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As the major port serving our glorious island home, Karandoz steadily increased in prosperity as the Continent slowly recovered from the centuries of economic stagnation brought on by the Time of Troubles. Though trading chiefly with Ondiran and Esdiron, it also brought in goods from as far away as the Great Western Ocean, enabling the merchant houses to pile up wealth that would later be used to finance industrialization.

—*Karandoz, Ships, and the Sea*

Colmar awoke to find a rat cautiously sniffing his hand. The sturdy, dark-haired man eyed the creature balefully, and it hastened away. He sat up with a grimace, his body aching from a night on the stone floor. The cold light of dawn barely penetrated a narrow lancet window high in the wall above. Rubbing his hands together, Colmar swore softly at the bone-chilling damp. They were too close to the river, he reflected, but then the sort of people who built prisons no doubt considered that an advantage. He looked about him. The cell was spacious but squalid, with no furnishings save a smelly latrine bucket and a little soiled straw. Of his five fellow prisoners, only one was awake, an ancient beggar who sat by the door, lousing himself. The old man paused to give Colmar an ambiguous, toothless grin. Suddenly one of the sleepers gave a strangled snore and rolled over.

Colmar did not know his cellmates. Brought in late the night before on a false charge of theft, he had not been in a conversational mood. A large contingent of the Karandoz city watch had taken him by surprise in an irritatingly competent arrest. He knew, of course, who must be behind it. Had she attempted to take him with her own men, there would have been a scuffle, and she might have lost some valuable retainers. The lady had a nice sense of economy. Colmar shook his head regretfully. He had not expected her to find him so soon. Indeed, a fortnight's headlong flight had bought him but three days' respite: it was hard to hide from a sorceress.

Distant temple bells rang their first peal of the day. Colmar began to wonder what exactly might pass for food here (not that he was feeling choosy). After some considerable time, during which he put the latrine bucket to its intended use and wiped his hands on some moldy straw, footsteps and voices resounded in the passage, and the door opened. A guard appeared. "You!" he barked, with an impatient gesture to Colmar. The beggar across the room cackled gleefully. Several of the other inmates were now awake as well, and Colmar gathered that they did not believe this early summons boded well for him, either. He sighed and got up. Whatever this was about, it was not likely to be breakfast.



Two armed guards escorted Colmar to a heated room on the ground floor of the building. Valdira was there waiting

for him, along with a heavy-set, middle-aged man whom Colmar rightly took to be some kind of superior jailer.

The sorceress smiled delightedly as he came in. "Thank heavens, he's safe and sound!" She spoke with a slight Ondiric accent, but her command of Tseren was impressive. She turned to the warden. "This isn't the first time something like this has happened, you know. I was so worried about him having broken loose in a foreign port."

Colmar stared, baffled by this flow of seeming nonsense. The warden, on the other hand, appeared unfazed, interjecting an obsequious "Yes, milady," and a "Quite so, milady." Evidently Colmar looked as though he might add some untoward remark of his own, for one of the guards punched him preemptively with the butt of a spear.

Valdira made a great show of distress. "Don't hurt him!" she entreated. "The poor man's quite deranged. Half the time he doesn't remember what he's stolen, or even his own name." She sighed tragically. "It has been such a trial for our family. He has these strange delusions, you see. Once, he took it into his head that he was an Asardian archpriest—he stole the robes and everything. It was most embarrassing!"

Colmar swore under his breath, recognizing that at this point any outburst on his part would serve only to confirm Valdira's diagnosis. Determined not to give her the satisfaction, he limited himself, with difficulty, to glowering at her. She was slender, with fair hair, gray-blue eyes, and an aristocratic bearing; under other circumstances he would have found her attractive. She had obviously overawed the warden, who seemed most unlikely to behave this

fawningly toward everyone. Colmar easily perceived the larger design of her little ploy. The arrest had allowed her to search his room in peace, while he was held, helpless, until called for. Not having found what she sought, she could now take personal custody of him, as a tame lunatic. He found his assigned role to be a thoroughly humiliating one—no doubt precisely as she had intended.

Meanwhile the warden was clucking his tongue at Valdira's sad tale of twisted kleptomania. "Now then, my boy," he began sententiously. (Colmar was thirty, but the warden had reached an age where he regarded anyone younger than himself as youthful.) He enunciated with exaggerated care, presumably on the assumption that Colmar, as an Ondir, was unlikely to speak Tseren very well. "We take theft—*stealing*—very seriously here. You are indeed fortunate—*lucky*—that her ladyship does not wish to take the matter further and that I have consented—*agreed*—to release you into her kind care." He produced the few possessions taken from Colmar the night before and presented them to Valdira. "A pleasure to be of service, milady. I'm sorry we could not find the article in question. I just hope you can keep this fellow out of further trouble."

Colmar scowled, having every wish to cause a great deal more trouble than either the warden or Valdira could readily imagine. Indeed, if only the alleged madman could have retrieved his sword, now in that accursed woman's hands, he might have done a good deal to live up to his new reputation, but under the circumstances all he could do was fume in silence as the guards prodded him again

with their spears and conducted him to the prison gates along with his new captor.



Outside waited two of Valdira's burly minions, engaged in a leisurely game of knucklebones. While the sorceress bestowed a coin upon each of the prison guards, her men-at-arms tied Colmar's hands behind his back with a stout cord, poked him once or twice in the solar plexus, and made rude remarks at his expense. Valdira then endowed the heftier of her two followers with Colmar's sword, and the party set out through the narrow cobbled streets.

Presently they entered a large square, where the morning's market was in full swing. It soon became difficult to walk for haggling peasants, heaping produce-carts, and bawling livestock. Geese hissed savagely as the procession passed. One bird attempted to bite the larger man-at-arms, who consulted with Valdira and then purchased the fowl for the day's dinner. Nearby beggar children could not resist drawing unflattering comparisons between Colmar and the captive gander. Laughing gaily, Valdira continued to lead the way past towering sacks of grain and heavily laden donkeys, making several additional stops to acquire vegetables, wine, and some expensive seasonings. The meal was clearly intended to be a celebratory one.

As a thriving port city, Karandoz attracted more exotic commerce than spices, however, and the men-at-arms displayed a covert interest in an arriving contingent of slaves, some of whom were female and not fully clad, in accordance with the most up-to-date marketing principles.