

*Magic meets mayhem in this audacious adventure, with the fate of an ancient empire resting in the balance.*

**The Sorceress of Lansheer A Song of Silver & Gold**  
By Beverley Fowler

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# The Sorceress of Lansheer

A Song of Silver & Gold



Beverley Fowler

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# Chapter 1

## *Feast day in Lansheer*

It was just before daybreak. The hour when the twin moons had set, and the stars were fading in the east. The summer solstice was near at hand. That special day when the Sun God stood at the height of his power. It was a feast day marking the start of a week-long celebration all Lansheean in every province were free to enjoy, from high-born to low, and in some rare instances, even slaves. The feast day of Maritzo, god of the sun.

Near the edge of the western sea in the lush Imperial Province, the great City of Lansheer, the jewel of the vast Lansheean Empire, had prepared for this day as was the custom. Bright yellow pennants glimmered in the pre-dawn gloom, fluttering from every street post and balcony, rooftop, and windowsill. Even the palace was flying the Sun God's banner this day, alongside the Imperial Bull.

A hushed and solemn crowd had gathered along the avenue between the palace and Temple Square to observe the Imperial Court's stately procession to the sun god's shrine. The temple doors had barely closed behind the last savasci guard when the first warm rays danced along the spikes atop the city's massive walls; glanced off the golden minarets towering with imperial majesty over the immense warren of shadowy streets and rooftops. Maritzo was pleased by their efforts. He had thrown his golden ball into the sky to chase away the darkness.

The citizens of the imperial city responded with appropriate gratitude. By midmorning, the walkways were packed even closer, the balconies groaning beneath the weight of those awaiting the procession's triumphant return. Waiting as ordained, to pay homage to their emperor for his

part in the rising of the sun on Maritzo's feast day. But as before, it was a strangely still and solemn crowd. No hum of anticipation, no buzz of conversation nor ripple of laughter floated on the breeze. Only the snap of the sun god's banners and an occasional cough, quickly muffled, broke the unnatural silence.

Into that silence came the blare of sazulas, growing steadily louder as the rumble of wheels over the paving stones heralded the procession's return from the temple at last. The crowd craned its collective neck as two great cats hove into view. Sleek black mountain lions in golden harness, pulling a gilded chariot with gold trimmed wheels.

A reverent murmur rose from the crowd. There was the great Hakisa, herself, lounging against the pillows of that rolling couch. Solzanna, the Sorceress of Lansheer.

Ah, but she was beautiful. Her skin so white, her form and bearing as graceful as the willow. A short golden bodice covered her upper torso, leaving her belly bare save for a dainty emerald in her navel. A matching girdle hung low on her hips. The diaphanous veils that formed its skirts did very little to hide the fine curve of her legs.

As Lansheean custom ordained, a golden headdress hid her hair. The gems on that headdress glittered in the rays of Maritzo's ball, but the large jet teardrop suspended on her forehead by a dainty silver chain, outshone them all.

Like a soli's crop before the scythe, the citizens dropped to their knees in waves and pressed their foreheads to the paving stones as her chariot swept past. Solzanna lifted a languid hand now and then in response, and sunlight flashed off the engravings on the golden band about her wrist.

A high-stepping, wild-eyed white lycorne followed close behind her chariot; a heavy destrier, like those used in the imperial army. It sidled and plunged, slashing the air with its single twisted horn. In its ornate saddle, sat a tall,

swarthy man with a magnificent, feathered helm. His flowing trousers were of the finest yellow silk, his boots shone like mirrors. But his gold-embossed tunic stretched tightly over a belly well on its way to obesity and his golden spurs were bloody. Bits of fur were caught in their rowels and the hem of the rider's fine yellow cloak was stained from the destrier's scored flanks. The citizens shrank even closer to the ground as he approached.

This was the Great Haki, himself. Feraco, Emperor of Lansheer.

He yanked harshly on the reins and his lycorne frothed and champed at its gilded bit. For a moment, Feraco held the animal to a jittery halt and surveyed the citizens groveling along the walkways and lining the balconies and rooftops above. Not a single eye lifted to meet his gaze.

This seemed to please the Emperor. A satisfied smile swept across his face as he spurred his destrier onwards. The crowd muttered low in its throat as he passed, but the muttering was drowned by the stamping of feet as ranks of savasci followed close behind the emperor.

Near the bottom of the hill below the central square, the two great cats broke into a trot, as if growing impatient at the procession's stately pace. Their tufted tails waving, their paws gliding soundlessly over the paving stones, they pulled the heavy chariot up that steep hill as if it was made of straw.

As briskly as imperial dignity would allow, the procession followed them up to the great central square and halted before the open palace gates. The Imperial Guard formed ranks on either side as Feraco brought his skittish lycorne up beside Solzanna's chariot and wheeled it clumsily round to address his people. One hand lifted in benediction. The other remained fisted around his saddlebow to ensure both his seat and his dignity as his edgy mount continued to sidle and dance beneath him.

“Citizens of Lansheer!” he cried in a booming voice. “It is feast day in our fair city. The Feast of Maritzo, god of the sun! For the most part, I am pleased with your decorum over this past year. It is a reflection of your veneration for the Imperial Throne. I shall therefore reward you as I have done since I became your emperor. During the time of the Games, for this coming week only, I will indulge your childish need for noise and revelry. Please me by enjoying my gift to you, my children. Celebrate well but show your gratitude by maintaining at least *some* semblance of dignity.”

“Hail Feraco! Hail our glorious Emperor,” the crowd chanted woodenly.

Beside him, leaning back against the pillows in her golden chariot, Solzanna’s pretty lips twisted. “Oh yes,” she murmured to herself, “it’s feast day in Lansheer and all rejoice as ordained.”

Feraco glanced at her, but she did not glance back. Nor did she make any move to address the crowd herself.

He waited hopefully a moment longer, then sighed and gestured for her to proceed. She sent a silent command to her two great cats and the chariot turned and rumbled through the open palace gates. Feraco and his savasci guards wasted no time in following.

Minutes later, the gates slammed shut.

Quietly, the crowd began to disperse. There was no laughter, no conversation, no hum of anticipation. It was feast day in Lansheer, but there did not appear to be much joy in it.

For most of Lansheer’s citizens, aside from the procession, it was simply another day. But tomorrow! Tomorrow would be different, by Maritzo! Tomorrow the Games began!

\* \* \*

*The Sorceress of Lansheer: A Song of Silver & Gold*

In the better part of the Guild Quarter, where prosperous merchants lived in lavish homes next to elegant shops, was one of the better drinking houses in Lansheer. Aside from the quality of its wares, if one had the right amount of stersis and knew who to talk to, there was also the option of renting one of the rooms above, with no questions asked. Amongst other things, these rooms offered a perfect place for dark thoughts and conversations.

In the smallest, most isolated of those private rooms, the seven men crowded around a small table appeared to be engaged in exactly that. An eighth sat in a corner a little apart from the others, as if denouncing membership in the group. It was Zani's hour, when the trickster's minions spread their mischief. When the sun had set, the twin moons had yet to rise, and only the stars illuminated the night. It was a time when honest men lit their lamps to chase the darkness away, yet the wick of the single small lamp on the table was trimmed so low it did little more than make the shadows dance.

A large, burly man at the head of the table reached up and stroked his thick black whiskers. His was a magnificent beard, exquisitely curled and perfumed with scented oils. "It is time," he said portentously, breaking the heavy silence. He turned his head, surveying the circle of shadowy faces. "The people of the Empire are ready for revolt. You saw their obvious lack of enthusiasm in the square this morning. Our emperor is not beloved of his children."

"Agreed, Marcus." The man to Marcus's right nodded his head emphatically. His eyes bulged in his round, jowly face as he, too surveyed the circle. "You are right, as always! It is time to act! Judging by this morning, it should be a simple matter to gain their support and dethrone him. Even the Hakis chafe at his rule."



“You are forgetting one very important thing, Tobias,” another man sneered from across the table. He was a small man, as wizened and thin as Tobias was fat. His sharp-featured face was dominated by his beak of a nose and the bitter lines about his mouth. “As long as that accursed sorceress stands behind Feraco, any such attempt will fail. You have seen it yourself. Every time anyone dares plot against the emperor, they are found and put down through her gods-blasted magic before they make any headway at all! Even the Hakis,” he mimicked mockingly.

Tobias flushed but pressed on. “Then it is clear we must rid ourselves of her,” he replied. Once again his bulging eyes bounced around the table before returning to Marcus’s face.

“And how shall we do that?” demanded the tall, thin man on Marcus’s left.

Tobias blinked and tittered nervously. “However we must, Hazall, to get her out of our way.”

Marcus’s eyes gleamed with satisfaction. “My dear Tobias,” he prompted slyly, “are you suggesting assassination?”

The big man in the corner stirred restlessly. “The people wouldn’t like that,” he said. “Not sure I like it meself. She’s done a lot of good for us commons, you know. And she has very powerful friends.”

“So does Feraco,” Marcus retorted, “but by the same token, they also have very powerful enemies. Be at ease on that, Karmac. As Tobias has already pointed out, the Hakis chafe beneath Feraco’s rule as much as any of the rest of us! You wait and see how many come forward to support us once Solzanna’s threat has been removed. And if the Hakis are behind us, the savasci will follow.”

“And as for the good she has done,” the wizened little man added with a scornful snort, “she could easily do more. They say her power is limitless. There are no boundaries to

what she could accomplish so why doesn't she just conjure up something to get rid of that twit in the palace herself, if she's so concerned with the good of Lansheer?"

"Because she doesn't want to, Salzo," Marcus told him. "As it stands, she can do much as she pleases any time that she pleases. None dare defy her, not with her magic and Feraco firmly under her pretty little thumb. Do not be fooled, my friends. *She's* the true power of Lansheer. Tobias is right. We must dispose of Solzanna. Without her, Feraco will be as a tender stalk waiting to be broken. But we must do it quietly! No one must trace this back to us, or our movement will lose all support from the people, even if we did somehow manage to keep our heads," he added with a dry smile. "As Karmac says, the people love her, bless their ignorant souls."

A brooding silence fell over the group at these words.

Karmac shifted uneasily. The chair squeaked under his weight, making him wince. Then there was only the noise from the tar-dar shop below, drifting up through the floor. Sharp contrast to the stark silence of that shadowy room.

"So," Marcus said at last. "We are decided then. Now. Who will undertake this vital mission? Who is brave enough among our number to rid us of this impediment to greatness?" He paused, and again stroked his whiskers. "I would take it on myself, but as your leader, I must protect myself or the movement will most surely be lost." He looked across at Karmac. "You are the biggest and strongest of us. You could easily wrench those bands from her wrists and her talisman from her headdress before wringing her skinny little neck and disposing of her body in the Serpent River."

All eyes swiveled towards the big man, who again shifted nervously in his chair. "My master only gave me this one day's leave to see the procession. I am to go back to his

country estate first thing in the morning. I'm afraid I cannot help you, Marcus."

Marcus frowned at him. "A very good excuse, Karmac. We will allow it this time, but if you are to be one of our number, you must prove yourself of value to us. To this point, you have done nothing but throw hurdles in our path."

The big man hung his head. "I understand, Marcus. I will try to do better."

"See that you do," Marcus told him sternly. He looked around the circle. "Salzo? Tobias? You others? What excuses do you have to avoid this task?"

Salzo grunted. "What good would I be, tackling a witch with only one hand?" he asked sourly as he held up the stump of his left. "And Tobias here, is in much the same case. He has hardly more strength than I with both his hands. He is too fat."

Tobias nodded sheepishly.

"What great heroes, you are," Marcus sneered. "Afraid of a mere woman!"

"Sorceress," Salzo corrected.

"*Great Sorceress*" Tobias added. "Favored by Balthas, goddess of magic, herself."

Another uneasy silence filled that gloomy room. Into that silence, drifting up from the tar-dar shop below, came a burst of hearty male laughter.

The conspirators exchanged nervous glances. Men, as a rule, did not laugh so loudly in Lansheer. Not even on feast day. Not until the following day, at least, when the Games began.

"I wish they'd be quieter down there," Tobias muttered with a slight shiver. "They'll draw the Patrol."

Now someone began to sing. More voices took up the chorus, a simple series of 'la-la-la's', with an occasional 'lo' dropped in for variety. Others were cheering and hooting

with an enthusiasm not heard in Lansheer since Feraco first took the Imperial Throne.

Again, the conspirators exchanged worried glances. Men did not sing in Lansheer either, not even during the Games. Feraco might relish a rousing sazula fanfare, but he was not fond of music as a general rule.

“Lashak have mercy on us!” Tobias whined, cringing in his seat. “They’ll have the whole damn Patrol upon us! Why don’t the Shopkeeper shut them up or toss them out?”

“Maybe we’d better scramble,” Karmac suggested nervously.

But Marcus wasn’t listening. He was stroking his magnificent black whiskers, deep in thought.

“Marcus?” Salzo prompted.

Marcus nodded to himself, looked up and nodded again. “I see an opportunity here, comrades. A message from the gods. The disturbance downstairs must be caused by a stranger to our city. No citizen of Lansheer would behave so indiscreetly and I have never heard that sort of song before. Have any of you?”

He paused as wisps of a wild bouncing tune floated up to them, clear as day. The lyrics flowed like water, the ‘r’s’ rolling, the vowels smooth, the consonants crisp. Not a word of it was familiar.

“This man,” Marcus continued, as the singing, cheering, and clapping grew louder, “is either incredibly brash or incredibly foolish. An elhadarin from the provinces, perhaps. One unfamiliar with our city’s ordinances, or one who is too stupid to care. Which means,” he went on in his ponderous way, “it is very likely he doesn’t understand the depths of Solzanna’s power.” His eyes gleamed. “A perfect dupe! If we can convince him to attempt the deed, and he succeeds against all odds, we have as good as won our empire. If he fails...” Marcus shrugged. “No great loss.

Even if he is caught and made to talk, who would believe an elhadarin's wild tale over the solemn oath of respected citizens such as we?" He grinned maliciously.

His companions exchanged smug little smiles, themselves. It was true. So far, by the grace of the gods, they had managed to avoid Solzanna's notice.

Then Marcus grew solemn once more. "What say you all? Shall we finally take a step towards our glorious future? Shall we take this gods-sent opportunity and hire this elhadarin to clear our way?"

The light in most of his follower's eyes gave him his answer. All but Karmac nodded eagerly.

The big man, however, looked more nervous than ever. "Marcus," he said hesitantly. "Do we really have to kill her? Couldn't we just...snatch her instead?"

Marcus smiled indulgently at him. "You truly are a gentle giant," he observed. "Yes, Karmac, that would be my preference as well. I, like you, hesitate to destroy such a combination of beauty and magic. The very thought revolts me, I assure you." His face hardened. "But I am afraid such a feat would be nigh impossible. Not even Haki Romadel or the emperor, himself, the two most powerful men of the empire, can control her." He shook his head regretfully. "It is unfortunate, but we have no choice."

Once again, he looked round the circle. Once again, everyone but Karmac nodded.

Marcus frowned at him. "Karmac," he said. "We have just talked about this. Your hesitation concerns me. You cannot sit on the fence any longer. You are either with us or against us."

The others muttered dark agreement.

Karmac sighed and reluctantly nodded his head.

Marcus's smile returned. "Very well, Comrades. Let's go contract our dupe before the patrol appears and snatches

him away from us.” He paused and eyed his followers sternly. “But I will do the talking. Understood?”

They nodded back.

One by one, they slipped from that shadowy room and scattered, re-entering the tar-dar shop from varying directions to avoid any hint of connection between them. The fair-sized room was crowded to the rafters, but the source of the disturbance was not hard to find. The crowd had drawn back to leave a clear space in the center, where a man danced and sang with wild abandon, egged on by his cheering audience.

Marcus’s eyes narrowed as he spotted his target. The man most certainly was an elhadarin. His apparel was strange, his dancing even stranger, and his long golden hair was braided into multiple plaits that flew around his head like writhing snakes as he moved.

The cabal leader’s lip curled slightly. Men in the empire did not dance, nor did they braid their hair. That was a slave woman’s thing and a free woman’s hair style. Everyone knew that, despite the fact that free women covered their hair as was only modest and proper. This elhadarin who danced with such careless exuberance, and wore his plaits with such shameless pride, was nothing but a foppish roisterer.

For a moment, Marcus hesitated. Were it not for the promise of the ten jeweled daggers on the stranger’s belt, and that unsheathed sword at his hip, Marcus might have given up then and there, and been the happier for it. But those weapons looked lethal enough, so he narrowed his eyes and waited.

As graceful and fluid as Solzanna’s great cats, the elhadarin bounded up onto a nearby table and continued to dance without missing a step, singing his rollicking song in his rich deep voice, egging on the crowd. He was not as large

as Karmac, but he was tall and lean, with broad shoulders and narrow hips. As he danced, he began to snatch those daggers from his belt, one by one, flipping them end over end then grabbing another until all ten circled lazily through the air. The blades glinted in the light from the lamps overhead, jeweled hilts flashed. His audience let out a roar of approval as the knives began to whirl faster, then faster again, until they became a circle of light in his hands. And then he began to play in earnest, making those daggers dance with him to the crowd's increased delight.

The flowing sleeves of his thigh-length white tunic swirled as he moved. The tunic itself, was loosely laced at the throat; fancifully embroidered in red and black at collar and hem, belted at the waist with a fringed scarlet sash. A wide leather belt hung low on his hips, bearing his dagger sheathes, a pouch and that long curved sword. His snug black leather breeches were a strange sight in Lansheer, where men wore loose trousers, and the silver spurs on his tall black boots chimed musically as he danced. Despite his strangeness, he was obviously of high status and some wealth. A fighter and a lycorne rider.

Marcus found a spot along the wall just to the right of the doorway, savoring the possibilities the elhadarin presented. He stood there a moment, his eyes fixed on the stranger, watching, assessing. Then his gaze dropped to that odd, unsheathed sword thrust through a loop on the elhadarin's belt. It was of a type never seen before in Lansheer, to the best of Marcus's knowledge. Unlike the Hakis' light rapiers, or the heavy short swords of the savaschi, this one was curved like a sickle moon. It moved like silver water against the stranger's hip as he danced. On the top of its pommel was the snarling head of a great cat, with amber gems for eyes and every wicked fang in view.

As the song began to draw to a close, the elhadarin's bright gaze shifted to Marcus, as if feeling the other's stare. He finished the song, not missing a beat in his juggling, but his eyes were now fixed on Marcus's face.

Marcus nodded and crooked his fingers in greeting.

The stranger's eyes narrowed, then widened, sparkling with mischief. He snatched five wicked knives one by one from the air and sent them whizzing straight at Marcus.

The Head Conspirator froze in shock. He could not move. He could only stand trembling as those lethal daggers flew at him. Breath caught, he closed his eyes and clenched his fists, waiting to feel their bite.

A stunned, hushed silence fell over the room.

Marcus heard the daggers hit their mark.

Five quick *thunks* on his right.

Then silence.

Slowly, Marcus opened his eyes to find himself unharmed. Incredulously, he patted himself down, just to be sure, then his sneer returned beneath his beard. The stranger had missed. Five times! Perhaps he had been mistaken in the elhadarin's potential.

But the stranger was still smiling, his eyes still laughing. He did not seem unhappy with the result of his throws. They were tawny eyes, Marcus noted inconsequently. Like the eyes of Solzanna's great cats. Bold eyes, with dark brown rings around the iris.

The stranger's hands moved again, just as quickly as before and five more knives came flying towards Marcus.

Five more *thunks* in quick succession to his left. They hit so close together, they blended into one brief rumble.

An awed murmur rose from the crowd. Marcus smiled to himself, taking the murmur as a tribute to his courage in standing so firmly in the face of this unprovoked attack. He turned with a pleased snort to Karmac, who was standing



near him, and saw a dagger quivering in the wall bare inches from his nose.

“By the gods!” Karmac cried. “He drew your outline on the wall with his knives and did not touch you once!”

Sure enough, as Marcus stepped forward and turned to look, his outline could be clearly seen in the arrangement of the knives, buried halfway to their hilts in the wall behind him. He gasped, staggered backwards, and felt a hard hand grasp his elbow to steady him. Startled, he looked up into the stranger’s odd, banded eyes. How had he approached so quickly through the crowd that had ringed him in so tightly?

“I think you wanted to talk to me, *Grom*,” he said. His voice was liquid and lilting. Even when he wasn’t singing, he sounded like he was. “I felt it only right to indulge you, since you stood so firm for me.” That sly twist to his lips suggested he knew very well it had been shock, not courage, at the root of Marcus’s apparent stoicism.

Marcus pulled himself together. He was imagining things. The greeting was strange, but the tone was friendly enough. “Yes,” he answered, smoothing his slightly rumpled sleeve. “A magnificent display, Elhadarin. My comrades and I are very impressed. Tell me. Are you by chance looking for work here in Lansheer? We are in need of a fearless and clever fighter.”

“I am always up for a challenge,” the elhadarin replied, and Marcus’s hopes rose as he noted the reckless sparkle in those eyes. “What did you have in mind, *Modraird*?”

This word, too, was strange to Marcus. Like everything else about this man. Judging by the light in the other’s strange eyes, he doubted it was complimentary. “Moh...de-rare-red?” he repeated suspiciously.

The elhadarin smirked and shrugged. “Comrade,” he translated as he went over to retrieve his daggers from the

wall. Marcus wasn't sure he believed that, but he nodded anyway.

"Very well then...comrade," he said. "Let us find a quiet spot to discuss our business." He turned and pushed his way across the room to a secluded table in the farthest corner from the bar. It was against his dignity to check to see that the elhadarin followed, and he was careful to hide his relief when the stranger immediately took a seat across from him. Salzo and Tobias joined them. The other conspirators arranged themselves close by, trying very hard to be inconspicuous and failing miserably.

For a moment, they eyed each other in silence.

"So...what is this challenge you have for me?" the elhadarin asked in his sing-song voice.

Marcus gestured to a passing barmaid and waited until a round of frothing tankards had been set on the table before he spoke again.

"First, tell us a little about yourself, comrade. We would know who we are hiring. It is not safe in the empire to be too trusting. What is your name and where are you from?"

The elhadarin saluted him with a tankard and drank half its contents in one long swig. "Excuse my manners," he said as he wiped his mouth on his flowing sleeve. "But 'twas thirsty work rousing this dull crowd."

Marcus smiled perfunctorily and waited.

The stranger grinned. "I am Jago of the Dalos," he said. "And I come from beyond the borders of your great empire."

"You have traveled far indeed, Jago of the Dalos," Marcus observed. His expression remained grave, but inside he was rejoicing. Better and better! Here was a true elhadarin, not merely an unknown provincial. This man was no Imperial citizen! No matter how wealthy or high-born he might be in his own land, he had no voice in Lansheer. Should things go wrong, even were he to cry from the

rooftops that Marcus had hired him for such a nefarious purpose, the claim could be easily countered.

Marcus pinned a fatherly smile on his face. "What brings you to our fair city?" he asked.

Jago shrugged. "The fame of the Sun Games in Lansheer is legendary. Like nectar to a bee for one who seeks excitement. Even so far away as the steppes, we Dalos have heard of this yearly celebration in your great city. I have come to see how the truth compares to the story."

On Marcus's left, Tobias preened a bit, pleased at the thought that the fame of their city and their Games had travelled so far. The Lansheean Empire covered practically the whole world on this side of the Western Sea. The very distance this stranger must have travelled boggled the mind. "I can assure you that they will!" he boasted.

Marcus waved him to silence. "If you are looking for excitement, we can offer you better sport than the games." His voice was grave, but inside, he was figuratively rubbing his hands together in glee.

"Oh?" asked the stranger, looking slightly more interested. "Tell me of this sport that is more exciting than your Games of the Sun."

Marcus looked around the circle. His followers nodded hesitantly, feverish hope and trepidation mingled in their eyes. It appeared they had indeed found their perfect dupe, but at the same time, they dared not quite believe in this apparent gift from the gods.

Marcus smiled. In his opinion, the reward was well worth the risk. Decision made.

"We have in this city," he began, "a woman who has, shall we say, way too much power for anyone's good. In other words, a sorceress." He paused to see how the stranger would react to this.

Jago gave another shrug, raised his tankard to his lips and again drank deeply. This time, as he did so, his flowing sleeve fell back, revealing a wide gold band around his wrist. Like the hilts of his weapons, it was engraved with the face of a snarling mountain cat with amber gems for eyes.

“You wear a wristband!” Salzo gasped.

Marcus’s hopes rose even higher. Only magic users wore such things. Surely that was universal, even in the elhadarah. This man *must* have power of his own! It would certainly explain his extraordinary skill with his daggers. How else could he have made them fly so swift and true? The Head Conspirator’s smile widened beneath his beard. The gods had indeed favored them.

“Go on, *Modraird*,” the elhadarin said, lowering his now empty tankard and ignoring Salzo completely.

To give himself a minute to think, Marcus picked up his own tankard, took a gulp and choked on the fiery kick. How could the elhadarin throw it back like water? He searched the other’s strange eyes for any sign of blurriness. There was none. That banded gaze was as clear and steady as before. There was also a knowing gleam, as if the stranger read his thoughts and was amused.

Marcus, however, was not. Once again, he questioned the wisdom of his plan. As perfect a dupe as he was, this elhadarin seemed far too flamboyant to be able to carry it off with any sort of discretion. Then Marcus remembered the wristband. His eye fell on the daggers and the strange but lethal sword thrust through the elhadarin’s belt.

He pushed his doubts away. “I am sure you have noticed,” he began gravely, “how downtrodden are the people of this city. How the sound of laughter is strange in our streets. We dare not speak above a whisper. There is no joy in our prosperity. Feraco rules with an iron hand and a heavy foot upon our necks. He places unfair restrictions

upon the Guilds, limiting our profits, and taxing us until we are practically starving in the midst of abundance! But we dare not protest, for every time we try, his sorceress uses her power to crush us. She is the reason our city is cold and heartless. She must be dealt with before the people of our empire can breathe free again.”

Jago leaned back in his chair. “Indeed?” he murmured politely. “And what has this to do with the sport you promised me?”

Marcus took a deep breath. Now was the moment. Sink or swim. “We want this sorceress disposed of. Discretely,” he added.

Jago tilted his head, eyebrows raised. “Dead you mean,” he said bluntly. It was not exactly a question.

Marcus spluttered a protest, and the others cast anxious glances around the crowded room.

“That is plain speaking indeed!” Tobias tittered.

“Keep your voices down!” Salzo hissed.

The elhadarin snorted a chuckle. “My apologies, *modrairds*. Let me rephrase the question, then, to spare your delicate sensibilities. But let us be clear. What you are doing, is asking me to pit myself against a magic-user in a mortal fight?”

“Yes. We are,” Marcus retorted, regaining his poise. “Is the challenge too great for you?” he added with a slight sneer.

The stranger chuckled again. “That is the first time anyone has ever asked Jago of the Dalos that question,” he said. “And since I have never refused a challenge, I will probably accept this one. But tell me more, *Modraird*. Tell me who this *shama* is, and where I can find her.”

Marcus studied him a moment. “You do not hesitate?” he asked. “Most men would balk at slaying a defenseless woman.”

Jago laughed. “If she is a magic user, she is hardly defenseless,” he pointed out. “It appears a reasonably fair match.”

Remembering the wristband, hidden again by the stranger’s sleeve, Marcus found himself in agreement. “Her name is Solzanna. A proud and haughty beauty who looks upon men as if they were worms in her dinner. A cold, heartless creature who cares nothing for the suffering of her people.”

The stranger’s laugh pealed out again. It sounded odd to hear such unrestrained mirth. “Better and better. And where can I find this cold beauty of yours?”

“She has her own apartments in the emperor’s palace,” Marcus replied.

“Ah, she is rich, then, as well as powerful?”

“Richer than one woman has a right to be. She could ransom a god with what Feraco pays her, and tis also said she can create wealth from the very air,” Tobias boasted.

“Then why does she work for a living?” Jago asked, signaling the barmaid for another round. Marcus noted with some dudgeon that this round appeared far more promptly than the first had done. He waited impatiently as Jago rewarded the girl with a handful of coppers and sent her off with a light pat on the rump. She swaggered away, throwing him a coquettish grin over her shoulder.

“You would have to ask the Sorceress that question,” Marcus said rather tartly when the barmaid had finally moved out of earshot.

Jago’s smile widened as he took a healthy swig from his fresh tankard. “Amazing,” he said. “But back to the business at hand. How long do I have to do this deed? What proof do you require when it is done, and where shall I bring it? Most importantly, what’s the fee?” He grinned at the looks on

their faces. “You surely do not expect me to do this so difficult thing for nothing?”

“One would think, for one who made such a journey as you claim, for the mere purpose of excitement, that the adventure itself would be reward enough?” Salzo countered sharply.

“One would think,” the stranger agreed good-naturedly, but the laughter in his eyes now held a distinctly mocking light. “However, one also has to eat. There is a sad lack of game roaming about your city.”

This was disappointing but reflecting on how great the odds against him were, it was doubtful the stranger would live to demand his payment. And if, against all odds, the endeavor succeeded, no price would be too high. Marcus, calculating swiftly in his head, mumbled a sum slightly larger than he had originally planned to offer. He crossed his fingers beneath the table and breathed a prayer that his followers would contribute from their own coffers in the unlikely chance the debt came due. Belatedly, he realized this question should have been raised before they’d started down this path, but it was too late now.

Jago tilted his head. Considering. Then he nodded. “That will do it,” he agreed. He thrust his hand across the table. “We have a deal. Now let us shake hands on it, as my people do.”

Hesitantly, Marcus reached out and took the stranger’s hand. Jago’s grip was strong. Confident and unrestrained, like the rest of him.

“As to where and when,” Marcus continued when the deal was properly sealed, and they both sat back to pick up their tankards again. “Just south of the city, a few miles beyond Serpent’s Gate, there is a little glade where the river fills a deep, secluded pool. There is an old, abandoned bathhouse there.”

Jago nodded "I have seen it." He grinned at their surprise.

"For one who is but new-come to the city, you seem to know of many things," Salzo observed suspiciously. "How came you to even hear of this place?"

Jago shrugged. "It is a very romantic spot," he said, as if that explained everything.

"Never mind," Marcus said firmly as Salzo opened his mouth again. His eyes never left Jago's smiling face. "Be there with the sorceress's head before the week is out and the Games are over, and you will get your payment."

He paused, remembering Karmac's earlier suggestion. Again, he studied the elhadarin with measuring eyes. The heady promise of unlimited power was too great a lure and he plunged right in. "There is one more thing. Since it would truly be a shame to destroy such beauty and power as she possesses, if you could manage, instead of killing her, to abduct her and bring her to us...intact," he lifted one eyebrow suggestively, "with her powers bound, we will double your fee."

"Thank you, Marcus," Karmac murmured gratefully from the next table.

Marcus tossed him an indulgent smile.

Across the table, Jago's tawny eyes narrowed. "Ah! A challenge indeed! Even better! But you will point this witch-woman out to me, so that I do not bring you the wrong one? Tomorrow? Yes?"

Marcus smiled indulgently. "It is clear you were not at the procession this morning, or you would not need to ask. But no matter. It is simple enough. She always attends the opening races at Feraco's side. Meet me here in front of this tar-dar shop at sunrise tomorrow and we will go to the Games together."

"I shall be here," Jago promised.



Marcus nodded, threw back the last of his tar-dar, cleared his throat and rose. "May the gods be with you," he said. "We will meet here tomorrow at sunrise."

Jago smiled like a huge lazy cat. "My god and my Totem are always with me," he answered and touched the great cat emblem on his saber's hilt like a man touches his beloved. "Never have they failed me." His white teeth gleamed as his smile turned feral. "Never."

But as Jago was about to learn, it was never wise to presume upon the favor of a god.

## Chapter 2

### *Let the games begin*

The following day again dawned fair and warm, a good omen for the opening of the Games. Despite the feasting the night before, the citizens of Lansheer were early at the gates. Feasts in Lansheer were not the rowdy, drunken gatherings that happened in the outer provinces. Lansheer's feasts were dignified and solemn, as befitted the people of the empire's greatest city. Sour beyond his years, lacking even a vestigial sense of humor, Feraco looked with distinct disfavor on those who were not. He liked his city to be orderly and restrained; its citizens humble, their decorum appropriate to their status in all their doings--at least in public.

His savasci patrolmen enforced this rule with ruthless diligence. The only exception, the only time Feraco loosened the reins, was during the Games of the Sun, which followed the sun god's feast for one whole week. Only then, were the citizens of Lansheer allowed to behave with abandon. Only during the games, was speaking loudly, dancing and singing, or letting children laugh in the streets permissible. As Feraco assured them every year at the opening of the Games, their exuberance pleased him at that time, for it showed a proper appreciation of his indulgence.

Whether it was to please him, or simply because for just one week, they could vent the steam that had accumulated over the past year, Lansheer's citizens all responded in a most gratifying manner.

It was therefore no surprise that the arena was packed before the sun was even fully in the sky. By midmorning, it was standing room only and people continued to pour through the gates. By noon, it appeared the arena could hold no more, yet still they came.

Finally, the arena gates creaked shut. Savasci guards took their places among the spectators and along the walls to ensure some semblance of order. Then the sazulas sounded their brassy fanfare and the crowd cheered dutifully as Feraco appeared on the Imperial balcony, escorting Solzanna towards the elegant divan that took up one half of the space. The other half was filled by a massive golden throne.

With the care of one handling a rare, fragile object, Feraco assisted Solzanna onto her divan, solicitously rearranging the pillows at her back. Then he turned to the crowd and raised his hands.

Once again, the sazulas rang out and the arena went instantly silent. In one fluid motion, the spectators dropped to their knees and pressed their foreheads to the walkways before them. It was a difficult feat, for there was barely room to stand, but somehow, they did it.

Feraco beamed at them. "Welcome, my children, to this year's Games of the Sun! Enjoy yourselves and show proper appreciation for this gift I have given you. But remember, I will have order restored the minute the sazulas sound the closing of the final bout."

Motionless, the crowd waited, bums in the air, faces averted with proper humility.

Feraco glanced out over the stands, savoring their homage. The fact that they abased themselves only because he had ordained it merely increased his enjoyment of it.

That gratified smile widened on his face as he looked back at Solzanna. The slight breeze ruffled her diaphanous skirts, exposing a slender white thigh. The jewels on her headdress sparkled no more brightly than her eyes. Not even the abasement of the crowd could match the pleasure he felt at having this living goddess by his side to witness it.

But said crowd was growing restless. From the corner of his eye, he could see subtle movement, hear a faint rustling, steadily growing louder. He sighed, regretting that this moment must end so quickly. It was the one moment of every year that he felt the Imperial Throne most secure beneath him. If they were here, they were not plotting against him, and it boosted the Imperial Ego immensely to watch them grovel. But he knew the limits of the crowd's restraint.

He raised his hands a bit higher and again the sazulas blared their fanfare. All movement ceased. A breathless silence filled the air.

Feraco smiled, reveling in their anticipation. He raised his hands higher still.

“Let the Games begin!” he roared.

The crowd went wild! In the stands, people jumped to their feet, shouting, clapping, and cheering. Hugging each other with glee.

Feraco stood there a moment, his Imperial smile on his swarthy face. Then he sat himself in the golden throne and reached out to take Solzanna's hand.

She allowed this but turned away with an inward shudder. It was her turn to scan the crowd, but unlike Feraco, she did so with a derisive curl to her beautiful lips. As usual, the brutal Games of Lansheer had attracted many from the outer provinces. There were barbarians from as far away as northern Handel with their shameless women whose uncovered hair shone in the sunlight. There were men from south-east Ostar who wrapped their women in swaths of brightly colored linen from head to toe, leaving only their eyes to peek out of an otherwise shapeless bundle.

Solzanna shuddered. She ran her free hand down her exposed belly, absently caressing the gem in her navel. She liked the way men looked at her, knowing they would never

dare to touch. She reveled in her power and her beauty. It was a gift from the gods, meant to be shared, but only from a distance, and only as *she* pleased. No man would ever dominate her. She might serve the emperor, but she did not belong to him.

She cast a sideways glance at Feraco, and her wristbands tingled. He was becoming importunate, his offers of marriage increasingly more aggressive. She would need to do something about that soon. Marriage was for foolish women who had no power of their own. Not for such as she! Sex was a tool she was very aware of but the thought of a man's hands upon her made her nauseous. Men were animals, driven by libido, only useful when a heavy hand was needed.

A huge cheer brought her attention back to the ring below. The chariots had appeared, circling the sands in preparation for the opening race. These were light, racing vehicles, a far cry from her own rolling couch or the heavy war carts of Feraco's army. Like the war carts, however, these had wicked blades attached to their wheels on either side, and reinforced guards along the top. Each was pulled by a team of five prancing lycornes. These were coursers, the fiery and often vicious horned equine favored by Hakis, far swifter and more agile than the heavy destriers of Lansheean savaschi. They were harnessed two by two with a leader in front, perfectly matched. The colored streamers on their horns and harness, and plaited into their flowing manes and tails, created a pleasing rainbow as they lined up at the starting flag.

"The red team is ours," Feraco said, leaning in far too closely. His hot breath fanned her cheek and his greedy eyes crawled over her.

Solzanna nodded regally, but inside, in that private part of her she shared with no one, she shuddered again. How she

despised this man. His dourness, his spoiled pettiness, his total incompetence, and fragile ego. But she had sworn on the sacred heart of her goddess to protect the peace of the empire and uphold its laws. Unfortunately, at the moment, that also meant putting up with its current emperor. At least until an acceptable alternative had been found. Therein lay her greatest frustration. Though easily led on most things, on the question of succession, Feraco was being his most stubbornly sly. Until she had a better candidate, he could not be deposed, lest the resulting political uproar tear the empire apart.

She gave herself a little inward shake. There was no use repining. Her path was set, and she could not stray lest she risk losing her goddess's favor. She must have patience. Surely Balthas would intervene soon and show her the way. Surely her goddess did not expect her to continue to serve this weak and petty tyrant for much longer. In the meantime, it was not so bad a life. She was the greatest of Lansheean magic-holders, and the last surviving member of the oldest of the five Imperial Houses. The post of Sorceress to the Throne was, after all, what she had been groomed for since childhood. Besides, they had quickly come to a mutual understanding, she and Feraco. She would allow his show of affection in public, defer to him when eyes were watching, but in private, behind the scenes, the lines were clearly drawn. It was an uneasy peace that lay between them, but life was bearable enough, and the alternatives open to her, both by birth and profession, were even less appealing.

The sazulaz blared. The crowd roared. With a great crack of whips and a thunder of hooves, the chariots surged forward. Sand flew from their wheels as they tore around the track. Lycornes screamed as their knees and flanks were sheared by the whirling blades. The blue team went down, taking the green team with it in a tangle of screaming

lycornes and chariots and flying debris. The drivers were tossed into the air like dolls, landing heavily to be trampled by the teams coming up from behind. As the chariots swept past, porters ran out to clear away the wreckage and drag the broken bodies from the track. The crowd went even wilder as the remaining chariots swirled round the last bend and began their second lap, sending the porters scattering. One was too slow, and his body was removed by his fellows when the chariots had passed again.

“Come on! Come on! You yonkas!” Feraco shouted with unusual animation, forgetting himself in the excitement of the race. “Red Team! Red Team! Give them the whip!”

Solzanna’s lip curled. Feraco obviously had stersis hanging on the outcome. He was an inveterate gambler, and he *had* to win, no matter what. The thrill of it was one of the only things that could make his careful portrayal of Imperial Dignity slip. He did not see that his ordinances against gambling were in the least hypocritical, for they only applied to the lower born. Feraco saw the commons and solis as uncouth children, and it did not suit his fragile ego to have a lowly soli enjoying the same pastimes he did. The only exception to this, of course, was the Games.

Solzanna gently disengaged her hand from his too-tight clasp to cover a dainty yawn and leaned back against her pillows. She let her eyes roam lazily over the stands once more, ignoring the drama below. Blood and death held no excitement for her. She hated the Games of the Sun. She loathed the way it turned even the most sober of citizens into a howling fiend.

As if to prove her point, the crowd screamed with delight when the white and red chariots began to battle for the lead. White turned his whip on Red and another roar went up when Red grabbed the lash and jerked White from

his perch. The white team faltered, and Red swept past in glorious triumph to lead the pack into the third lap.

“Come on Red!” Feraco cried, banging his fists on the arms of his throne. He cast Solzanna a feverish glance. “Two more laps to go! Help them win, Solzanna! For the glory of the empire!”

“They do not appear to need my help, Feraco,” she replied, her attention still on the frenzied crowd. “And tis better for our purpose if the Games are not tampered with.”

He was obviously not pleased with her answer, but he accepted it and turned his attention back to the race. Of the seven initial teams, only three remained. Red, Gold, and Black.

As the chariots swept into the fifth and final lap, Solzanna’s roving eye was caught and held by a man sitting in the stands directly across from her. He was a pocket of stillness in a raging storm. Unlike his neighbors, his attention was not on the race below. Instead, his gaze was fixed upon her with an intensity that made her shiver, despite the distance that separated them. Her eyes narrowed as she studied him in turn.

He was obviously an elhadarin, judging by his odd attire and the strange collection of weapons on his wide leather belt. His skin was bronzed from the sun. His hair the color of new-minted stersis, plaited into dozens of braids that swung from his head like a desert lion’s mane. He was a handsome man. Far too handsome for his own good, Solzanna decided as she met his dark-ringed tawny gaze.

She stiffened, lifted her chin, and stared haughtily back. Even during the Games, no man looked at her with such boldness! Considering Feraco’s well-known possessiveness, it was also downright dangerous. But instead of dropping, that tawny gaze travelled over her in a way that was almost a caress. In spite of herself, Solzanna shivered again, and



knew that he'd caught the movement, for a feral smile broke across his handsome face.

She hunched a pettish shoulder and turned her attention back to the race. The chariots were now halfway through the final lap, heading for the finish line. The red team was still ahead but the others were closing in fast. Beside her, Feraco was screaming his fool head off, his careful image long forgotten.

Solzanna's lip curled in contempt. The man was at heart, a child! All men were children! Look at them, jumping up and down and screaming, reveling in the carnage. Some of the women were no better, cheering wildly, throwing bits of jewelry and flowers into the chariots as they flashed past. She could not help stealing another glimpse of the man with the tawny eyes. He was sprawled back in his seat, looking thoughtful and bored, fingering the jeweled hilt of one of the knives in his belt. As she watched, he lifted a booted foot onto the back of the seat before him. A silver spur flashed as he propped his other foot upon his raised ankle. Then suddenly, as if he felt her gaze upon him, he lifted his own and caught hers. Heavy lids fell lazily over his tawny eyes and his finely shaped lips curled in amusement.

Angry and embarrassed at having been caught staring, Solzanna immediately turned her head. But she could still feel those bold eyes on her. She was unaccountably at a loss over what to do about it, for never had any man dared to look at her like that. With longing and adoration, yes. Even outright terror. But never amusement!

The crowd let out another roar as the gold chariot began creeping up beside the red. Feraco leapt to his feet and pounded on the railing before him.

"Five hundred stersis if you win, Red!" he shouted. "Five hundred, I swear, if you win! Whip them harder! Drive as if your very life depends upon it!"

Solzanna's lip curled again. She had no doubt the driver knew that for a fact. Typical, she thought. To most men, winning was all! Honor meant nothing. Unable to help herself, she glared across the sands at the man with the tawny eyes.

The stranger's even white teeth flashed again in that sly smile.

Blood splattered as the whips came down, again and again, lashing at the lycornes' flanks. The coursers screamed and redoubled their efforts, slashing the air with their twisted horns. Black fell back as Red and Gold swept neck and neck towards the finish line, spinning knives flashing, chariots rocking, the driver's whips a blur. Slowly, laboriously, Red pulled ahead. With a jerk of his reins, the driver swerved and the knives on his chariot wheels cut the legs from the lead gold lycorne. Fresh blood sprayed the churned up sand. With an agonized scream the beast went down, taking its teammates with it. As Gold crashed heavily behind him, Red swept triumphantly over the line, followed mere seconds later by Black.

The sazulas rang out, signaling the victory. Feraco dropped to his knees before Solzanna, grabbing her hands and raining hot, sloppy kisses over her be-ringed fingers. "You bring me luck, today, my dear! Much joy! Perhaps today, you will bring me more. Perhaps today is the day I will win your affection, as well as your loyalty."

All too aware of that feral gaze from across the stands, Solzanna cast Feraco a bright smile. Unfortunately, this prompted the emperor to press even more unwanted kisses upon her hands. She was therefore supremely thankful when the winning chariot completed a last victorious sweep of the arena and came to a halt below the Imperial Balcony. It caused Feraco to release her and rise to reward the victor.

A hushed, expectant silence fell over the stands. If the race had pleased the emperor and his sorceress, the driver would live in luxury for the rest of his life. If not, he would be lucky to remain a slave.

“It was a fine race. You have done well.” Feraco’s voice boomed in that breathless silence. “The Sun God has smiled upon us, and our sorceress has brought me luck today. As a result, I am feeling generous. To her, I will give the honor of accepting your victory.”

The driver bowed from his chariot with deep reverence then turned his face up to Solzanna.

The jet jewel on her forehead glittered as brightly as her cat-green gaze as she called upon her power to look behind the driver’s eyes to the mind below. She saw sullen resentment, a grudging awe and respect, all mingled with a good amount of greedy expectation. There was no remorse for what he had done to obtain his victory. Solzanna’s lip curled, but it was not really this man’s fault that he had been driven to such viciousness.

And the people were waiting.

She rose gracefully to her feet and came to stand beside Feraco at the railing. “As our Emperor has declared, it was a good race,” she said in a clear, sweet voice. “And in addition to earning your freedom, I believe there was also mention of five hundred stersis?” She looked challengingly up at the emperor, who frowned, then reluctantly nodded.

The crowd went wild again. People hugged friends and strangers alike. Their sorceress was pleased. Their emperor was generous. It was a good start to Maritzo’s Games.

Shaking his whip above his head, Red drove his chariot around the ring in one last triumphant loop. His coursers pranced skittishly, their bay flanks now as crimson as the red plumes on the driver’s helmet, their backs and ribs raw from the kiss of the whip. As the winning chariot disappeared into

the inner sanctum, the porters again raced to clear the sands of what was left of the losers.

The crowd settled back, humming with new anticipation. They had witnessed bloody victory, now they wanted bloody death. Their cheering grew in volume as the first wild beasts were driven in and made to fight. Lycorne against lycorne, wolfhound against wolf, great cat against great cat, then the victors of one match pitted against another, sometimes in pairs, sometimes in larger numbers. Over the coming days, there would be many such exhibitions, culminating with the ultimate. Man against beast, then man against man. Death matches, every one of them.

Solzanna returned to her couch and settled back against the pillows, her thoughts turning inwards. She had seen these displays too many times. Year after endless year, they happened, and she was still nowhere near to seeing her way towards ending them. Feraco adored the Games, a long tradition carried forward from more barbaric times. They made him feel powerful, in control of life and death at a much more tangible level. When combined with his favorite pastime, it made him come alive. Look at him now! So gleefully intent upon the suffering below that he was leaning so far forward in his massive throne he seemed in danger of toppling headfirst into the ring.

Her lip curled again. As if unable to help herself, she glanced back across the stands towards the handsome elhadarin, curious to see how he was reacting to the same spectacle. It was hard to gauge. He, too, was sitting forward in his seat, but there was a shuttered expression upon his face.

Suddenly, a woman screamed. A high, shrill wail that pierced the roar of the crowd and the shrieks of the fighting beasts below. Startled, Solzanna looked down and saw that

an Ostarian child had fallen into the pit. A little girl encumbered by her ridiculous robes.

A snarling wolfhound, distracted from its most recent kill, turned, and slunk menacingly towards her. Whimpering with terror, the child backed slowly away from the advancing beast until she came up against the arena wall and could go no further. Trapped and frozen, eyes wild between her hood and her veil, she watched the beast approach.

It dropped to a crouch. Its snarling rose to fever pitch. All else was silent, shocked, and still. This had never happened in the entire history of the Games! Never before had a spectator fallen from the stands. There were railings and bars to prevent such a thing!

Yet somehow, the unthinkable had occurred.

Solzanna sat forward, her eyes intent upon the wolfhound. The jewel on her forehead glittered. Her lips moved in a soundless chant.

“Guards!” Feraco bellowed. “Do something, you sluggards! Solzanna!” He grasped her arm, shaking her, breaking her focus, and causing her to lose the spell that had formed in her mind.

Angrily, she threw him off, perfectly aware it was not the child he worried for, but the reputation of his Games.

Before she could resume the spell, however, another shocked gasp went up from the crowd. As the guards battled their way down through the crowded tiers towards the ring-side gates, a man had already swung down from the stands to the arena floor. A man whose hair flew about his head in a multitude of plaits like a desert lion’s mane. An elhadarin whose tawny eyes were clear and fearless as he strode towards the maddened beast.

Just as the wolfhound gathered itself to leap upon the child, the man’s voice rang out in a sing-song challenge. The words were strange, lilting but sharp. The tone commanding.

Snarling, the wolfhound spun about to face this new threat. It howled and bloody saliva dripped from its fangs. Head lowered, it padded menacingly forward. The man circled, moving as fluidly as Solzanna's own great cats, firmly keeping the wolfhound's attention upon him as two Ostarian men climbed quickly down behind him to rescue the child.

The wolfhound snarled again and lunged. The elhadarin leapt back untouched. Sun glinted on the daggers he now wielded in both hands. The crowd roared approval as he began to dance with the enraged animal. A wild and daring dance, darting in and out, twirling round the maddened beast, drawing double bloody streaks across its rough grey hide each time he passed. The animal howled. Teeth snapped with a crack that echoed through the arena.

Solzanna was now on her feet, her hands gripping the railing as if she were gripping the wolfhound's throat. A new spell began to form on her lips. A spell to save this reckless fool from his own certain death. Such a loss would be a shame, she thought, then angrily thrust the thought away. She would rescue him, yes, but she would do no less for anyone. There was no personal interest in it. And so she would tell Feraco later.

Down below, blades flashed, slicing through the wolfhound's thick hide with effortless ease. Teeth flashing in his sun-bronzed face, braids flying, the man continued his macabre dance, keeping the wolfhound away from the child, easily dodging its increasingly wild attacks. His movements were almost hypnotic. Solzanna watched, fascinated, as he leaped, whirled, and twirled, barely noticing as the child was carried to safety.

But the stranger had noticed. As soon as the girl had been restored to her mother, and her rescuers were safely

back in the stands, he deliberately turned his back upon the savage, bloodied beast to address the crowd.

“Shall I kill it for you?” he asked in a deep, rich, strangely accented voice.

The crowd went wild. “Yes! Yes!” it chanted. Then it groaned as the beast made a silent leap at his back. An odd sound rang out, bubbling over the noise of the crowd as the man stepped easily aside, drawing another long red line across the wolfhound’s shoulder. The fool was laughing! He was laughing as if he had not a care in the world!

He turned to face Solzanna as the hound crashed into the arena wall and staggered back to its feet, shaking its shaggy head. It gathered itself and charged again, going up on its hindquarters and swiping with a heavy paw. Bloody claws whistled harmlessly over the man’s head as he dipped into a graceful bow. One booted foot shot backwards to catch the beast in the chest. Even from that awkward position, the kick had the force to send the animal crashing back into the ringside wall.

“Your pet is becoming tiresome, *Shama*,” he said as he straightened. The crowd hooted with glee.

The beast charged again. Without even turning his head, the man kicked back with his other foot and again the beast went flying.

Solzanna’s eyes narrowed. Despite her iron control over her expression, she could not help the slight twitch that touched her lips. But her voice was cool as she replied.

“Indeed,” she said. She looked him straight in his banded tawny eyes. “Kill it if you can.”

The elhadarin laughed. “Oh I can,” he said. “Indeed, ‘twould be a mercy, I think,” he added, almost to himself. Then he again made his curious salute and turned to face the animal. This time, as it charged him, his daggers slapped

into their sheathes and he drew his odd sword, swinging it effortlessly high above his head.

Time stood still. As if in slow motion, Solzanna saw the charging beast, the waiting man. Sun glinted from the sword's razor edge as he stepped aside and swept it down just as the beast lunged past.

The head flew free. The huge grey body stood for a moment before it slowly toppled over at the stranger's feet.

The crowd went wild again, shouting, stamping, cheering! The elhadarin looked up at Solzanna with a curious gleam in his eye. "Take note, *Shama*," he told her calmly. "Anything I say I will do, is no sooner said than done."

Then he bent down to clean his blades on the dead wolfhound's coat before sliding them all back into their places on his belt and leaping up to catch the railings. Willing hands pulled him into the stands; patted his shoulders and back.

Accepting these accolades as his due, he smoothly made his way through the swirling crowd and disappeared, leaving Solzanna staring narrowly after him. Had she sensed a warning in his final words?

Suddenly, she became aware of Feraco's gimlet gaze, the jealous twist to his mouth as he studied her profile. She stiffened, then returned to her couch and lay back against the pillows, forcing herself to relax.

"He was impertinent, that elhadarin, to speak to you so boldly," Feraco said after a moment of uncomfortable silence. There was a familiar edge to his voice. An unspoken question.

Solzanna shrugged. "As you say, he was an elhadarin. No doubt he knew no better. There was nothing in it, my emperor."



Feraco fumed down at the ring a moment, watching sourly as the porters groomed the sands for the next bout.

“My guards would have handled it perfectly fine,” he said resentfully. “They would have killed that beast and saved that child with far less unnecessary drama. But it seems some people must always play the hero, even when it is not needed. I hope you were not too impressed, my dear.”

“Not at all, Great Feraco,” Solzanna murmured politely. She covered a delicate yawn with the back of her hand, as if bored by the subject. She had learned to be sparing of her admiration for anyone of the male persuasion. Men she showed the slightest interest in tended to die or disappear in mysterious ways with disturbing regularity. “I am sure you are right, of course. As you always are, my emperor.”

At last Feraco sat back in his throne, a satisfied smile on his jowly face.

Solzanna heaved an inner sigh of relief. It had been easier than she had expected to save the elhadarin from the consequences of attracting her attention, and by extension, Feraco’s animosity. He had, after all, served the empire by saving that child, and he did not deserve to die for it. She would have done the same for any man who did such a courageous thing, necessary or not. There was nothing personal in it, of course, for it was highly unlikely their paths would ever cross again.

As the next event began, she thrust aside all thoughts of wicked tawny eyes and dismissed his warning as the empty boast of a brash young man, full of his victory over a mindless beast.

Which was a very serious mistake when dealing with a Dalo.

*For a different kind of adventure...*

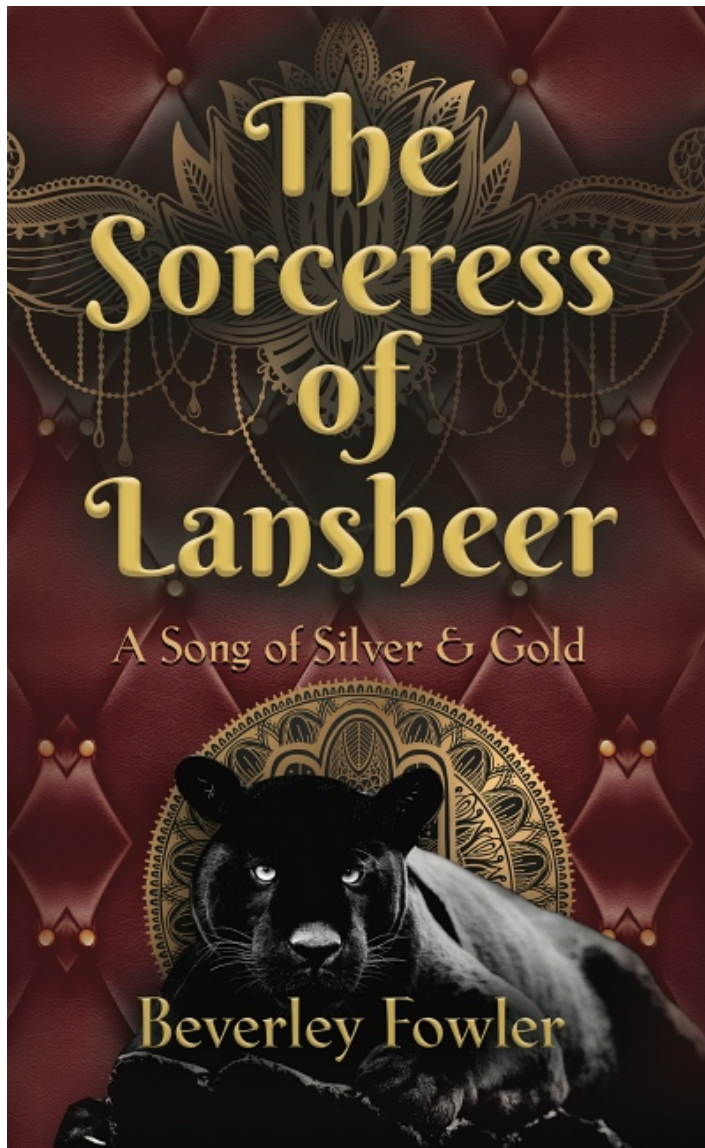
## **The Jewels of Trevaline**

Beverley Fowler

In 1820, Captain Brandon Trevaline died without an heir in a duel gone wrong. At his death, his cousin, Martin Collins, inherited the Trevaline estate and a mountain of debt, but the fabulous collection of Trevaline jewels was missing and believed to be irretrievably lost.

Over 200 years later, on a visit to her friend, a distant descendant of Martin Collins, Brett Saunders discovered that the story was not quite over. The subsequent theft of a ruby signet ring--the only piece of the famous collection remaining--plunged them all into a mystery that threatened to shake the entire Collins' family to their roots.

And all because of a handsome, shamelessly impudent ghost with laughing eyes...



*Magic meets mayhem in this audacious adventure, with the fate of an ancient empire resting in the balance.*

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