SWEATDROP STORIES

The Emperor's Hound

MORAG LEWIS

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✧ Index ✧

Chapter 1 9
In which Alyn meets Lord Miervaldis for the first time, is warned to keep an eye on him by a person unknown, and accompanies him to Fifth Star Court at the command of the Sun Emperor himself.

Chapter 2 25
In which Alyn and Lord Miervaldis discuss a murder, examine a body, talk to witnesses and suspects, and form opinions.

Chapter 3 41
In which Alyn begins lessons at Fifth Star Court, fails to get on with the other pages, and makes discoveries related to inheritance.

Chapter 4 58
In which Alyn makes a friend - maybe - attends Jaquan's funeral, and tails her lord when he goes to town in disguise.

Chapter 5 73
In which thoughts are marshalled, leads are followed up, suggestions are made and clues are obtained.

Chapter 6 90
In which Alyn attends Miervaldis at a formal dinner and a casual trip to town. Many things are overheard at both events.

Chapter 7 107
In which a letter from Alyn's brother prompts the multiplication of suspicions and suspects alike, much to Alyn's discomfort.

Chapter 8 122
In which Miervaldis and Alyn visit Cathecassa, meet Lord Cassian's wife and daughter, and return with more questions than answers.

Chapter 9 **137**
In which Miervaldis stirs up trouble while Alyn watches and worries.

Chapter 10 **153**
In which entirely the wrong people are arrested.

Chapter 11 **170**
In which Alyn discovers what Miervaldis has been accused of, and makes a decision.

Chapter 12 **185**
In which Alyn gives evidence, much to Miervaldis' dismay.

Chapter 13 **201**
In which significant progress is made following a return to Fifth Star Court and a visit to Cathecassa.

Chapter 14 **217**
In which research is carried out into the census records and the local cuisine, after which an accusation is made and answered.

Chapter 15 **232**
In which a second trial is held, Alyn claims a favour from the Sun Emperor, and matters are brought to a close.

Extras **250**

Author's note:
The plot of this book involves a murder, which is by nature unpleasant, as are the circumstances leading up to and around it. The investigations reveal, among other things, a history of sexual abuse perpetrated by one of the side characters. I did not want that to come as a nasty surprise to readers. Please note that there are no explicit details given, and nothing of that nature takes place during the narrative. The challenges faced by Alyn and Miervaldis are of a different kind entirely.

Lands of the Nine Star Courts

A lord's duty is to the Sun Emperor first and foremost, and then to his people, those he pledged to govern and protect. Thus a lord should not carry out work for any kind of remuneration, nor devote excessive time to scholarship. The rewards of paid work would be a distraction from his duty, as would devotion to a scholarly field, even one of high repute. While extensive scholarly study of any subject is inadvisable for a lord, the study of magic is completely inappropriate.

Excerpt from *Concerning the Duties of the Nobility of the Nine Star Courts*, by Syalan Vandrese.

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✧ 1 ✧

The day the scribe was murdered was the same day Alyn first saw her patron, although she had been in his service for nearly six months. The other pages in the Fourth Star Court had told her that was nothing unusual for Lord Miervaldis. The older pages could list on the fingers of one hand how many times they had seen her lord, and some of the kitchen staff didn't even recognise his name. Miraina, Alyn's best friend and the only other girl in her year, attended her assigned patron almost as rarely. But, Alyn had thought, at least he had turned up at the induction ceremony. The Fourth Star Court chamberlain had had to stand in for her.

So when the under-groom's boy arrived in the door of the classroom to announce that Lord Miervaldis wanted his page in the first hall, as soon as possible, it came as a complete surprise. Lord Fitzhugh had been droning on about variations of court law brought in four hundred years ago, and Alyn had long since stopped listening, slumped over her desk fiddling with her short, fluffy brown hair and dreaming about nothing more interesting than the end of the lesson. The knock at the door barely moved her from her reverie, but she blinked awake when she heard her name.

"Sorry, sir, but I was sent to ask for Alyn Vanyasdotter to attend on her lord. He's in the first hall."

Alyn didn't quite register what that meant at first. The teacher waved a laconic hand in her general direction.

"Go on, Alyn. You can copy Miraina's notes later."

Miraina gave Alyn a wink, and reached to take her friend's papers and quills as Alyn pushed clumsily out of the chair. She stood aside, took a breath, bowed to the teacher and ran from the room.

It was a long way from the classroom to the first hall. The Fourth Star Court was one of the smaller courts, but its ancient buildings still stretched over more than a square mile of ground, arranged in gracious, studied disarray around small gardens, cultivated orchards and sculpted stone courtyards. The pages were taught wherever was available, which today had meant one of the unused court rooms at the far end of the West Pavilion, almost as far as she could be from the Court's great first hall.

The under-groom's boy, Tom, followed behind her as she ran, her steps echoing in the court's corridors. Reaching the central cross corridor, she almost knocked over the head housekeeper and grimaced at Dame Clarin's angry shouts even as she raced away. She hoped she didn't end up cleaning the old tack rooms again. That had been bad enough the first time.

Putting potential punishments aside, she sped through the older rooms off the central corridor, swinging from the door frames to help her make the turns. There were three steps down to the enclosed kitchen garden, its sweet herby smell rising around her, then a rarely used door on the other side. She ducked into the pantry corridor and hurried through the busy kitchen, dodging a swipe from an under-cook with the ease of practice.

Racing down one of the subsidiary corridors, reaching the corner, grabbing the decorative gargoyle to steady and pivot herself, she flew around the bend, and almost hit a man standing right in front of her. Her feet went out from under her, and she only stopped herself from falling by clutching the helpful gargoyle tightly. The man turned round as she regained her balance; she bowed quickly, hoping he could not see her furious, embarrassed blush.

"I'm terribly sorry, my Lord..." she managed, staring at the floor.

"Ah, Alyn."

It was a light voice, not quite melodic, not a familiar one. She looked up at a tall, slim man, with tousled greying brown hair and pale brown eyes in a lean, weathered face. His hair was caught back in a loose ponytail tied with a scrap of velvet, although some curls had escaped to bob untidily around his ears. His clothes had been in fashion about fifteen years ago; a velvet waistcoat that hung rather loosely, as though he had lost weight, and short trousers caught with ties at the knees. He was a complete stranger; she gaped at him. He smiled.

"You have the misfortune of being my page this year, I'm afraid," said Lord Iarlaith Miervaldis.

Tom skidded to a halt behind her as she stared at her patron, and nudged her in the side. She inhaled sharply and glared at him sidelong, dropping into the appropriate obeisance.

"My Lord," she said, not sure what to make of his odd, self-deprecating greeting.

"Alyn Vanyasdotter. Thank you Tom, that was very quick."

"Milord," said Tom, and Alyn knew from his tone that he was grinning. He poked her in the side as revenge for her glare as he turned to leave.

"Alyn. I'm sorry to drag you away from your studies, but I have need of your help."

"Yes, my lord," said Alyn, hoping that was what he was expecting. What was he going to say? Most first year pages didn't do much in the way of service; their main duty was to learn. Once they had learnt from their patrons, but more and more often

they were taught in groups by one lord. Alyn's father had complained about the changes, but Alyn didn't think it made a difference who taught her all the boring stuff. She had expected to wait at least a year before doing anything more than wine service for her lord, not that she'd even done that yet. She glanced up at him; he was looking distracted, busy.

"We have to go to the Fifth Star Court," he said. "I will need you in attendance - I'm sorry, will that be all right? I know this is very early, but -"

In attendance at the Fifth Star Court? "Yes, my lord," she hurried to push in. "I swore I would serve you at the induction." *Which you weren't at*, she thought. He looked abruptly guilty, as though she had said it out loud.

"Yes, you did, didn't you? I'm sorry I have neglected you," he said, looking directly at her for the first time. "Oh, get up, please. You've been down there long enough for five lords, and you're making my knees hurt."

Alyn stood up, feeling a bit disgruntled. He was hardly acting like a proper lord. Miraina's patron, Lord Evernar, was propriety itself, all dressed in velvet with a rich, important voice. She hadn't had a choice of patron, of course, but she still didn't want to end up with some weird... *eccentric.*

"Please pack," her lord went on. "For yourself, of course, and for me. I have some business to attend to and we must leave as soon as possible. My room is on the second floor; ask Anitia to tell you which one it is. Then bring the chests to the coach yard and wait for me there."

Anitia the maid? He knew her by name? Alyn shook her head, confused, then hastily nodded. "Yes, my lord," she said, and turned to hurry up the stairs. She paused at the top to look down, but he was already gone. She wondered what it was that he'd had to see to.

Miervaldis' rooms were at one end of the long corridor on the second floor of the first hall. She had gone there during her first week, hoping to catch a glimpse of her absent patron. She hurried along the richly carpeted halls, making a mental list of the things a lord might want. Clothes - but what to choose? He was hardly conventional, if what he had been wearing just now was any indication of his taste. Cleaning things? What was she going to bring?

The room was open, and she paused in the doorway. Anitia stood in the middle of the room with her hands on her hips. She heard Alyn's footsteps and turned with a smile.

"He said he'd send you up. I've got most of his things ready here," she said, and gestured to the big, shabby couch that occupied most of the living room. Alyn blinked at it, then looked back to the maid, wondering why she seemed to know so much more of what was going on.

"How did you know what to put in?" Alyn asked. Anitia winked.

"There's not much else to pack," she said, and pulled open the door of the enormous, ornate wardrobe standing by the couch. It was all but empty. Alyn looked

from it to the small pile of neatly folded clothes on the couch, confused.

"Aren't lords supposed to have more clothes?"

Anitia laughed. "You'd think so," she said. "But at least it makes our jobs easier. I have to go, I'm supposed to be helping prepare for lunch. Will you be all right here?"

"Oh - yes, of course. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Enjoy your trip," and Anitia hurried from the room, leaving Alyn to realise she didn't even know where her patron's luggage might be.

In the end, she located two dusty clothes chests and piled the clothes inside. She had found Miervaldis' rooms bare of almost anything of interest. The chests had been stuffed under a window seat in the small dining room, which also contained a battered table and a single chair, a lamp and a faded picture of an unfamiliar man and woman. The main living room held only the couch and wardrobe, and a tatty rug. The privy room had a few personal effects which she put on top of the clothes in one of the chests. The tiny bedroom off the dining room barely contained the bed. The last room was locked, so she couldn't see inside. Peeking through the keyhole afforded her the view of a desk, but nothing else. It would make sense for it to be a study, but why was it locked? She straightened up, frowning. What else should she pack?

"May I come in?"

She spun round, shocked, and hurried to the living room. The voice had come from a man standing just outside the door to the corridor. *So he can't have seen me at the keyhole, surely?* He was not someone she recognised, slim, not tall, neatly dressed in dull, dark colours. She nodded mutely, and as he came into the room, she noticed an odd scent about him. It wasn't unpleasant, exactly, but for some reason it made her uneasy.

"Alyn, am I right?"

"Yes..." She left off the 'sir', uncertain of his status.

"I have a task for you. The eminent Lord Miervaldis is going to the Fifth Star Court, is he not?"

Alyn gaped. He stepped a little closer and lowered his voice.

"When you made your oath, Alyn, to whom did you first swear?"

Caught off guard, she answered automatically.

"The Emperor."

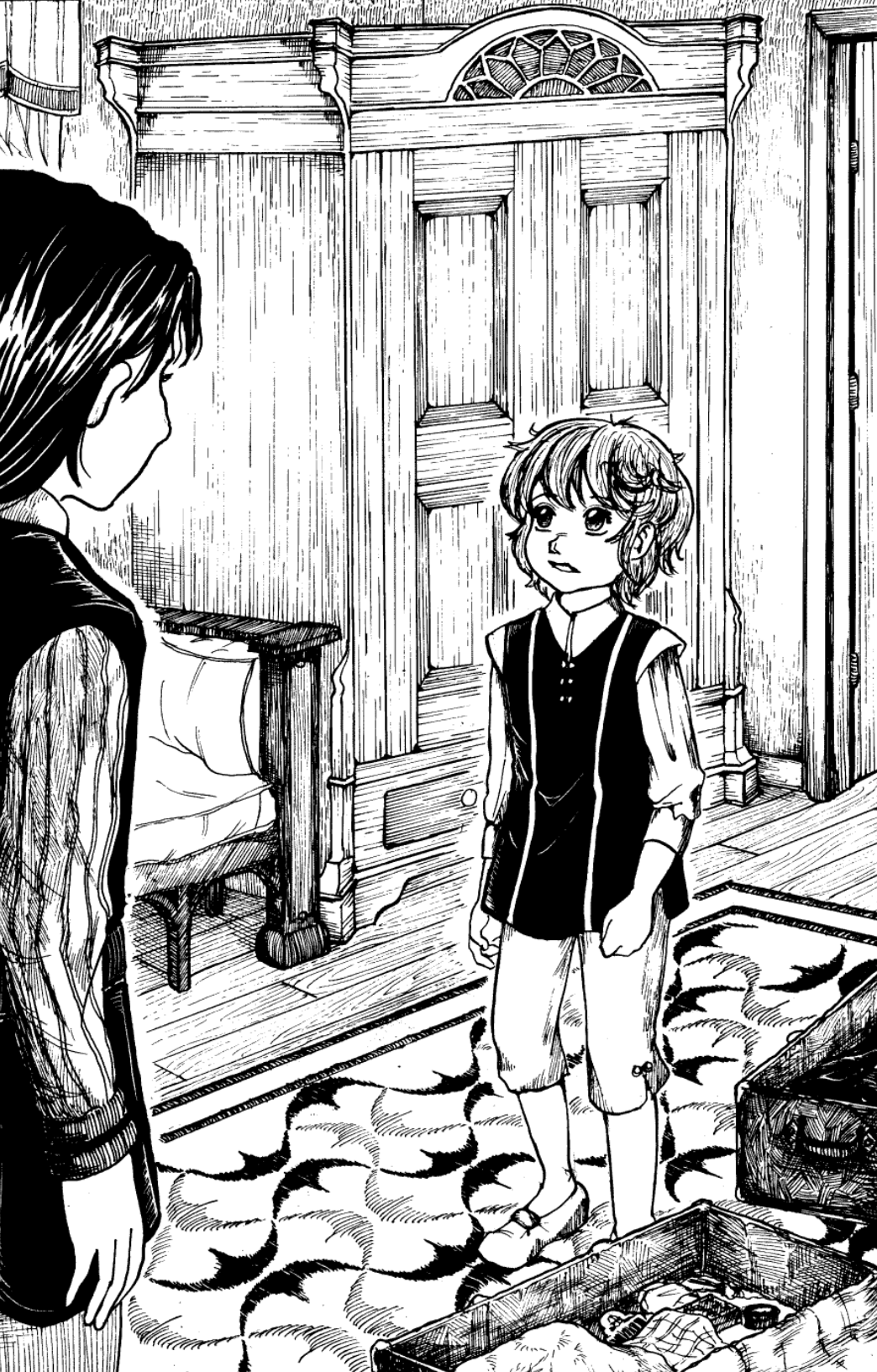
"And then?"

"Lord Miervaldis."

"Ah," and he smiled, which didn't help. "Then you will understand, your loyalty is first to the Emperor."

"Yes..."

"When you go with your patron, please be alert to what he may do. A report will be required in the event of anything... untoward."



"Untoward?" *What?*

"You understand, I'm sure." He leaned towards her, and she flinched back. "Have a safe journey, Alyn."

"Th - thank you."

He left the room, walking as silently across the threadbare rug as on the rich carpet of the corridor. Alyn stared after him, confused, a little frightened, but most of all, desperately curious.

She didn't spend much longer in her lord's suite, although she dearly wanted to know what was in the locked study. Instead, she found a servant and asked him to take the two chests to the coach yard. Then she hurried to her own small room in the pages' dormitory on the other side of the orchard, and pulled her little clothes chest out from under the bed. Looking at her wardrobe, she wondered if she had more clothes than her lord - but then, she wasn't going to need most of them. She picked two alternative outfits and one dress, added her washing things and picked the whole thing up with some effort to make her way to the coach yard. Miraina caught her outside the dormitory.

"Where are you going?" she asked, eyes alight with curiosity.

"Fifth Star Court," Alyn said, and put the box down. "Oh, hey, give me my writing stuff. I should take that too."

"Be careful," Miraina said as Alyn opened the chest. "You don't want to get ink on your clean things. Anyway, why are you going to Fifth Star Court?"

"I have no idea, but Lord Miervaldis is and I have to attend him."

"You lucky thing! Tell me all about it when you get back?"

"Of course," Alyn said, and picked the clothes chest up again with an effort.

"Safe journey," Miraina called after her as she hurried down the path, ducking the apple branches to make the shortcut to the coach yard. Alyn glanced back once, but couldn't see anything through the blossoming orchard.

Her first thought, when she reached the coach yard, was that Miervaldis had forgotten to ask for his coach. Her second, with a shock of horror, was that she had forgotten to ask for his coach, which must surely be her task. She looked around wildly, but there was no-one in attendance except for the groom holding the heads of the two horses harnessed to the dull brown, slightly grubby-looking coach on the far side. It was unmarked with the insignia of any court, so she assumed it had to be some domestic service. The cobbled yard was otherwise bare - bare of people, of horses, of straw... and of her lord. The stable doors were open but there was no-one inside; she could make out the brown head of a curious horse poking his nose out to see what was happening.

"Alyn?"

She spun round to see her patron's head in the window of the small brown coach. He beckoned. "This one's ours. Thank you for sorting out my luggage; you can put your chest on top."

Alyn walked over and put her chest on top of the two belonging to Lord Miervaldis, which she now saw sat next to each other on the platform at the back of the coach. From the other side, a groom came to tether hers on securely. She went to the door her lord was holding open, and climbed in.

"Thank you," she said, seating herself opposite him, facing backwards. Miervaldis nodded. He was holding a heavy book on his lap and had a short carbon stick in his hand; he'd been making notes in the margin. When he saw her looking at him, he closed the book casually and tucked the carbon stick in his pocket. Alyn mentally winced. *That's going to leave marks all over his clothes.*

She looked around the carriage; it was as small on the inside as on the outside, but the leather seats were surprisingly comfortable. There was a Sun Court insignia discreetly placed on the sides, although the outside had been unmarked. So this wasn't her lord's coach? Had it -? It must have been sent by the Sun Court! She looked back at him, but before she could ask anything, the driver opened the little hatch into the carriage and spoke just over her head, making her jump.

"Ready, my lord?"

"Ready."

The hatch closed, and she heard the driver whistle to the horses. The carriage rolled sedately out of the coachyard and down the long drive, between the horse chestnut trees in their new green leaves. The sun shone through them, making dappled patterns in the coach where it came through the window. Alyn gazed out of the window; she hadn't been outside Court since she had arrived in the autumn, brought by her father in the family coach with her mother and brothers and sister. All the other pages had been arriving too; a cacophony of coaches from all over the country disgorging excited fourteen-year-olds come to start their service and their younger siblings, jealous and excited in equal measure, older pages looking lofty and enjoying their privileged positions, and parents looking by turns harassed, proud and confused. Her older brother Byran, normally assigned to the Eighth Star Court, had pontificated about her duties, and Illiana, her older sister, made eyes at some of the older pages and occasionally wondered, out loud and pointedly, at Alyn's choice. Her littlest brothers ran around chasing each other and sometimes other small children, until her father bellowed stentoriously at them to behave, which had only worked for a few minutes at best. The chamberlain had been attempting to bring order to the tumult, assisted by three or four servants all running around with huge piles of paper.

Alyn remembered her first sight of the Court after they had driven up the long drive, tall and gracious through the glorious golds and browns of the autumn horse chestnut trees. It had seemed to preside calmly, as though this regular circus was no more than a brief interruption to years of order, and it expected all to resume in due course. Which it had the following day, when after the induction and the welcoming banquet all the parents and families had driven away and she and her classmates had started their lessons.

Today, though, the drive was empty except for their small coach, silent except for the clop of the horses' hooves and the whistling song of the birds outside. The dappled sun warmed her face, making her smile. There was an excited feeling in her stomach; this was new, this was different, and right now, it was fun. She dropped back into the carriage and looked over at her patron, wondering if she could ask about what they were doing. He was looking at the book again, but the carbon stick was still in his pocket. She wondered what he had been doing with it. Why would a lord write on a book? Books were expensive, and the ones that nobles bought were stories for fun and relaxation. Nobody would need to make notes on a romance. Scholars' books were different, but no lord would have something like that. She peeked surreptitiously at the book, but with it open on his lap she couldn't make out the title, and the text was too small and cramped to read upside down. Trying to read it felt a bit like looking through the keyhole of the study, so she looked away again, feeling a little guilty.

The coach finally reached the end of the Court's drive and turned onto the big road that led towards the Sun and Moon Courts. Fifth Star Court was quite a way from Fourth Star Court, despite its name; she knew they would head towards the central Courts and turn onto one of the orbital roads that ran around them before heading back out again to their destination.

"My lord," she started, unable to contain her curiosity any more. "What are we going to Fifth Star Court for?"

Miervaldis closed the book, marking his page with a long white feather.

"How do pages learn?" he asked. Alyn blinked, surprised.

"There are lessons..." she began, unsure of what he wanted.

"No," he interrupted, then looked thoughtful. "Well, maybe sometimes, but do you really learn anything from them?"

"No," she admitted.

"No. Pages learn from following, from copying, from trying things out. Most of all, they learn from listening. I'm sorry I haven't been around to train you properly - I didn't actually realise I had a page until recently." He looked rueful; Alyn was too busy trying to work out what he meant to react to that revelation. "But now, well, I have a feeling I know why we've been called to the Fifth Star Court, but I don't know for sure. So I won't tell you. You'll see soon enough, anyway. But when we are there, you will be silent. You will listen - to everything, but most of all, to me. And you will do as I say, without question. Do you understand?"

Alyn stared at him. His face was suddenly serious, and he was looking straight at her. She dropped her eyes, then looked back up.

"Yes, my lord. But -"

"But?"

"If I have a question..."

"What do you think?"

"I should wait for the right time?"

"Good," Miervaldis said. "Yes. When we're alone, if possible. I will answer as much as I can - truly, I'm not trying to keep you ignorant - but if I'm right, this could be a difficult situation, and I need you to be discreet."

"I understand," Alyn said, and felt that thrill of excitement deepen.

"I'm sure you do," and he smiled, relaxing a bit.

"Can I ask a question, then?"

"Now, yes. Ask away."

"Where is your carriage?"

He smiled again. "I don't keep one. It's expensive, and I rarely use them. This was kindly sent for our use, which is why it looks like it doesn't belong to anyone. Its appearance is deceptive, though."

"What?"

"Look outside."

Alyn did so, not sure what he meant. They were still on the radial road, and the sun was now high overhead. Fields stretched away on either side of the broad, paved surface, with the occasional figure visible at a distance bending to their work. Closer to... closer to the road whisked past at quite a rate, and now she paid attention to it, she realised that the horses' hooves were beating out the cadence of a canter. She turned back, surprised.

"We're going really fast," she said, and felt stupid for not realising it before, given how the carriage rocked and swayed.

"It's built for speed," her lord confirmed. "We'll be changing horses when we reach the ring road, and again before we get to the Fifth Star Court. Hopefully we'll be there before the end of the day."

Alyn wondered again what was so important about Lord Miervaldis - or the situation at Fifth Star Court - that would require such a coach, such a speed. Which would require such discretion. Then the words of the dark man in Miervaldis' rooms came back to her, and she shivered, suddenly a little afraid. There was more going on here than she knew, and she felt out of her depth.

Across from her, Miervaldis shut the book again with a muted thud which emphasised its mass. She looked up at him.

"Alyn," he said, "I must confess, I didn't know I had a page until about two weeks ago. I - well, it doesn't matter. But I know very little about you. Would you mind -" he looked a little embarrassed, she thought - "would you mind telling me about yourself?"

She stared at him. It wasn't such a very odd request, she supposed, but, it did seem a bit strange. And he looked almost apologetic. Mentally, she shrugged.

"My family live in the demesne of the Third Star Court, in the west," she said. "I've got five brothers and a sister who wants to marry a lord as fast as possible." She wondered how that was going; surely a betrothal would have to be arranged for Illiana soon?

"And you chose a different route." It wasn't a question as such, but she answered it anyway.

"Yes, it was all right because of Illiana. And it's a good education, my father says, although he complained about how the lessons work now when my brother told him about them."

"What do you think?"

"Sorry?"

"Do you think it's a good education? You've only been having lessons for six months or so, but what do you think of them?"

Alyn frowned. Why would anyone care what a page thought? How honest should she be? She glanced at Miervaldis; he was watching her with careful interest. *Why does he care what I think about the lessons?*

"Well... they're a bit boring. I'm sorry! But... well, I suppose if my patron were Lord Fitzhugh, that would be the same, so... and it's better for the lords if their pages are taught all together, it means they can do the important stuff and not be distracted."

"Do you really think that?"

"Think what?"

"That it's better for the lords to have their pages taught together, to keep the pages away?"

"Why wouldn't it be better?"

He said nothing, just shrugged a little in a way that suggested she should keep going. She paused. *What is good about having a page?* Something Byran had said to her once came back to her mind. *What is good about teaching a little brother?*

"I suppose... having a page means teaching a subordinate. And it's a good thing to teach because it makes you think about what you're teaching." Her mad plan five years ago to teach Davian and Simman, two and three years younger than her respectively, how to whittle came to mind. She hadn't achieved anything more than a badly cut finger for Davian and a scolding for herself, but she had learned how hard it is to pass on knowledge and techniques that she didn't fully understand herself. Miervaldis nodded, his eyes implying he wanted to hear more.

"Um... it's better for a page to learn directly, too, one to one. That's better than a class." She stopped, not sure what else she could say.

"And what is good about the classes?"

She stared at him. *I thought the classes were bad?* But he just looked expectantly at her, so she thought again.

"They're good because... because learning from lots of people means learning lots of stuff. I mean... if I attended you all the time, my lord, I'd learn about attending and I'd learn the stuff you know. But if I attended you some of the time and went to lessons, I'd learn about attending and I'd learn the stuff you know and I'd learn more from other lords. And it means people with, um... well, lords who aren't so good at teaching can learn from other people too."

"So which system is better?"

"I… both? Can you have both?"

He gave her a long, thoughtful look, then glanced down. "Perhaps," he said. "That might be best. Thank you, Alyn."

"Can I ask a question?"

"Yes, go on."

"Why didn't you know about me until two weeks ago? And if you think the current lessons are a bad way to teach, why… why didn't you do anything two weeks ago?" He looked surprised, then strangely amused.

"I didn't say I thought the current lessons are bad," he said, and Alyn realised he hadn't said anything about his opinions at all. "But in answer to your question, I didn't realise you were here because I was away until two weeks ago. I was visiting my lands, and then some friends. I'm sure they sent a letter, but it never caught up to me. When I came back, they told me about you and I had to take some time to tidy a few things up. Then the summons to the Fifth Star Court came, and, well, I am sorry. I will try to be a better patron in the future, although you'll have to bear with me. I've not done this before."

That was surprising, given how old he seemed, but the Fourth Star Court was quite small and not very important, so probably got fewer pages than usual. Alyn smiled, almost involuntarily, at his apology, and the conversation lapsed. What he had said about visiting his lands bothered her; she thought about it over again, and realised that if he had been visiting his lands, and his friends, he must have been doing it for almost six months or longer. And in all that time, he had been out of touch with the Court? That didn't seem very likely… or if it was true, it seemed a bit suspicious. She thought about the other things he had said, dissecting his words in her head to think over, and slowly realised that she had done most of the talking, and even when he had spoken, he had revealed very little about himself. And for all that he'd said he wanted to know about her, she'd said hardly anything about herself, her likes and dislikes, her family and her friends. No, he had been after something else. *He was asking me that stuff to see how I think. What kind of person I am. He didn't care about my family, or about the lessons. He wanted to know how I think. And… he was very good at getting that out of me while giving nothing away.*

What kind of a lord uses questions like that?

Within the hour they had reached the first junction and the horses had been swiftly changed. Alyn watched the fields whisk by, punctuated by tracts of forest and the occasional bridge. The longest bridge was the one with seven arches that reached over the mighty river Voront. She watched a barge on the Voront being pulled slowly upstream by two heavy horses, patiently plodding up the towpath tugging their burden against the gentle, insistent current. The sun descended through banks of cloud. Miervaldis read his book.

A few miles after the seven-arched bridge they came to the second junction, to turn onto the radial road south-east to the Fifth Star Court. Here they stopped for a bit longer; Miervaldis spoke to the men in charge of the way station and they brought out bread and cheese for him and for Alyn, who had not even realised she was hungry until she saw the food. She ate it so quickly she nearly choked, and they gave her ice cold water to wash it down with. When she had recovered from her subsequent coughing fit and the fresh horses were harnessed, they started again up the road to Fifth Star Court.

The sun sank towards the horizon, beginning to colour the western sky behind them a pale pink shading to deep gold. Alyn stared out of the window still, although the views were very similar to the countryside around the Fourth Star Court. The trees now cast long shadows on the road, and rooks whirled around their tops, cawing loudly as the coach rattled by underneath. The coachman never spoke a word, and Miervaldis read until the light grew too dim, then laid his book aside and shut his eyes. Alyn sat back against the soft cushions but kept looking out of the window, waiting for her first glimpse of the Fifth Star Court.

For all her good intentions, she woke when the coach finally came to a stop in the coachyard. She pushed up from the seat and stared outside. The sun had mostly sunk; tendrils of light-touched clouds still traced the horizon, but it was otherwise dark. The coachyard, however, blazed with light; lanterns were arranged everywhere. Above it, the bulk of Fifth Star Court loomed into the sky, squat and angular to her eyes where Fourth Star Court was gracious and elegant. Hundreds of lit windows dotted its walls, making its size very clear; it was at least twice as big as Fourth Star Court, and she thought there must be more beyond what she could see.

The coachman jumped down from his seat - she heard his boots hit the cobbles - and spoke to the grooms who came running out to meet them, carrying yet more lanterns. Across from her, Miervaldis opened his eyes and sat up, stretching carefully. The door opened, and a well-dressed man stuck his head in.

"Welcome, my lord," he said briskly. "If you will come this way? I will take you to the chamberlain."

Miervaldis climbed out of the carriage, and Alyn moved to follow him, becoming uncomfortably aware that she desperately needed to relieve herself. She bit her lip and held on, following silently behind her lord and the steward who was leading the way into the house. Behind her, an army of grooms came to deal with the weary horses, and porters followed to take the chests from the coach.

The steward led the way into a wide, well-lit hall with an ornately tiled floor and narrow, gracious columns lining the walls. At the other end, two staircases ran up to a common landing, with double doors leading to the next room. A plump, prosperous-looking man dressed in a long dark robe and bearing a staff of office was descending the right hand staircase. The steward murmured something to Miervaldis, who nodded. The plump man came to meet them, eyes moving rapidly from Alyn to

her lord and back again. Alyn tried not to cross her legs.

"Lord Miervaldis," the man said. "I am Emilio Otakar, the chamberlain of this court. Be welcome here."

"Thank you," said Miervaldis. "This is Alyn Vanyasdotter, my page. She will be attending me."

The chamberlain looked at Alyn again. She met his gaze and saw worry lines on his brow, and a tic near his eye.

"Be welcome," he said to her, and she dipped in the appropriate courtesy.

"Thank you, Chamberlain," she said, wondering when it would be polite to ask about the privies. There was a pause as Miervaldis and the chamberlain looked at each other, then the shorter man nodded to himself and turned.

"If you'll come this way, please, my lord," he said. "I'll show you to your rooms. And then, if I might beg your indulgence...."

"The Emperor asked me to come," Miervaldis said quietly. "Whatever is necessary, please don't hesitate." Alyn sucked in her breath. She'd thought, from the coach, that the summons might have come from the Sun Court, but to hear it confirmed - and not just the Sun Court, the Emperor himself - was still a shock. The chamberlain flinched a little, then nodded and walked forward without saying anything.

The rooms they were led to were luxurious and well positioned, facing south. Tall windows would let the sun in during the day, and plenty of lamps kept them bright at night. Their chests were already there, looking a bit lonely and somewhat shabby on the thick, bright rug in the middle of the floor. There was the main sitting room, a study, a wash room and two bedrooms, one much like a closet for Alyn, and one almost the same size as the sitting room, with its own fireplace and a large, four-poster bed. Mercifully, the chamberlain left them there to clean up after the journey; as soon as he had left, Alyn bolted for the privies at the end of the corridor.

A short while later, relieved, refreshed and feeling hungry, she followed the chamberlain and her lord to a small room two floors down. The court was enormous and labyrinthine; by the time they reached their destination she had the horrible feeling she'd never find her way back on her own. The room was plain but still rich, and when she sat in the chair Miervaldis gestured her to, she sank into soft cushions which all but encouraged her to sleep. The chamberlain sat, but on the edge of his chair. His worried look had deepened. He didn't speak.

"Please," Lord Miervaldis said eventually, "tell me what the problem is." The chamberlain winced and looked down, then back up again. Alyn held her breath.

"I need your help, my lord," he said. "Lord Cassian needs your help."

"Lord Cassian?" Miervaldis frowned slightly. "I don't think I know him."

"No, probably you would not," agreed the chamberlain.

"So... how can I help him? And you?" Miervaldis pressed, after a further silence.

"I am hoping you can help clear his name."

"Clear his name of?" Alyn heard frustration in her lord's voice, not quite masked. The chamberlain looked away and back again.

"Of murder, my lord."