

Shyasha glided toward the balcony, her willowy body clad in wispy faeriespun billowing in the breeze wafting through the open doors. Gazing out at the twinkling waves of the Cinaltan Sea, she spied a clipper ship's silhouette cruising slowly across the horizon. As she stepped out onto the balcony, her eyes lifted to the heavens, peering at the wind-sculpted clouds scudding across gibbous moons.

Dramte watched her shoulders heave as she let out a sigh, and he sighed also. She turned and reentered her chamber, her body limned by moons-light as she approached her bed. The posts below the canopy were made from moonwood, highly polished and carved with images of Thanatas, the god of dreams. The sheets were Talcyan silk, dyed in shades of blue, the color of dreams.

Shyasha turned toward Dramte and his heart skipped a beat as he beheld her face, framed by flaxen hair, bathed in the soft glow of the lamp on her nightstand. 'Twas a countenance fashioned by generous gods who had graced her with beauty rivaling their own. For a moment her violet eyes locked with his and he nearly cried out, fearful she could see him.

But that was impossible. She was inside the royal palace atop Poshancy Hill, while he was five miles away, lying on a sagging cot of much-mended tent-cloth in a dirt-floored hovel amidst the twisting streets of Tophets.

She reached up to her neck and tugged on the drawstring at the back of her gown. It fell from her shoulders and slipped down her body and she stood naked in the melded gold and silver light spawned by lamp and moons. Her breasts swayed as she climbed into the bed and Dramte let out a sob of longing. She rolled onto her side and extended an arm, turning the knob on the lamp and closing the shutters over the lens, blanketing her in shadows.

Releasing a long, shuddery sigh, Dramte opened his eyes, breaking the trance, returning himself to his surroundings, a shack with leaning clapboard walls and a single grimy window and a thatched roof with a hole in it and a door with a loose latch, the lock long-gone – but no self-respecting thief would bother entering anyway.

He sat up and swung his legs to the side, planting his bare feet on the packed dirt floor and rubbing a hand over his sweaty face. He reached for the battered tin basin sitting on the stool he used as a nightstand. The moons-light struggling through the dirty panes of his window revealed a slosh of water at the bottom of the basin, nothing more. He started to rise from the cot to get more water from the jug by the door, then remembered he'd forgotten to fill it.

"Shit!"

He gazed at his mournful visage reflected in the bottom of the basin. Such was his life – wallowing in the dregs, snatching brief glimpses of fine ladies and lofty towers and lives lived to the fullest. If only he could be high-born and handsome for just one day. Or one night. Long enough to...

A different image floated to the surface of the water. He leaned closer, eyes widening. The image leapt out of the basin, splashing into his face, washing it with light instead of liquid, soaking into his brain. He sank back, head spinning. The image sharpened, brightened: a young man clad in a dark blue coat with silver buttons and purple epaulettes, and slacks of black with lavender stripes down the side – the uniform of a captain in the King's Royal Dragoners. He sported a jaunty mustache above lips made for maidens, and smoldering dark eyes protected by brass-rimmed goggles.

The decorations on his breast left no doubt of the soldier's identity: Boistrup Toiro, whose exploits in the air – and in the boudoirs of ladies both fair and foul – were much talked about in

the marketplace. Yet this was no massive gray battle beast he rode, but a small forest-green dragonet, the kind used for missions where stealth, not firepower, were required.

A chill breeze blew in Dramte's face and ruffled his threadbare tunic and he looked up. His door had not blown open. The window was shut. He eyed the hole in the thatched roof over his head, but the breeze was not coming from above.

And then the vision in the basin reclaimed his eyes and he sensed saddle leather beneath his buttocks instead of a thin piece of sagging canvas, and reptilian muscles throbbing against his legs, and fine leather gloves encasing his hands, and the scent of dragon filling his nostrils.

*I'm inside the captain's head! How can this be?*

Alarmed, Dramte tried to break contact but could not. His ankles – that is, the captain's ankles – dug into the beast's sides, commanding it to dive, and Dramte's stomach lurched and the wind blasted at his face even stronger than before, and below him he beheld the giddy sight of spire-topped towers swiftly approaching, the purple stone gleaming in the moons-light, the arched windows all dark, save for one.