

The Masterpainter

by Diana L. Paxson

Tomar ran through the back streets of Neri. It was only a medium-sized town in one of the more obscure provinces of the Empire of Bindir, but it was set where the river Galia joined the Dard. The wharves that served the trade route east through the mountains attracted the dregs of the thinly settled lands behind the frontier. Tomar avoided the garbage, inanimate or human, that clogged the alleys without really seeing it, wondering how he was going to tell Dergalla that all their hopes for marrying were gone.

Dergalla's father had promised her hand, and his fortune, to the artist who took the prize at the Midsummer Festival, but a young painter's chances of becoming famous were small. Dergalla deserved more than he would ever be able to give her even if he won.

And now he could not even compete for the prize.

Only craftmasters and the journeymen they sponsored could enter the contest. Master Sembul's name had not been on the list posted on the Palace Gates, and when Tomar had gone to tell the old man he must register by noon, he had found him lost in an opium dream. How, knowing what the contest meant to Tomar, could his master have betrayed him this way?

At that moment any half-fledged pickpocket could have fleeced him. But even in the River Quarter, a skinny young man in flapping slippers and patched breeches whose paint-stained shirt had clearly seen better days was hardly worth the energy it would take to shake him down.

He turned eastward without slackening pace as the morning light blinded him, and ran full tilt into someone standing there. For one amazed moment he was flying, then he crashed into a wall with a force that drove the breath from his lungs. It took a few moments for things to come into focus again.

There was a body in the road. Still dizzy with reaction, Tomar started towards him. Brushes and little pots of color were spilled across the road. He stopped short again, staring. The victim's clothes were Bindiri, and good quality, though not new. As their owner groaned and pushed himself uprightly gold chain flashed beneath his full, graying beard. He rubbed his balding head and swore.

"What in the name of the Triple Harmas possessed you not to look before you stepped into the road?" said Tomar defensively.

The stranger raised one eyebrow. "Harmas? Possessed?" The gleam in his eyes was oddly disconcerting. Tomar found he could not stir until those keen eyes had completed their assessment, and flushed to the roots of his fair hair.

"I'm Master Roneyn," the man added then, "from the capital. I'm an artist, and so, I think, are you - "

Tomar felt the high color drain from his face as he remembered his lost hopes. "Only a journeyman," he answered flatly, "apprenticed to Master Sembul the Limner. I'm sorry I knocked you down - " The words stuck in his throat and he held out his hand.

The Bindiri waved it away. Tomar bent to get the scattered paints, but the other man was already sweeping them back into their box. He stood up with surprising flexibility, brushing dust from his clothes.

"I could use a drink - if you want to make amends, show me a place where we can wet our throats - "

Tomar frowned. "There's the Centaur..." he said slowly. "It's only a common inn, but they've honest wine."

Tomar suppressed a grimace as the coarse red wine went down, and replaced his mug on the table. "What were y'doing in the Beggar's Quarter anyway? Not your part of town!" Dimly he realized the question was impertinent, but though the Centaur's wine was sour to the tongue it lit a comforting fire in the belly. This

early, the tavern was almost deserted, the only other customers two soldiers just off night-guard, who were drinking to the Empire's recent victory over the Arhini Mountain Tribes.

"I was heading back to the wharves after registering for the Arts Competition at your Summer Festival."

Tomar choked on his wine.

"They said it was open to strangers," the Bindiri said mildly.

"Yes - yes, 'tis, and better y'have Dergalla than Master - baster' Bek. Y'look like a good man!"

"I don't understand - "

In the shadows all Tomar could see of Roneyn's face was the eyes, but they sparkled with a life that held his gaze. Suddenly the sorrow he had tried to drown welled through.

"It should've been just a competition, like every year. But Dergalla's father - that's Kildon the Coppersmith - thinks folk'll take him more seriously if he's got an artist in the family, so he's goin' to marry off his daughter to the masterpainter who wins the prize."

"And you love her..." Roneyn's voice was very gentle now.

Tomar fought down a sob. "Yes, an' Dergalla loves me, though only Ytarra herself could say why. All I have to offer is here - " he stretched out his thin, paint-stained fingers and flexed them convulsively. He was sobering rapidly now.

"There's a man called Bek who wants Dergalla too - pompous, pot-bellied fool with a showy style. The nobles all buy his stuff, an' Dergalla's father likes him. The contest is the only chance I have to win her, and my master is too drugged to enter my name, so I won't even be able to try!" Suddenly it was too much, and Tomar covered his face so that the other man would not see him cry. After a time he straightened and managed a weak smile.

"Thank you for listening. I'm sorry I knocked you down."

Roneyn smiled. "Now I understand why you were running. And there is something you can do for me. I have business of my own in Neri, and I entered my name in the competition mainly to give a reason for my presence here. But I certainly don't need a bride! If you are willing, I will sponsor you."

In a chamber in the Temple of Triple Harmas, patron of magic, the high priest lay suspended in the warded reverie that served for sleep with his kind. In that state he should have been protected notably from physical intrusion but even from dreams, therefore he was all the more astonished when a figure shaped itself out of the dim veils that surrounded him.

A Voice spoke a name which no one in Neri should have known. The high priest fought his way towards consciousness, but the formlessness which he himself had summoned bound him.

His name was called again.

"You should have reported at the Equinox, and it is almost Midsummer - " the Voice went on. "Did you think that because the Empire's energies are committed to the Mountain War that the Order had forgotten you?"

As if the high priest's stunned silence had been resistance, the Voice sharpened. "I am your Senior - do you deny it?" A Symbol flared suddenly between them, and the lesser adept stifled a cry.

"I've been busy! It's all I can do to control - "

"It seems to have been more than you can do - " the Voice corrected him.

"There are abuses here. You will correct them!"

"Master, please - I will try - "

"You will succeed, or test the mercy of those demons to whom your own oath binds you. I will be watching you."

"Watching - but where - " Abruptly his wards and the limbo they had guarded disappeared and he found himself sprawled naked on his own lavishly carpeted floor.

"Yes, of course you should be grateful to Master Roneyn for sponsoring you, but that doesn't mean you trust him!" Dergalla stopped short, forcing the pulsing traffic of the Festival to swirl around them. "There's no *reason* for him to befriend you!"

"He's an artist!"

Dergalla raised one eyebrow, and Tomar's fingers twitched with desire to paint that arching dash of gold against her rosy skin. She was wearing a sky-colored tunic that deepened the blue of her eyes, drawn up through the sash that accented the sweet curve between her swelling hips and the generous line of her breasts to display a brightly striped petticoat.

"And is Master Bek also your brother?"

Tomar started to reply with a phrase he had learned on the wharves, remembered who he was talking to and produced an inarticulate garble that made her laugh. It was difficult to focus on the argument when the sunlight turned her hair to living gold and her scent made the blood pulse in his veins.

As if his name had called him, Master Bek himself was coming towards them, shadowed by the black figure of Mirrakin, second priest of the Temple of Harmas. Tomar and Dergalla eased gently backward into the alley between the rows.

The Festival grounds had been laid out in the open space between the Jeweler's Quarter and the remains of the city wall, and most of the spaces were occupied. Jugglers and sword swallows worked the corners. Side by side with sellers of Dorian silk or fine vintages from Teyn, the craftsmen of Neri displayed their wares.

"How could this Bindiri master know you were worth sponsoring?" Dergalla turned to face him.

They had stopped before one of the open-air stages. It bore only a chair and table, making it impossible to guess what period or place was being represented. The costume of the lady who had just entered was hardly more helpful, being designed mainly to set off her personal attractions. She was speaking to an older man who sat banging away rather unconvincingly at a shoe.

"He hasn't seen your work - " Dergalla went on. "Unless he has some other reason to help you, he is taking an awful chance."

"He did say he had other business here," Tomar answered slowly. "But I'd swear he means me no harm."

They moved closer to the stage, and suddenly the voice of the actress came clearly, low and thrilling with appeal.

"And might not a widower win my hand?"

"My child, but think - he'd be too old for you - " the cobbler replied.

"How so, too old? It is Art that matters here. Let him who understands it set to woo!" The girl answered with some spirit, and Tomar felt the words strike home. He turned to Dergalla, torn between the need to reassure her and the fear that a man like Master Roneyn might reassure her only too well.

"The only harm he might do me is to fall in love with you himself! I have seen some of his drawings, and he is a master - his lines flow onto the page with never a need for erasing - " He gestured in frustration, unable to find words for the way the assurance of Master Roneyn's work affected him.

"Dergalla, if Bek were to win you I would kill *him*, but if it were Roneyn, I would kill myself, and never know if it was because I couldn't equal his work or because I had lost *you!*"

The actors finished their scene and exited to general applause. Dergalla stood with her hands on her hips, emotions chasing across her face like clouds building up for a storm.

"Artists!" She exploded into speech as the clapping died down. "Am I no more than something to inspire you?"

"Dergalla - " Tomar ducked as her arm came around.

"I will marry where I choose and be damned to you, and my father, and them all! I hope your Master Roneyn does come to court me so I can tell him no!" The last words came over her shoulder as she strode away.

Tomar and Master Roneyn had just finished a meal of sausages, local goat cheese, and pickled mushrooms when the attack began. As if he had heard Dergalla's criticism, Roneyn had noted that if he were to sponsor Tomar he ought to give him some instruction. A little gold had settled matters with Master Sembul - Tomar was Roneyn's journeyman now, and the two had been at work since dawn.

At first, it was not clear what was happening. To Tomar it seemed as if something he had eaten had disagreed with him; the colors on his canvas merged and whirled. Then they exploded suddenly into whorls of burning sparks that spiraled outward; his laboring vision was overwhelmed by the brilliance and he fell into the dark.

When he came to his senses, Master Roneyn was bending over him. He opened his lips as a cup touched them and found himself abruptly wide awake as the hot, spicy liquid went down.

"What happened?"

"Well, I don't know much about your local wizards, but it felt like a paralysis spell..." Roneyn replied. He looked remarkably unruffled. "Do you have any enemies?"

"Me?" Tomar squeaked. Since he had grown nimble enough to outrun street gangs no one had considered him worth attacking.

"Master Bek, for instance?"

"I wouldn't have thought the Beak considered me enough threat to - "Tomar broke off, "unless he saw me with Dergalla at the Festival. He was with that priest, Mirrakin. It's possible..."

The thought that someone might actually spend money to have him killed amazed him, and why with magic? A man with a knife would have been so much cheaper than a wizard, and so much easier to hire.

"Are you all right?" Tomar looked at his benefactor. The lines in Roneyn's browned face seemed to have deepened, but no cloud troubled his serenity.

"Oh yes," he said calmly. "I think you took the brunt of it." Rather unsteadily, Tomar got to his feet. From his canvas, an unfinished figure that was meant to be Dergalla looked back at him. He frowned. He had been trying to paint her as Ytarra, goddess of love and spring, but all he saw now was lines, as if the magic had knocked out his vision.

"It's no good - " He put the paintbrush down.

"What do you mean?"

"If I could tell you, maybe I could fix it! It's just not Dergalla!"

"Is an exact likeness what you want? Is that what you think art is?" The soft voice with its slight accent held no emotion, yet Tomar felt the judgment there.

"Yes! No!" He shook his head in confusion. "I don't mean what she looks like, but what she is like - what it is about her that makes me want to put the world on my canvas and create everything anew!"

"But what you were painting was not new -" Roneyn's gesture took in the stylized iconography of cows and cats by which the figure was surrounded.

"Pictures of Ytarra always have that sort of thing, or how would people know who She was? You have to obey the rules."

"True, but you must do something more. If the painting makes people feel the way you feel about your beloved, then they will know who it is, for she will be Ytarra for them as well..."

Tomar glared at him, remembering how he had struggled to learn the conventions of formal painting. Master Roneyn said nothing, and Tomar realized that he might as well have tried to be angry at a tree. Unwillingly his gaze returned to the canvas.

The work remained as pointless as before. Even Bek's slick and sentimental productions looked livelier. This was not a prize painting; it would never win Dergalla. Nor should it - *nor should it!* With a groan Tomar snatched up the big brush, plunged it into the pot of white gesso and slapped it downward again and again. When tears blurred the mess, he dropped the brush and stumbled towards the door. Roneyn was speaking but he could not understand the words. As he pushed blindly down the stairs Tomar did not know if he were weeping for the loss of his love, or of his dream.

Dergalla's maid stationed herself on the stone bench in front of Master Roneyn's rooms, still protesting. Dergalla let the words flow over her. Risky though this visit might be, it was safer than sending a messenger. She was less strictly watched since she had agreed to become the equivalent of an engraved prize platter, and if her father found out where she had gone, what more could he do to her?

Still she hesitated, suddenly shy of this stranger who would be used to Imperial court ladies with wasp waists and painted eyes. Then a squeak from her maid told her someone was coming, and she started up the stairs.

At first she saw Master Roneyn as Tomar had - a short man with a full grizzled beard whose body had thickened like an old tree trunk with age - except for his foreign dress, quite an ordinary man. Then she took a step forward and saw the picture he was working on.

"It is Tomar, isn't it?"

The master had caught Tomar while he was painting, all the awkward lines of his skinny body turned to grace as he focused on his work. His eyes were rapt, gazing through the canvas to some vision no one else could see.

Master Roneyn turned to face her. For a moment Dergalla's heart halted. Despite differences of age and nation, the face she was looking at and the one on the canvas were curiously the same. Only in the older man Dergalla saw the perfected power which she had only glimpsed in Tomar at moments like the one in which Roneyn was painting him now.

"Do you think so?" the Bindiri's voice rumbled as if it came from somewhere beneath their feet. "Then perhaps you are the right woman for him after all..."

As he returned her smile, his eyes glowed, and Dergalla wondered how he was seeing her.

"Am I?" Abruptly she remembered the news she had come to bring. "It may not matter. I've seen Master Bek's painting, and I don't think there's any way Tomar can win."

"Is the picture so wonderful?" Roneyn eased back onto the painting stool and the gray beard quivered with a little smile. His lips were firm, and somehow, Dergalla knew that beneath that luxuriance of beard was a strong chin.

"It is - " she said honestly. "The colors glow like liquid jewels and the figures seem to move. But that's not why it's going to win. Bek has painted Toyur himself crowning the Emperor with victory over the Mountain Tribes."

She stopped short, remembering that this man came from Bindir, but Roneyn continued to smile.

"And the Governor is one of the judges?" he asked calmly.

"The Governor, and the Guildmasters, all of whom will be only too eager to display their loyalty."

Roneyn nodded. "When politics mix with art there can be problems, but don't despair. The competition may surprise you."

"Tomar is really that good?"

"He could be, if you help him..."

"What does that mean?" Dergalla began to pace around the room. "Am I only his inspiration? I am no artist, but I'm a human being too, with strengths, and needs, and fears!"

"Yes, all that, and more - " Roneyn turned her to face him. So close, she could feel the power in him as if she withstanding next to a fire. His breathing quickened, and Dergalla felt her own heart begin to pound once more.

He could have me - she realized. All he has to do is ask. . .

"You do not yet know the strength that is in you, Dergalla, or what you can do! And remember, unless you consent to it, no other will can hold you. Forget this competition. You are the one who will have to choose!"

"And if I chose you?" she asked with surprising steadiness.

"Ah, that *would* be interesting - " Master Roneyn took a deep breath. "But even with that temptation I will say no more. It is the lady who must decide."

A scratchiness the door parted then as if they had been caught in a guilty embrace. The kerchiefed head of Dergalla's maid appeared at the door.

"Mistress! Mistress Dergalla - it has been more than an hour, and your father will be seeking you. My lady, please! We must go!"

Tomar was never entirely sure where he went after he left Master Roneyn's studio. He must have stopped, at least once, at a tavern, for his head was still spinning when he regained consciousness somewhere near the wharves. The cool air from the river drove the last of the wine fumes away. Presently his footsteps echoed on wood and he realized he was on one of the docks.

I could just keep going, he thought, until I walked into the river! That's one way out of my troubles... Would Dergalla weep for me?

Starshine glimmered on the ripples. Here where two rivers joined, the current was deep and strong. Was it lack of courage or just exhaustion that kept him from throwing himself in?

Dergalla's luxuriant body and triumphant spirit affirmed the reality of Beauty, but what virtue could she find in him? If he had ever been able to paint - and now he doubted it - he certainly could not do so anymore.

The strength left him and he slid down against one of the posts and stayed there, staring blindly as the river mist devoured the stars.

Tomar had not expected to sleep, but he must have, because suddenly the morning sun was shining into his eyes and the fishermen were making rude comments as they went by. But Tomar scarcely saw them. His inner sight was filled by another vision, and whether it had been a dream or an enchantment of mist and starlight he neither knew nor cared. It did not matter even if it were the kind of vision that might win a prize; he only knew that he must try to capture it. He pushed himself to his feet. He ached in every bone, but that did not matter either. Nothing mattered in all the world but his dream. With an urgency that surpassed his flight of the night before he dashed back up into the town.

Master Roneyn was eating a leisurely breakfast when Tomar burst through the door, mumbled a reply to his greeting, and lurched towards his canvas. The gesso which covered most of the previous painting was dry. Hastily he uncorked paintpots and laid out his brushes.

"I *said*, did you sleep well?" The Bindiri's deep voice held a genial amusement.

"No - " Tomar answered without looking away from the canvas. With his soft brush he was already laying in the outlines. "But I dreamed." There, a sure stroke suggested the stately sweep of trunk and branches, and beside it, the singing line of a woman's uplifted arm...

"Ah - " Roneyn let out his breath in a sigh of satisfaction. "A dream! Now you will understand the purest magic. And in this dream of yours, what, I wonder, did you see?"

It was as well that the question was rhetorical, for Tomar scarcely heard. Swiftly the outlines flowed from his paintbrush - a luxuriant garden in whose center rose a noble tree. Its fruit glowed with a softer gold than the sun, but had the same living splendor. Yet if the tree was splendid, the figure that stood beside it, gesturing to the viewer to take up that fruit and be healed, shone with a holy radiance.

It was the quality of light that gave life to the picture, and Tomar achieved the effect without even thinking how, laying down bold dabblings of unexpected color until the picture seemed to shimmer with the transparency of summer sunlight filtered through green leaves. The leafy canopy, the earth, even the rosy flesh of the woman for whom it was the setting, all were composed of confused flashes of rainbow color which organized themselves into glorious harmony when seen from a few steps away.

"That is vision certainly - " murmured Roneyn. "To illuminate without blinding - and the Goddess of the Garden is crowned with stars! It goes beyond the rules of art. The judges will not understand it, but they cannot help but respond, for this is the real magic that comes from the heart."

But Tomar was still painting. In the Lady's other hand he placed a garland. Her brilliant eyes were Dergalla's, the majesty of Her form was Dergalla's, and She was holding the wreath out to him with all Dergalla's love in Her smile.

On a brilliant midsummer morning, the assembled Guilds and Fraternities of Neri marched onto the Festival grounds to the music of flutes and brasses and the deep booming of copper-bottomed drums. Sitting with her mother and the other ladies in the shade of the long pavilion, Dergalla watched them, stirred in spite of herself by the pageantry. The same sun that blazed so blindingly from the snows of the mountains behind them struck sparks from gold thread worked into robes and the gilded finials of the Masters' ceremonial staffs.

The Honorable Fellowship of Market Farmers came first, followed by the fishermen, butchers and bakers, shoemakers, candle-dippers, and the Guild of Metalworkers, Dergalla's father, perspiring with heat and

pride, foremost among them. Next came the luxury trades, including the Guild of Limners in whose ranks Dergalla recognized the Bindiri master and Tomar, hollow-eyed as if he had not slept since she saw him last. Finally, the priesthoods of the various shrines and temples marched in.

Each group marched up the main causeway and bowed to the big red pavilion which shaded General Wingulf and the other Bindiri nobility resident in the city, then took its place in the sector prepared for it. The wealthier associations had pavilions. Those reserved for the Metalworkers, the Painters and Limners, and the priesthood were made of silk. They had been donated by Master Kildon, said Dergalla's mother proudly. The pavilion which sheltered the ladies was of silk as well - yellow - which made everyone look jaundiced. She wondered what it had all cost.

"I don't care how many pavilions Papa has donated," she whispered to her mother, "I won't marry a man I cannot love!"

"Dergalla darling, be reasonable! Your father has supported you in comfort for eighteen years. Don't you think you should repay him?"

By spending my life with Master Bek? Even a daughter's duty doesn't stretch that far! But before she could answer, her mother leaned closer.

"Actually, dearest, it's all rather complicated - even I didn't know. Your father has invested in several caravans, and with the right political connections he can get favored treatment. If he doesn't - " She fluttered her hands helplessly, leaving a confused but vivid impression of disintegration.

Dergalla remembered the bright colors and political propriety of the picture Master Bek had brought in, and felt suddenly cold. Nervously she smoothed the figured white silk of her gown.

The Featherworkers marched past, their ranks forested with long-handled chamber fans plumed with red and gold, followed by the Perfumers in a dizzying cloud of sandalwood. And then, at last, everyone was in place.

Clarions blasted the conversations as the Governor rose to read a speech full of loyal protestations that might have strained even Bindiri patriotism if anyone had really been listening. The recent victory over the Mountain Tribes was celebrated with a pious wish that the opening of the Great Pass would stimulate trade and communication all over the Empire. Thanksgivings were offered for the birth of a new son to the Emperor, Ban Abeiren, ninth of that name. Wingulf congratulated the Guildmasters of the success of their festival.

Dergalla scarcely heard. She was watching the Limners' multicolored pavilion, where Tomar and Master Roneyn sat among their peers. On the other side of the pavilion, in the front row, was Master Bek, smoothing his thinning black hair complacently as he saw her look his way.

I'd rather sell my body to the men who pole the barges than marry him! Dergalla swore silently. *At least it would be honest whoredom!*

Her gaze flicked back to Tomar and the stranger. Her father had kept her so close these past days there had been no way for her to see them. She wondered whether she really did have a voice in her own destiny, and if so, what should she choose?

She believed in Tomar's talent, but he had little chance of convincing the judges. And if he did win, apparently her father would lose. But Roneyn had high status in the capital, and he was certainly Bek's master. As his wife she would be secure, and her father would be pleased.

The clarions belled like hounds and suddenly everyone was looking at them. Dergalla's stomach lurched as she realized the waiting was over.

She let her father lead her through the sunshine to the ruddy shade of the Governor's Pavilion, controlling her features as Wingulf seated her and pat her hand with an avuncular smile.

"A rose! Kildon, you raise a real rose here at the end of the world!" said the Governor, the faint accent that still betrayed his barbarian origins giving a faintly explosive quality to his words. Dergalla met the speculative glances of the Bindiri ladies and wondered just how badly she had creased her gown.

"So, now we have a little romance here? All the young men are after this girl, yes?" General Wingulf laughed.

"The Fine Arts and the Practical Arts will be united by this marriage," Dergalla's father proclaimed, gesturing towards the blue-robed members of the Limners' Guild who had taken position in a semicircle before the Governor's pavilion with the masters of the other guilds behind them.

Not to mention the art of political expediency, thought Dergalla, favoring the Governor with a mechanical smile. Master Kildon did not appear to see the lifted eyebrows, or hear the Bindiri ladies titter behind their hands.

"So, bring on the pictures then. Can't sit here all day or we melt, eh! I expect the pictures do, too."

The Master of the Limners' Guild came forward, and presently two apprentices carried in a large canvas by one of the older masters who was not in competition, being married already but would not pass up a chance to display his work to such a well-endowed audience. Others followed, equally ineligible, and Dergalla blotted moist palms against her gown.

"*The Destruction of Arhini*, by Master Bek..."

Dergalla suppressed a start as the Guildmaster's harsh voice spoke almost in her ear. *Don't look, don't how that it matters to you!* she told herself, trying to ignore the murmur of comment on the painting's polish and politics. She could not look at Tomar; she would not look at Master Bek's complacent smile. Dergalla's gaze, seeking onward, came to the shadows of the priests' pavilion and flinched from the malevolent satisfaction she saw in the face of Mirrakin.

When she looked up again, two more pictures had joined the line-up, and the Guildmaster was announcing the final competitor.

"*Inspiration*, by Tomar, a journeyman. An entry in the competition - " he added, in a tone which sharpened as the slaves turned the picture so that it could be seen. There were a few exclamations from the Bindiri, and then a murmur of amusement.

Dergalla bit back a cry of dismay at the confusion of color that smote her eyes. Amid the jumble of bold brushstrokes it was hard to say what exactly was being portrayed. This was not the picture whose beginnings Tomar had shown her. Had that Bindiri bewitched him, or was he simply maddened by despair? She saw his face, white as a blank canvas, with eyes that begged her understanding. But with the ruin of all their hopes before her what was there to understand? Clinging to the rags of her pride, she looked away.

"I think we know who gets the prize!" said the Governor genially. "Master Bek's workmanship is only equaled by his choice of subject!" There was a general mutter of agreement from the assembled masters, and the Governor turned to Dergalla's father. "Well, Master Kildon, what do you say?"

Kildon cleared his throat, but another voice cut across his reply -

"My lord Governor, before you make your decision, may a newcomer to your city who is nonetheless a loyal subject of our Emperor say a word?"

Dergalla's eyes opened. The stranger, Master Roneyn, had stepped out from among his fellows. He made a deprecating bow.

"No painting looks its best in the shadows - why not let everyone approve your judgment by bringing the entries out into the light?"

Recognizing the Bindiri accent, General Wingulf smiled indulgently and waved assent. One by one, the slaves carried the pictures outside. As Master Bek's painting was lifted, Dergalla recognized once more the

glossy perfection of each detail. The soldiers were like the garrison on parade, the Emperor's profile perfection, the defeated tribesmen as barbarous as she had always imagined them.

And then the light of noonday struck full upon the painted surface and suddenly everything changed. Figures which had seemed about to march off the canvas were stiff, crudely-drawn; proportion and composition unbalanced; and the face of the Emperor clumsily copied from a coin. From the ranks of the limners came an astonished gasp.

No one had told the slaves to stop. As the murmur of speculation spread, they continued to bear their burdens into the sunlight. Carrying Tomar's painting, the last of them joined his fellows and turned to face the Governor.

Once more Dergalla gasped, for the picture which she had seen before as a mass of crude dubbings leaped suddenly into focus, and she looked upon a vision. But not even when people began to whisper and point from the figure in the painting to her and back again could she believe that she had been the model. It was a goddess who stood under the Tree of Life with the garland of victory in her hand.

Is that really the way Tomar thinks of me? Suddenly ashamed, Dergalla looked full at him for the first time that day, and saw him as she had seen him in Master Roneyn's drawing, with a kind of shining about him that came from something more than the blur of moisture in her eyes.

In that moment, Dergalla realized that though she had been flattered by Tomar's adoration, excited by his caresses, even touched by his need for her, she had never truly loved him until now. The knowledge struck like a sword, severing her from the past. Whatever the outcome of the contest that fact would remain. She stood in an unknown country now.

"Sorcery! He's used sorcery to cheat me of my due!" Master Bek darted into the half-circle, jabbing his finger furiously towards Roneyn. "My Lord Governor, I appeal to your justice - "

"And so do I!" exclaimed Roneyn. "Why, I wonder, is Master Bek so quick to babble of sorcery? Is it perhaps because he has already tried it? Governor, you know your city. Would any of Neri's sorcerers put a spell on a painting for a percentage of the Prize?"

The General's frown had grown thunderous. "High Priest, come here!" His parade-ground bark brought the high priest of Harmas hurrying forward. He came to a stop in front of the Governor's pavilion, straightening his black robes like a crow after a storm.

"My Lord, how can I serve you?"

"How do you think? Use your arts - test the picture," he gestured towards Master Bek's *Destruction*. "and then do the same to that one with the tree in it, over there!" The pointed finger jabbed towards Tomar's picture as well.

The priest looked nervously over his shoulder, then took a deep breath, drew a gold and crystal wand from the folds of his robes, and touched it to Master Bek's picture, muttering. Blue light flared from the tip of the wand and played across the canvas. When it faded the painting looked even more tawdry than before.

"Mirrakin, you traitor, you promised me nobody could break that spell!"

Master Bek's screech split the air.

The high priest looked over his shoulder at the priests' pavilion, but his wand was already touching Tomar's painting. Again the blue radiance shimmered, but the painting was unchanged. If anything, it seemed more luminous than before.

A word from the Governor sent two men towards the dark ranks of the priests of Harmas, but even as the high priest touched Bek's painting, Mirrakin had disappeared. Still cursing, Bek tried to run, but the soldiers, having failed in their first objective, eagerly dragged him back again.

"Yes, I hired Mirrakin to do a small spell!" Bek gibbered, "for the Emperor's glory - was that such a crime? He swore no sorcerer in Neri could undo it, but he didn't know about this stranger! My Lord Governor, give me justice too! Let us see who this Roneyn really is! Let this man who calls himself a Masterpainter be tested for black sorcery!"

Suddenly everything seemed to have gone very still. The high priest's lips were moving, but there was no sound. Master Roneyn stood watching him, and Dergalla trembled. How could the Bindiri remain so calm? The high priest appeared to struggle with some invisible foe, and looked at the other man in appeal.

"Do as he bids you, adept - " Master Roneyn smiled.

The high priest repressed a shudder, then paced quickly around him, tracing the circle with his wand. Blue fire blazed up where it touched the ground. The priest stepped backward and once more lifted the wand. Calling aloud in tones that sent a shiver across the skin despite the heat of the day, the high priest drew a Symbol in the air.

Blue it flamed at first, and then whirling inward, became crimson, flaring brighter and brighter. The magefire played over the Roneyn's body until it was veined in lines of glowing gold. For a moment they saw him robed in radiance with a staff in his hand and on his head a great headdress crowned by flaring wings. The high priest moaned softly and sank to his knees.

Then the magic faded; robes and headdress shimmered and were gone, leaving the man they had called Master Roneyn clad as he had been before. And yet he was not quite the same. The features of the Bindiri painter had realigned themselves into the face of majesty which Dergalla had glimpsed when she visited his clambers, but which, like her vision of Tomar, she had not understood until now.

"You are the Archpriest of Triple Harmas! You rule the sorcerers who serve the Emperor!" rasped the Governor.

"Master, forgive me!" the high priest babbled into the ground.

"Did I not say I would be watching? Perhaps you will believe me now!" The Archpriest turned to the Governor. "I think that the charges of sorcery have been dealt with. Will you make your judgment now?"

"When you are here?" The Governor shook his head. "How would you decide?"

"The lady Dergalla is the one who will be most affected by the outcome. I would let the maiden choose..." The Bindiri sorcerer smiled.

And then everyone was looking at her.

Dergalla took a deep breath and stood up. With dreamlike deliberation she moved into the sunlight. She saw Bek, still watching her with mixed hatred and desire. She saw Tomar, thin and awkward, looking at her with his soul naked in his eyes. She saw the Archpriest, waiting with the patience of perfected power, and stopped in front of him, achingly aware of the force whose veiled presence she had sensed in him before.

"If I were as Tomar has painted me, I would choose you - " she said softly, "for I would need nothing, not even for you to need me. But you have shown me what Tomar is, and even though I am not the Lady of his vision, he shows me what I would wish to be." She held out her hand in appeal.

The Archpriest took it and for a moment held her gaze with his own. "He has shown you what you will be, and you have seen what he will be, if you both keep faith until the end."

Then, still holding Dergalla's hand, he led her to Tomar. "Here is the new Master!" He seized Tomar's arm and swung it upward triumphantly. "He has won his lady fairly. Who can deny him his victory?"

"He may have won the girl, but he'll win no prize!" Bek's spite edged a real agony. "Her precious father has bankrupted himself on this contest. Will you take her with no dowry?" He leered at Tomar. "And you, mistress, will you marry this man if you have to live on millet and goat cheese?" For a fleeting moment Dergalla felt pity, knowing that in its way Bek's passion had been sincere. But it had not been love.

She looked at Tomar, whose thin wrists stuck out from the sleeves of his blue journeyman's gown and whose pale hair was ruffled like a cock's comb, but who gazed at her with all the light of sunrise in his eyes.

"Yes!" he answered, and his voice rang like a bell.

"I will..." Dergalla echoed, and felt her flesh kindle at the touch of Tomar's as the Masterpainter joined their hands.

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