

Chimaera

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ONE



Little Ullii, the mildest and meekest person in the world, tested the blade of the pilfered dagger concealed in her coat. She was going to revenge herself on the man who had been her first friend and only lover, and the father of her dead baby. She was hunting Nish, and when she found him she planned to cut out his heart, for that was just what he'd done to her.

'Seeker? To me!'

Ullii started and looked around guiltily. She loathed Chief Scrutator Ghorr almost as much as she hated Nish, but she feared Ghorr as only the truly helpless could. He was a brute, a monster, and she was in his thrall. She scurried to his side to betray the rest of her friends.

The Council of Scrutators had attacked the ancient fortress of Fiz Gorgo before dawn with overwhelming force and complete surprise, taking most of their victims in their beds. With Ullii to pinpoint them, mancercs as powerful as Yggur and as subtle as Malien had been captured within minutes, along with dozens of lesser victims. Now only a few remained, but among them were the two that Ghorr wanted most desperately.

His victory was almost complete and Ghorr was going to finish the rebellion here and now. The trials would be swift, the executions swifter. By the end of the day no one, from the least scullery maid at Fiz Gorgo to Lord Yggur himself, would be left

alive. And every detail of the trial and the bloody executions was to be recorded devotedly by the war artists, recorders and tale-tellers. The whole world had to know that there was no escape for traitors, not even those hiding in distant territories under enemy occupation. Every citizen of Santhenar, down to the smallest child, must hear the tale of the rebels' brutal end, and take the lesson.

But Ullii plotted a different fate for Nish; Nish who had slain Myllii, the beloved twin brother for whom she'd searched since she was four. He had claimed it was an accident but Ullii knew better. She had to take retribution with her own hands. Without it, neither Myllii nor her son Yllii could ever find peace in their graves. She was going to carve out Nish's treacherous heart and feed it to the carrion birds that were already circling above the walls of Fiz Gorgo in expectation of the feast.

Ullii crept down the corridor beside the chief scrutator. Her eyes were masked against the torches of his troops, for Ullii was so sensitive that bright light burned her eyes. Fortunately she did not need to see. Her mental lattice, her unique and, to others, incomprehensible way of viewing the world, told her where she was even in darkness.

Her ears were covered to keep out the clangour of battle and bloodshed, the roars of the soldiers, the screams of their victims, the thud of weapons against armour, flesh and bone. Ullii could not see Nish in her lattice because, lacking any talent for the Secret Art, he did not appear there. But her most sensitive sense was not veiled in any way. She was tracking Nish by his scent. Nowhere he could go, nothing he could do could prevent her from finding him among the myriad of other smells and stenchs that threaded the frigid air of Fiz Gorgo.

Fortunately Ghorr was not aware of that talent and, in the afterglow of a victory more complete than he had ever dared hope for, he seemed to have forgotten about Nish. He was not in the same league as the great mancens Gilhaelith, Malien and Yggur. Nish was insignificant compared to the unexpected discovery of Tiaan and the priceless flying construct, not to mention the powerful and enigmatic amplimet, a crystal that drew power

from the field without human intervention. Ghorr's personal guard had already secured all of them and the chief scrutator could not help gloating over it.

He heaved her back by the arm. 'Stay behind, Seeker. Don't endanger yourself. We've yet to find the arch-fiend, Xervish Flydd, and he could slay you with a single glance.'

Ullii knew that wasn't true, and moreover Flydd had treated her far more kindly than the chief scrutator ever did. However, she stopped at once; Ghorr took pleasure in inflicting pain, particularly on the weak and powerless.

'Well?' he said, pulling off her earmuffs to roar in her ear, though she could hear him clearly through them, and he knew it. 'Where is the renegade, Seeker?'

Before she could answer, a soldier came running. 'Two people have barricaded themselves in a chamber down to your left, Chief Scrutator, surr. Mancer Squilp says the place has a strong tang of the Art.'

'Is it Xervish Flydd, Ullii?' said Ghorr, crushing the bones in her gracile arm.

She closed her eyes behind the mask, the better to visualise her lattice. The noise hurt and the violence frightened her, making it difficult to concentrate. The lattice was faint again today. It had been fading for weeks now, and that filled her with dread. What if she lost it completely? Ullii had created her lattice as a lost and lonely little girl and, in the desperate years since, it had been the only thing keeping her sane. Her solitary achievement had given her pride in herself. It was now the only crutch she had left.

'Hurry up!' hissed Scrutator Fusshte, thrusting his pock-marked reptilian face at her behind Ghorr's back.

Ullii recoiled. Fusshte was a creeping monstrosity whose nearness brought her out in goosepimples.

Ghorr urged him out of the way. 'She can't be forced, Scrutator,' he said acidly. 'Won't you ever learn?'

Fusshte backed off, but Ullii saw his malevolence as a corrosive knot in her lattice. Even Ghorr was preferable to the slithering horror that was Scrutator Fusshte.

'Well, Seeker?' said Ghorr.

'It's Xervish,' she conceded. Ullii had once regarded Flydd as a friend and knew she was betraying him to his doom, but she wasn't strong enough to resist. Even if she had been, Ghorr would happily break her to find his enemy. 'And Crafter Irisis.'

'Splendid,' said Ghorr. 'What are they doing, Ullii? Surely they know that locking themselves in is useless?'

'Breaking the floor,' said Ullii with lowered head.

'Reinforce the mancercs just outside the door,' snapped Ghorr to a messenger, who hurried away. 'Captain,' he turned to a hulking officer, each of whose intricately tooled military boots could have accommodated Ullii's head and neck, 'lead us to the room below Flydd's. Bring two squads. Fusshte, take a third squad down the far stairs and cut off the other exit.'

Ghorr allowed his troops to take the lead, then caught Ullii's arm and hauled her down the stone staircase. As they crossed a landing, a muffled roar shook the building.

'Quick, Captain!' said Ghorr. 'Flydd's broken through. Take him and Irisis alive and there'll be a bonus for you.'

The soldiers hurtled down the steps, swords raised. Ghorr kept well back. The chief scrutator guarded his life like a miser his hoard.

They reached the bottom step, rounded the corner and there, in the flickering light of the soldiers' torches, stood the fugitives. Irisis had stopped dead when she saw the soldiers, then raised her sword. Flydd glanced over his shoulder at the cluster of dancing torches and his skinny shoulders sagged. Scrutator Fusshte and his heavily armed troops blocked the only way out.

Ullii lifted her mask for a moment. Xervish Flydd, a small man of some sixty years, looked more scarred and emaciated than ever. Though it was bitterly cold, he wore just a bedsheet, hastily knotted about his hips. Beautiful Irisis Stirm was dressed in brown woollen pantaloons and a loose shirt which could not conceal her luxurious figure. Her yellow hair was unbound. They were both covered in grey dust.

Ullii pulled the mask down, as if to hide from her former friends, but Flydd had already seen her. He shook his head,

a moment of desolation, and Ullii knew she had done a terrible wrong. But what else could I do? she thought plaintively, slipping into the shadow behind Ghorr before Irisis could see her.

'Xervish Flydd,' said Ghorr in a treacly voice. 'Irisis Stirm. I'm so pleased to see you both again.'

Irisis shifted her weight, holding the sword two-handed, but Flydd drew her back. 'There's no point, Irisis. Put it down.'

After a long hesitation, she let the sword fall. The soldiers took hold of the pair and swiftly bound their hands.

'These are the last,' said Fusshte. 'Let's get the trials underway, Chief Scrutator. The executioners grow impatient.'

'The executioners wait upon my pleasure,' Ghorr said icily. 'Take the prisoners out to the yard, Captain.'

Ullii pressed back into a niche in the wall, hiding from herself. Flydd had let her down, certainly, but he'd been kind to her too, and always looked after her. And she'd betrayed him to a monster.

Taking off the mask, she rubbed her eyes, trying to work out where it had all gone wrong. As Flydd was dragged past, his eyes met hers for a second. He knew Ullii had betrayed them; he was looking right into her heart and, worst of all, he understood.

The guard jerked on the rope; Flydd stumbled away. Ullii crouched down in her niche, shivering violently. Cold rarely bothered her but now she felt like a statue carved of ice. She was just as bad as Ghorr.

Irisis was dragged past. Hastily pulling down the mask, Ullii turned her face to the wall until the crafter had gone by. Irisis would neither understand nor forgive.

The troops led their prisoners upstairs, gloating and calculating their shares of the reward, and getting in vicious blows when Ghorr wasn't looking. Ullii remained where she was. Ghorr took little notice of her at the best of times and, now that he had his enemies at his mercy, would not give her a moment's thought. It was easy to conceal herself in the darkness, for no one was more skilled at hiding than she.

She slipped into a room that had already been checked while Fiz Gorgo was searched one more time. Finally, the soldiers

tramped out into the yard. The scrutators had gone. Ullii tracked the knots they made in the eye of her lattice. They went out through the broken front doors of Fiz Gorgo and up onto the outer wall, from whence they were hauled up in rope chairs to the comfort of the hovering air-dreadnoughts, doubtless to indulge themselves in an orgy of congratulations. The prisoners and their guards were left to shiver in the ice-crust-ed yard until the preparations for the trial were complete.

Fiz Gorgo was silent now. Ullii put her head out the door. The darkness was comforting and she felt the lattice strengthen a little, but she had lost her purpose. Seeing Flydd that way had thrown her. Then a familiar tang raised bumps on her arms. *Nish!*

She tasted the air, nose up like a mouse. To Ullii, Nish *was* his smell, and she could have identified him anywhere. She'd picked him out from sixty thousand soldiers and slaves when he'd been sentenced to haul bogged clankers out of the sodden battlefield at Snizort last summer.

There was a trace of his spoor down here, though the scent was old. On the ground floor it had been stronger. Ullii took off the mask and earmuffs. Her sensitive eyes could see well enough in the dark, not that she needed to. She eased up the farther stair, the one Fusshte had come down. The stench of *him* drowned out all other smells: stagnant water in the flooded labyrinth below, mould growing on the walls, the faint odour of woodworm and rotting timber, and even the unwashed, sweaty reek of the soldiers. Fusshte had a sour, festering stink that made her nostrils pucker and her toes curl.

It was brighter on the ground floor. A gloomy daylight seeped in through the broken front doors, though it cast little light around the corner to this narrow hall. The breeze was blowing away from the doors and she could not tell if Nish was out there. Dare she look? Easing to the shattered remnants of the great doors, Ullii covered her eyes with her fingers and peered out.

She didn't see Nish. The prisoners were kept apart, save for Flydd and Irisis, and each was surrounded by burly guards. All the men of Ghor's guard were tall and Nish, a small man, would not be visible behind them.

Ullii went back and forth, testing the air for every tendril of odour, and, around the corner, picked up an old scent. She could even tell that Nish had been weary when he'd come this way. He'd plodded down the corridor before stopping for a moment. Why? Ullii smelt Irisis's fresh, creamy tang and her fists clenched involuntarily. Nish and Irisis had been lovers once, before Ullii had met him. She sniffed the air. He'd gone into *her* room!

She tracked him to the bed and he'd been in it. He'd lain with Irisis just hours ago. How dare he? Ullii didn't operate on logic – as far as she was concerned, Nish had been hers ever since they'd made love in the balloon in the treetops near Tirthrax, at the end of last winter. He'd made her pregnant there, and even though he'd killed her brother since then, she would share him with no one.

It firmed her faltering resolve. She tracked Nish to his little room. The bed was cold but a fresher scent led around the corner, into the main hall and up in the direction of the front door. There she lost it.

Ullii crept along the hall on her toes, keeping to the left-hand wall, ready to dart away should someone approach. She could hear the guards talking in the yard, gravel crunching under their boots and an occasional mutter or plea from the bound prisoners, always answered with a jeer or slap.

She headed for the stairs to one of the tower balconies she'd seen from Ghorr's air-dreadnoughts, so she could look down into the yard. A few steps up, she detected Nish's spoor once more, and it was fresher. He'd gone this way in the last few hours.

Unfortunately he'd come down again; she smelt him on the other side of the staircase as well. Nonetheless, she continued up to a landing on the second floor, where she went down on her belly and crawled to the edge. The scent was stronger here. He'd spent some time with the tall mancer she now knew to be Yggur.

Ullii looked down into the mist-wreathed yard and made out Yggur easily, as well as the even taller mancer with the frothy hair whose attempt to escape had enabled her to find Fiz Gorgo

in the first place. They were bound hand and foot, and tightly gagged to prevent them speaking any spell or word of power. Flydd and Irisis stood together, not gagged but surrounded by a double halo of guards. The old Aachim mancer, Malien, was by the wall, also bound and gagged, and watched by a pair of Council mancers. The other rings of guards enclosed people she could not identify, but Nish was not among them.

So how had he, alone of all the clever people here, managed to escape? Not knowing the answer, Ullii crawled back to the steps and allowed her senses to guide her.

A faint odour led up, though only to chaos that was also her doing. Using her lattice, Ullii had pinpointed the locations of several uncanny devices designed to protect Fiz Gorgo. The top of this horned tower had housed one of them, but it and the other devices had been blasted by amplified sunbeams from the air-dreadnoughts at the beginning of the dawn attack, melting the very stone and destroying everything inside. Nish could hardly be up there now, though she could detect no track coming down.

Nonetheless, the lingering scent trail went up, so Ullii followed. By the next turn of the stair the stone had grown perceptibly warm and she smelled the peculiar dry odour of overheated rock. On the turn after that the steps were sprinkled with ash, charcoal and gritty granules of slag.

It was hard to move silently here for the grit squeaked underfoot, a high-pitched abrasive sound that irritated her sensitive ears. She trod as softly as she could but by the next turn of the stairs the ash and grit were ankle-deep. At the landing after that the stairs were blocked by a crusted flow of melted stone, black on the outside but deeply cracked and glowing within. The crust, resembling dirty glass and slag, was embedded with pieces of charcoal and half-burnt wood. A sagging pewter mug protruded from one edge.

The flow was so hot that it dried out her eyes. Ullii could not find any way through the smoke and heat haze so she went down to the main hall, crisscrossing the building like a mouse hunting for food. None of Nish's scent traces led out of Fiz

Gorgo. The most recent was the one that had gone up the steps to the destroyed tower. Perhaps he'd gone up twice and only come down once.

Climbing an adjacent tower, one that hadn't been attacked, she peered through an embrasure. The mist was growing thicker and turning to light rain that drifted on the breeze. It was miserably cold and dank but Ullii preferred cold to heat.

From here she had a good view of the ruined tower. She'd led Ghorr's forces to it, had pinpointed exactly where the defensive devices were, and where to aim their incandescent, rock-melting beams of crystal-boosted sunlight. The horned tower was now bent like a banana, a couple of floors below the top. The beam had burned in through an embrasure, liquefying everything inside that chamber. The thick outside wall had bent like toffee then set again, though the stone was sadly cracked and fretted. Pieces of stone fell as she watched, and the wall steamed gently in the rain.

If Nish had been in that chamber, he could not have survived. Even had he been in the rooms above, the heat must have burned him alive. Not a pleasant death, nor what she'd intended for him. Before Ullii cut out his heart, she'd wanted him to know *why*.