No one can curse an innocent man*, though not strictly speaking true, isn’t so far from the mark—’

‘Oh, he’s not innocent,’ the girl interrupted confidently. ‘He killed my uncle.’

Alexius nodded. ‘That’s a good start,’ he said. ‘At least we’ve got an action on which a curse can be founded. Better if the killing wasn’t justified, but even a man who is in the right can be successfully cursed so long as the act itself is violent or causes damage. Hence my caveat to the maxim I quoted just now about cursing an innocent man.’

The girl thought for a moment. ‘It was legal,’ she said. ‘But not justified. How can you justify killing someone? You can’t, that’s all.’

The Patriarch decided not to pursue that one. ‘When you say legal—’ he began.

‘My uncle’s an advocate. Was.’ The girl smiled. ‘Not a very good one. *He* never killed anybody in his life. All wills and divorces, you see.’

Alexius suppressed a smile, thinking of the famous statue in the suburb where he’d been born—

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF
NICETAS THE BOXER
OF WHOM IT MAY TRULY BE SAID
HE NEVER HARMED ANY MAN.

‘Perhaps he was in the wrong line of work,’ he said. ‘Presumably it was another advocate—’

‘His name’s Bardas Loredan,’ the girl said promptly. ‘I think he’s quite famous. Can you tell me the words now, please?’

Alexius sighed. ‘It really isn’t as simple as that,’ he said. ‘For a start, there aren’t any special words; in fact, you can curse someone perfectly well without saying anything. What you really need is a picture—’

‘I’ve got one,’ said the girl, reaching into her sleeve.

‘In your mind,’ Alexius continued. ‘A strong mental image of the act that makes you want to lay the curse.’ He gritted his teeth; better in the long run to explain it now, it’d be bound to save time. ‘The way it works is that a qualifying act - something violent or hurtful - causes a disturbance in the force we refer to as the Principle.’ That, he knew, was putting it very badly, but he couldn’t be bothered. The girl seemed to understand. ‘It’s like when you drop a stone into water. For a split second, the water is pushed away and there’s a sort of gap where the water used to be. Then the water comes back into it but the ripples carry on spreading. What we can do - sometimes - is catch hold of that gap and put in something of our own. That’s what we call a curse.’

‘I think I see,’ the girl said. ‘So what happens to the water? The water that should have gone back into the gap, I mean?’

Alexius smiled, impressed. ‘That’s a good question,’ he said. ‘By interfering where there’s already been an interference, you see, we always make things worse - no, that’s a bad way of putting it. We increase the level of the disturbance, and inevitably there’s a reaction. More to the point, the reaction

tends to be much more intensive than the curse itself.'

'It hits you harder than you hit the victim?'

Alexius nodded gratefully. 'You've got it,' he said. 'Which is why, before you learn cursing, you have to learn how to deflect curses. Otherwise you might succeed in making your enemy break a leg but you'll break your own neck.'

The girl shrugged. 'I'm not bothered about that,' she said. 'Will you tell me how to go about it?'

Alexius drummed his fingers on his knee. One thing the adepts of the Principle did *not* do was hire themselves out as metaphysical assassins, cursing perfect strangers to order. Quite apart from the social implications, there was the danger. The reaction to a curse in your own mind's eye was bad enough; warding off the reaction when you were inside somebody else's head was next to impossible unless you knew exactly what you were doing. And the Patriarch was perfectly willing to admit that he wasn't sure about that.

'No,' he said. 'It's out of the question. All I could do is try and lay the curse for you, but—'

'Would you?'

The carefully phrased explanation he'd prepared faded away inside his mind. 'It's very difficult,' he said. 'And it probably wouldn't work. You see, I'd have to try and look at what's inside your mind.'

'Can you do that?'

The Patriarch tugged at his beard. It would be easy to say no, it's impossible; because it *was*, or at least it was a simple matter to prove it wasn't possible. In three weeks' time, he'd do just that in the lecture hall. One thing you had to learn, however - the so-called fourth assumption - was that just because a thing's impossible doesn't mean to say you can't do it if you really try. But to try, you have to want to.

'Sort of,' he replied.

'How does that work?'

Alexius grinned rather feebly. 'I'm not sure that it does,' he replied. 'It happens sometimes, but that's not quite the same as something working. A clock works if you wind it. Sometimes a clock that's wound down happens to tell the right time.'

The girl looked at him. 'What's a clock?' she asked.

Alexius made a vague gesture. 'I'll try if you like,' he said. 'But I'm not promising anything.'

'Thank you.'

'You're welcome. Now then, I've got to try and visualise exactly what happened; I've got to see that stone hitting the water. And not just any stone; that particular one and no other. Do you understand?'

'I think so.' The girl pressed her chin with her hands, her brow furrowed. 'You want me to tell you what happened.'

The Patriarch shook his head. 'No,' he said. 'I want you to tell me what you remember, there's a difference. When you think of it, or when something reminds you, isn't there a picture there?'

immediately comes into your mind?’

‘Yes. Like a single moment, frozen.’

‘Very good.’ Alexius took a deep breath. ‘Tell me what you can see.’

The girl looked up at him. ‘Uncle was trying to hit him - sort of cutting rather than thrusting. He pushed Uncle’s sword away and stabbed him, and then his sword broke. I can see the broken-off bit of Uncle’s chest. It looks so strange, a big bit of metal like that stuck in a person. Reminds me of a pillow cushion, or the knife standing in the butter.’

Alexius nodded. ‘And what about the look on his face? Your uncle’s, I mean. Can you see that?’

‘Oh, yes.’ The girl looked down at her folded hands. ‘He was cross.’

‘Cross?’ Alexius repeated.

‘That’s right. It’s like when you do something clumsy, dropping a cup or tearing your sleeve on a nail. He was cross because he’d got his fencing wrong. He was very proud of his fencing. He knew it wasn’t *that* good, but he practised for hours. He used to hang a sack full of straw from the apple tree and bash at it with a stick; and he knew the names of all the different strokes, and he’d call them out as he did them. When he made a mistake, he was cross. I think that was all he had time for.’

‘I see,’ Alexius said, and then added irrelevantly, ‘You must have been very fond of him.’

The girl nodded. ‘He was eight years older than me. They say twenty-three’s a good age for a boy fencer.’

Well, now, the Patriarch thought. Twenty-three. In the western suburbs, it’s quite usual for uncles to marry their nieces. Helpful; nothing like love to help you get a grip on a fleeting image. He closed his eyes—

‘Are you doing it now?’

‘Yes. Don’t interrupt.’

‘But I haven’t told you what I want the curse to be yet.’

Alexius’ breath came out in an exasperated gasp. It wasn’t enough that he was expected to do a curse once-removed; it had to be a specific curse. This was turning out to be quite a performance.

‘Well?’

‘I can see him,’ the girl said. ‘He’s in the court, and I’m facing him. We’ve both got swords, and he stabs at me. And then—’

Alexius waved his hands in alarm. ‘Stop,’ he said, ‘or you’ll do it yourself, and then the reaction’ll bring the roof down on both of us. Trust me; I think I know what you’ve got in mind.’

He closed his eyes again; and there, as if painted on the inside of his eyelids, was the court, with its high domed roof, the rows of stone benches encircling the sandy floor, the judge’s platform, the marble boxes where the advocates waited for the command. He could see Loredan’s back, and over his shoulder the girl; older now, grown up, extraordinarily beautiful in a way that made him uneasy. He could see the red and blue light from the great rose window burning on the blade of her sword, a long thin strip of straight steel foreshortened by the perspective into an extension of her hand, a single

pointing finger. He saw Loredan move forward, his graceful, economical movement; and the girl reacts, parrying backhand, high. Now she leans forward, scarcely moving her arm at all except for the roll of the wrist that brings the blade level again. Loredan's shoulder drops as he tries to get his sword in the way, but he's left it too late, the sin of the overconfident man. Because Loredan's back is to him, Alexius can't see the impact or where the blade hits; but the sword falls from his hand, Loredan staggers back and drops, bent at the waist, dead before his head bumps noisily on the flagstones. The girl doesn't move, the blade points directly at him. He realises he never saw the man's face, or asked the girl her name . . .

Wait for it. Here it comes.

Imagine the fly that buzzes round your head, or the moth that flutters aggravatingly in your study at night as you crouch over the flame of your lamp. You reach out, your huge fist dwarfs the insect as your fingers close to crush it. Either it gets out of the way in time, or it doesn't. If it does, the disturbance in the air as your enormous hand goes past flings the insect aside, and it wobbles helplessly for a moment, out of control. Alexius could feel the enormous hand sweeping down on him from behind, though he couldn't see it; he could feel the displacement of air, buffeting him like a breaking wave at sea. There was nothing he could do; either the hand would catch him, or it wouldn't.

It didn't; but the slipstream slammed him down, like a door slamming in his face. He tried to make a noise but there was no air left in him. He opened his mouth, and fell off the bed.

'Are you all right?'

'No,' Alexius replied. 'Help me up.'

The girl grabbed his sleeve; she was very strong. 'What happened?' she asked. 'Did it work?'

'I haven't the faintest idea,' the Patriarch grumbled, rubbing the back of his head with rather more vigour than the slight bump warranted. 'In my mind's eye, or our minds' eyes, I killed him. Or you did, rather. Whether or not it'll actually—'

The girl let go of him abruptly. 'But that's wrong,' she said. 'That's not the curse I wanted.'

Alexius glowered at her; the whole thing had stopped being a pain and was getting ludicrous. 'But you must have,' he said. 'It's revenge you're after, isn't it?'

'I told you I don't believe in killing,' she replied, coldly furious. 'What good's killing him going to do? If only you'd let me tell you—'

Alexius let his head fall back onto his one hard pillow. 'Then what did you want, if you didn't want him killed?' he asked wearily. 'Be fair. The two of you, in open court—'

'I wanted to cut off his hand,' she said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. 'I was going to cut his hand off and then walk away, leaving him standing there, in front of everybody.' She turned away, her hair falling across her face. 'Getting killed isn't a punishment for him, it's part of his job. I wanted him to *hurt*.'

'Well, tough,' Alexius snapped. 'You'll just have to make do, that's all. Assuming that it works, of course. As I told you, there's a good chance that it won't.'

The girl stood up. 'I don't think so,' she said. She walked towards the door.

Why is it, Alexius asked himself, that young people are simply incapable of saying thank you? She

was just about to vanish into the sharp blade of light she'd come in through when he remembered.

'What's your name?' he called out.

'Iseutz.' Her voice, in the dark. 'Iseutz Hedin.'

'See you in class,' he called out as the door closed. He knew he wouldn't. One down, four hundred and ninety-nine to go.

When the hall steward came to lower the chandelier, Alexius threw a book at him.

CHAPTER TWO

Traditionally, the best way to approach the island on which Perimadeia, oldest and most beautiful of cities, is built is from the seaward side. At first, only the lighthouse is visible over the skyline. As the ship comes closer, the towers of the Phylax and the spires of the Phrontisterion poke up above the horizon like green shoots of corn. Shortly after that, the mountain itself rises up out of the water and the foreigner sees the first distant prospect of the Triple City. The summit of the mountain is a unworldly flash of white marble and gilded rooftops, and ignorant offcomers who know no better than to believe in gods at once assume that here is where they live. When they're told that the upper city is the residence of the imperial family, they find it easy enough to make the association in their minds between gods and emperors, a natural-enough reaction which generations of Perimadeian diplomats have exploited to the full. Since nobody ever enters or leaves the upper city, the assumptions of barbarian visitors cannot be refuted; not that the Perimadeian state ever tries too hard.

Below the white and gold crown lies the second city, a breathtaking jumble of palaces, temples, banks, market halls and public buildings of all kinds interspersed with and often indistinguishable from the private residences of the rich and mighty. All great Perimadeians intend their houses to look like glorious and awe-inspiring office buildings, and many a confused envoy or merchant has wandered for an hour among the cloisters and corridors of a second-city edifice only to find out eventually that he's in some private citizen's home.

The lower city can only be seen when the ship is close to land, since it is largely obscured by the colossal sea walls, invulnerable guardians of the city for seven centuries. Once visible, the largest and busiest section of the city looks like any city anywhere, except that it's much larger and more concentrated; as if the great conquering emperors of the past had scooped up the cities acquired on their campaigns, picked out the loot and everything else worth having and dumped the empty buildings at the foot of the mountain like a huge pile of oyster shells.

If the city is approached from either of the two branches of the river in whose fork the island lies the prospect is slightly less dramatic; the traveller sees the whole mountain at once as he comes through the narrow passes of the surrounding hills, and the land walls don't mask the lower city in the same way as the maritime defences do. From the river approach, Perimadeia appears as a very large city divided into three levels, with freshwater estuaries on two sides and the sea on the third. Impregnable, arrogant, infinitely rich, but not necessarily a dwelling-place of gods. Gods would have servants' quarters, but they would be cleaner and not quite so dark and cramped.

Another advantage of approaching from the sea, as a result of the prevailing winds, is that the smell only becomes noticeable once the ship has made landfall in the harbour of the Golden Crescent. Travellers arriving by river get the smell rather earlier; by way of compensation, they have time to get used to it before they arrive at the bridge gates, whereas sea-travellers get it as an unpleasant shock when they walk off their ship.

Only one in a hundred native Perimadeians is even aware of the smell; on the contrary, citizens born and raised in it tend not to notice it and complain about the thin, bland air they find when they go abroad. There is no one single flavour to it; rather, it's a rich and complicated mixture of wood and charcoal smoke, tanneries, refineries, distilleries, glassworks, bakeries, cookshops, perfumeries, brickyards, furnaces, workshops, fish, cattle dung, essence of humanity and rotting seaweed, the like of which is not to be encountered anywhere else in the world.

Temrai's caravan had followed the western branch of the river down from the high plains, and accordingly they entered the city across the Drivers' Bridge and through the Black Gate. Once through the gateway, the road becomes the main thoroughfare of the carpenters' and machine-makers' quarter, and the first thing Temrai saw in the City of the Sword was the famous bone-grinding mill that stood beside the gateway on the left-hand side.

It was an extraordinary sight for a young man newly arrived from the plains. What Temrai saw was a deep pit, out of which rose a huge wooden circle with fins radiating from it like the spokes of a wheel. Someone had cut a hole in the city wall seven feet or so from the bottom of the pit; since this was below the level of the estuary on the outside, water poured through the hole, fell onto the sails and pushed the wooden circle round before being fed back through a smaller hole controlled by some sort of mechanism which allowed the millstream out without letting the river in. The circle itself turned around an axle formed from the bole of an enormous pine tree. On the other end of the axle was a smaller wheel with pegs driven in all round it, which fitted into similar arrangements of pegs driven into yet another wheel standing at right angles to it. In fact there was a whole family of the things, all biting into each other like a pack of wild dogs, which were in turn connected to the grindstone itself. The miracle was that although the axle turned slowly, the millwheel went round much faster, ensuring that the bones fed into the hopper were crushed to fine powder.

Temrai had never seen so many bones in one place; more even than littered the plain at Skovun, the site of the great battle between the eastern and western clans three generations ago. Two men stood on top of the hopper, shovelling them in from a plank bin. Most of the bones were bits of ox and horse and goat, but mixed in with them were the occasional patently human shin, arm, rib, and skull. The crackly crunching sound as the millwheel rode over them was like horsemen riding over dry twigs and bracken in a forest, but much louder.

'What's it for?' he asked the men with shovels.

They couldn't hear him; or if they could, they couldn't understand his accent. But the man who had the copperware stall next to the mill tugged his sleeve and explained; bonemeal, he said, was highly prized by farmers and market gardeners. It made things grow.

'Oh,' Temrai said, 'I see. Thank you.'

'You're a plainsman, aren't you?'

Temrai nodded. He could understand the stallholder perfectly well, although he found the man's sing-song voice rather irritating. He'd been told before he set out that the city people sang rather than spoke; until now, he hadn't seen how that could be possible.

'In that case,' said the stallholder, 'you'll be wanting to buy a genuine Permadien copper kettle. And it just so happens—'

Explaining that he had no money (fortunately the stallholder believed him) Temrai escaped and left

his horse up the hill to where he'd been told the city arsenal was to be found. On the way he passed any number of even more remarkable and fascinating stalls and workshops - a man who was using a bent sapling to turn a spindle, to which was attached a chair-leg which the man was shaping with a chisel as it spun; a crossbow maker chiselling out a latch socket from a bar of iron; two men working the biggest bow-drill Temrai had ever seen, with which they were boring a hole through a cast-iron wheel; carpenters joining the frame of a magnificent beam-operated press, presumably for crushing grapes or olives. Temrai was astonished by what he saw, so much so that he was nearly responsible for several disasters as he narrowly avoided walking into carefully arranged displays of merchandise through not looking where he was going. It was incredible, he told himself, that men's hands had made all these marvellous things. There was clearly more to the business of being human than he'd realised.

And this was the city where he was going to earn a good living as a metalworker. That didn't seem right, somehow; with all this amazing knowledge and all these unbelievable machines and devices, how was it possible that he could know something they didn't?

Had it been up to him, he wouldn't have dared. But of course it wasn't; so he tethered his horse outside the imposing bronze doors of the arsenal, found the rather less imposing side door, and went in.

Unlike most of his race, Temrai had been inside buildings before. He knew what it was like to be between walls and underneath a roof, and although he didn't exactly like the experience, it didn't bother him too much. This, however, was something else entirely. It was dark, like the inside of his father's tent, and what little light there was consisted of a flickering red glow. That and the oppressive heat came from the enormous furnaces, from which bare-skinned sweating men tapped off streams of brilliant white molten iron into long rows of identical gang-moulds that clustered around the base of the furnace like piglets round a sow.

The noise was worse; at home, there was nothing that pleased Temrai more than the sound of the smith's hammer, but these must surely be the hammers of the thunder-genies. When his eyes were a little more accustomed to the light, he was able to identify the source of the noise: a battery of wheels that could only be gigantic mechanical hammers, vast wooden piles shod with iron or copper that were lifted by thick beams until some mechanism tripped them and let them fall. Behind the machines and hammers he saw another giant wheel, similar to the one that had driven the bone mill but even larger still. Remarkable; these men made the river do their work for them. The very thought disturbed Temrai; it was like enslaving the gods. Except that, by all accounts, there were no gods in this city. Perhaps, Temrai reflected, with all these machines they didn't need any.

'You.'

He turned round to find a short fat man with two little feathers of white hair in either side of a shiny bald head staring at him. Temrai smiled.

'You,' the bald man repeated. 'What do you want?'

Like all the other men in the building, this one was naked except for a little kilt of grubby white cloth. Understandable, Temrai thought, if you had to work in this heat all day, although with all the sparks flying about from the spitting furnaces, he reckoned he'd rather keep his shirt on and sweat. And this was the place he'd come to find work in. He felt a great urge to run away, but managed not to.

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