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Written by Stephen Hunt

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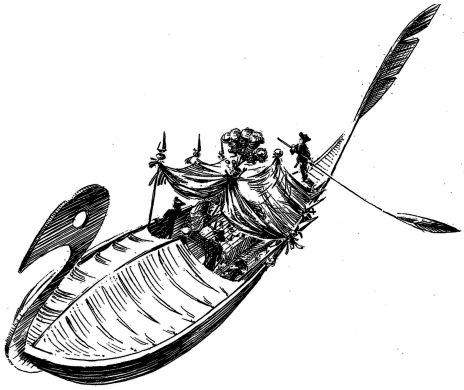
SECRETS OF THE FIRE SEA

STEPHEN HUNT



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You would not cling to his guiding hand
if the way was always bright.
And you would not care to walk by faith
could you always walk by sight.

Anon

CHAPTER ONE

The Isle of Jago. Hermetica City

Watching the underwater craft carrying the ambassador away from Jago's shores was as good a way as any to pass the afternoon, if you could ignore the distant thrum of the iron battlements keeping the hordes of prowling monsters out of Hermetica City.

Hannah turned as her friend Chalph joined her near the edge of the tall cliffs. Not so near the edge that she might be scalded by the boiling water lashing up from the Fire Sea, but near enough to glimpse the departing ambassador's u-boat on the surface. The u-boat was meeting up with the Jagonese tug that had been assigned to escort it beyond the coral line, before it braved the maze of boiling passages of water that veined their way through the bubbling magma of the Fire Sea.

'They've picked a good day for going,' said Chalph, raising his black-furred arm to point to the u-boat on the surface, guide lines being tossed across to the tug. The sailors were wearing rubber scald suits, coloured yellow for visibility. 'No steam storms today – and I can't smell any cold fronts moving in.'

'That's a pity,' said Hannah. She loved the violence of the arctic rain hitting the superheated waters of the Fire Sea and the parched coastlines of Jago. She felt alive when steam storms broke across the island's shores, geysers erupting from the ocean, hot mists sliding across the basalts plains, lightning painting the landscape and the crack of thunder urging the monsters laying siege outside their battlements into a frenzy. Hannah felt more alive in a storm than she ever did down in the empty echoing streets of their capital's vaults.

Chalph rubbed at his face with a paw-like hand. Like the rest of the ursine race, he had wonderfully expressive eyes – pupils that could narrow to a pinhead or expand out until the rim of yellow around the edges was driven out and the features of his face vanished in a mask of black. 'I wonder how long I've got left on Jago now that the ambassador has gone?'

A blade of fear stabbed Hannah. That Chalph urs Chalph might depart back to his country across the sea, leaving her as good as friendless on the island. 'But you've been brought up here, the same as me. Your house can't just make you go back to Pericur.'

'Oh, they *can*, alright,' said Chalph. 'Why do you think our ambassador is leaving? She supported the claim of the archduchess to the throne of Pericur. The ambassador being recalled back home is her reward. Our conservatives don't like merchants operating on Jago. They believe Jago is sacred soil, that our trade here is an affront to the scriptures. You wait and see. The trade concession the House of Ush had been granted will be cancelled by the new archduchess, then we'll all be back on Pericurian soil within the year.'

'But I'll still be here,' said Hannah. '*We'll* be here. The race of man. . .'

Chalph moved back as a spray of boiling water carried on

the wind and hissed towards his boots. 'The archduchess won't need to force your people from the island.' He clambered over a boulder and pointed to the nearest of the guard towers rising up behind the sloped iron battlements. A large ursine mercenary was just visible inside, the light glinting off the brass of the gas tank on his back.

'Careful,' said Hannah. 'The soldiers might see us, report us for being out on the surface.'

'They don't care we're here,' replied Chalph. 'They get paid for keeping the monsters out, not keeping us in. And that's the nub of it. Your senate relies on our free company fighters to keep the capital safe, not your police militia. The free company may be mercenaries, but they will not dare disobey a direct order from the archduchess to leave Jago, and then who will protect your city?'

Hannah shrugged. 'The militia hate your mercenaries. They never wanted free company fighters here, that was the senate's choice. They'd throw a party on the docks and help load your mercenaries into a boat if the free company were ordered off Jago.'

'And your senate would widen the draft to make up the numbers,' said Chalph. 'Do you want to spend the rest of your life in a guard tower, hoping that the power charging the battlements doesn't fail on your watch?'

'It won't come to that,' said Hannah. But she knew how optimistic her words sounded even as she spoke them. There were press gangs operating across the city now, and even the senate's latest raft of anti-emigration legislation wasn't going to fill all the empty vacancies in every trade from the tug service to clerks for the ministries. 'In the cathedral they're saying that the new ambassador from Pericur is going to be one of your modernizers. He'll argue against any attempt to embargo Jago.'

'Of course he's a modernizer,' laughed Chalph – although there was little humour in his growl of a voice. 'Jago's been a dead-end posting for embassy staff for centuries. The new ambassador is being sent here as a punishment! He was ambassador to the Kingdom of Jackals before. A bit of a demotion, don't you think? From the most powerful nation in the world to this cold, dying place.'

'How can you say that, Chalph? You were born here!'

'You weren't,' said Chalph. 'You should go home. Go anywhere there's a future for you.'

'This is my home.'

'No,' Chalph insisted. 'The Kingdom of Jackals is your real home, this is just where you ended up.'

Hannah shook her head. 'Jago is all I've known.'

'It's all I've known too,' said Chalph. 'But there's more out there than this place.' Chalph picked up a piece of rock and angrily tossed it in the direction of the Horn of Jago, the vast peak rising up behind them out of a cluster of the capital's domed greenhouses. He threw the stone as if he might break one of the tall stained-glass windows along the senatorial palace circling the mountain. Hannah winced as the flare-house at the very top of the summit erupted with magnesium phosphorescence. A brief flash of light to help guide in the traders that had long ago stopped calling on the island.

'It's just that I don't want you to go back to Pericur,' said Hannah, trying to placate her quick-tempered friend. 'Alice says there might be war between Pericur and the Kingdom of Jackals now there's a new archduchess sitting on your throne.'

'War? No, that's foolish talk. I'm sure the archduchess would be happier if the Kingdom's colonies disappeared from our southern border, but traditionalist though our new baronial council may be, they understand well enough the power of the Kingdom's Royal Aerostatical Navy. The archduchess

might close the border and hope the rest of the world goes away, but she won't be invading Jackelian possessions anytime soon. Your people have airships, mine don't.'

'The Jagonese are my people,' said Hannah.

'Your parents were both Jackelian,' said Chalph. 'The senate can't stop you leaving the island. You have a choice, at least. More of a choice than I have. I'm bonded in service to the House of Ush. I go where the baroness sends me, just like the baroness has to trade where the archduchess sells her the charter to operate. But you, you can travel to the Kingdom, to Concorzia, go to the Catosian city-states if the fancy takes you. But all you do is stay here. You're wasting your life away on this island.'

'It doesn't feel like a waste to me.'

'It should do,' said Chalph. He pulled out a large Pericurian timepiece from a pocket in the heavy dark leather clothes that were the fashion among his nation. 'You're the cleverest person I know, but you're surely one of the laziest too. The entrance exam is beginning now. You're meant to be back at the cathedral, not watching steam shapes above the ocean.'

'Yes,' sighed Hannah, 'I suppose I am.' She pointed at one of the clouds of mist leaping up off the sea. 'That one's a lion.'

Chalph responded to the game and pointed at another wall of steaming mist rolling up behind the first. 'And look, that one's my future. Come on, let's see if we can't find you one too.'

It was a measure of how determined Chalph was to secure a life for Hannah off Jago that he had personally come to fetch her back to the cathedral. Ursine might be more or less the same height as their counterparts in the race of man, but the dense flesh and thick muscles of the bear-like people meant that a citizen of Pericur usually weighed twice as much as a similarly sized human. And Chalph urs Chalph had dragged

his weight up every rung lining the air vent before wrestling open the heavy armoured door that opened out over the black cliffs of Jago.

Now both Hannah and Chalph had to descend hundreds of rungs back down to the subterranean city without slipping – always tricky the nearer you got to the surface; where the heat from the Fire Sea made sweaty, slippery hands – or paws – an occupational hazard when gripping the ladder. Ventilation passage ninety-two was a long way from the cathedral too, close to the submarine pens of the docks – like the rest of the capital, deep underground in the city's machine-hewn vaults. But vent ninety-two's isolation had an advantage. It was Hannah Conquest's favourite way up to the surface. Without a single u-boat sitting moored in the underground pens among the hundreds of tugs waiting unmanned for trade that would probably never return to the island, there were rarely any adults around to see Hannah emerging from the vent shaft and report her to the police militia. It wasn't so much that people feared Hannah and her friends might fall and break their necks – though that was often the stated concern that forbade them to leave the city – it was the fear that a careless child might leave open an armoured door up top, allowing in one of the beasts from the island's cold interior.

Down below it was just as she had expected. Hannah and Chalph emerged from the vent watched only by the dark, empty eyes of passages that led to the underground water locks and lifting rooms up to the sea-bed. There were no tug crew about the docks; most of the sailors would be back home, drawing half-pay while their fire-breaker vessels sat equally idle tied up around the pens. Guiding the Pericurian ambassador's u-boat out through the Fire Sea was a rare flurry of activity for the service this morning.

It was a long way back home through the Eliza Vaults – a

lonely walk past empty warehouses and boarded-up taverns and guesthouses for sailors that no longer visited Jago's shores, before Hannah and Chalph began to pass through the more inhabited parts of the capital, each vault larger than the last as they followed the connected chambers towards the heart of Hermetica City. The two friends travelled on foot, ignoring the cries from gondolas drifting along the city's canals. Chalph was a junior apprentice in an increasingly impoverished foreign merchant house and Hannah a ward of the church, and neither had the little platinum pennies that a gondola owner would demand for a quick ride towards the cathedral.

It seemed to Hannah as if they had crossed every one of capital's arched bridges by the time the waters widened out into the Grand Canal, and here at least Hermetica City still felt like a metropolis. Noise. Smells. Activity. People about the arcaded passages of shops, colonnaded walks that were still polished and cleaned by the district's workers. People, it was always people that made a place. Little private skiffs moving down the canal, paddles turning under the power of chemical batteries with the whiff of eggs about them. Large oared barges moored for use as restaurants along the canal walls, bored kitchen staff leaning out of the windows to talk to idle gondola men. Hawkers' cries filling the air, knife-grinding for a penny a blade, pig gelders offering their services to the increasing numbers of people keeping livestock in their canal-side houses and apartments. Not trusting to the scant food supplies coming down from the greenhouses on the surface, not now so many of their labourers had left for the fertile wheat plains of Concorzia. Where once civilization had clustered around the warm coastline of Jago as the glaciers moved south and enveloped the world under white sheets of ice, now the islanders were themselves clinging ever tighter to the noise and din of each other, leaving the fringes of their

capital to the water rats, cavern bamboo and the shadows of their ancient glory.

Even the roof of the subterranean vaults seemed to burn brighter in the centre of the city, the diode plates shimmering above in an approximation of the sun the mist-shrouded island's surface hardly ever saw, especially now, in the winter. Though the seasons mattered little to the Jagonese; not with their flash steam systems, powered by the underground water table warmed by volcanic action within, and the Fire Sea without. If only the island had more people. They could continue to live on Jago for another two thousand years – the machinations of the Archduchess of Pericur and the rising power of her nation on the opposite side of the Fire Sea be damned.

It wasn't long before Hannah and Chalph reached the largest – and, some said, most elegantly carved vault in the city, the vast circular cavern of the Seething Round. Here, flanking the grand canal, buildings stood as high as twenty storeys, sash windows sparkling as brightly as jewels. And there at its centre, Jago Cathedral, the Grand Canal surrounding it like a moat, spanned by three bridges leading across to its chambers. The largest bridge – the south – lay opposite the steps leading up into the Horn of Jago itself, the mountain long ago hollowed out like a termite mound for the richest vaults and streets of the capital, topped by the senate and capped at its summit by their flare-house. Yes, the light of Jago had once burned with far more than the Fire Sea's red glow reflected from its basalt cliffs. For those who ruled the city below from high inside the mountain, it probably seemed as if nothing had changed – and even Hannah, at her tender age, could see that that was part of the problem.

There were extra priests and vergers standing at all three bridges across to the cathedral now. Last month, Jago Cathedral

had been broken into at night and the altar raided for silver, its collection boxes smashed. The crime no doubt perpetrated by would-be emigrants desperate to scrape together enough coins to bribe the harbour workers to look the other way when the next supply vessel docked.

Hannah chose the smallest bridge to try to sneak across to the cathedral, but Chalph's heavy six-foot figure following behind her was unmissable. A tonsured priest sucked on his teeth in a disapproving way as they passed. 'You may be late, Damson Conquest, but I can't be letting your friend into the cathedral.'

'Because he's ursine?'

'Because he's a believer, miss. In the scriptures of Pericur, unless you've renounced your faith, Chalph urs Chalph?'

'My house may be of a reforming bent,' said Chalph, 'but I don't believe we're ready to renounce the scripture of the Divine Quad quite yet. Atheists are treated less kindly in my nation than in yours.'

'Then you and your faith shall stay on this side of our good Circlist dwelling, my fine-furred wet-snout friend, while young Hannah can go and make her apologies to the archbishop for an appointment ill-kept.'

Chalph glanced knowingly at Hannah, who was looking annoyed that the priest had used the insulting Jagonese name for an ursine: *wet-snout* indeed. 'This place is just like the rest of Jago, it's a relic. You remember what you're going inside there for . . . it's your future.'

She shrugged. 'I'll meet you out in the park later. We'll see what the future looks like then.'

Hannah walked inside. Jago Cathedral wasn't a relic to her, it was *home*. Wheel windows a hundred feet across painted the nave of the cathedral with brightly coloured illumination, much of it speckled by lines of formulae traced across each

stained glass light. Formulae had always been important to the Circlist church – the church without a god. Some of them were scientific, outlining the known building blocks of creation. Others were the proofs and balances of synthetic morality – equations that proved society worked best when people worked together, that kindness to the weak was a thing of glory, to do unto others as you would have done unto you. The quantitative proof for the qualitative teachings of Circlism. Hannah's eyes flicked across the stained glass. There, the elegant proof for the parable of the clear mind – openness of mind versus the infective vectors of a faith-based meme. Every koan and parable taught by the church was represented, through both equations and sublime rainbow-coloured images. Of all Jago's arts, stained glass was the most celebrated: as was attested to by the double-lancet windows as tall as the cathedral's spires, which adorned the island's most important building, the senatorial palace.

Hannah found the archbishop lighting candles in the north transept where a simple steel hoop held a thousand red wax candles, one for each of the koans of the Circlist teachings. The candles were always going out, much as they did – so the archbishop said – in the hearts of the race of man that were meant to subscribe to them.

'I'm sorry I'm late,' announced Hannah.

Archbishop Alice Gray turned around with an appraising look at Hannah. What did she see before her? A young blonde girl with skin so pale it might as well be alabaster? The lazy blue-eyed youngster that hoped to follow the woman who had raised her into the Circlist church? A stubborn, slightly distant little dreamer who always seemed to cause mischief for the prelate who had taken her in as her ward after her parents' death?

'I don't suppose you were off studying for the algebra test

that Father Penley tells me he's setting the church class at the end of the week?' asked the archbishop.

'I'll pass it,' said Hannah.

'Yes, I'm sure you will. Then, undoubtedly you've been helping Damson Grosley fumigate the sleeping rooms for wall-louse.'

'I tried,' admitted Hannah. 'But the brimstone was making me choke. I thought I was going to be sick.'

The archbishop rolled her eyes. 'You're not the only one who is being tried. That is the point of it, Hannah. That's how you get rid of wall-louse.'

Sometimes, Hannah thought, the archbishop must have regretted taking her in aged three as a ward of the cathedral. If only Hannah's parents' boat hadn't been incinerated in the Fire Sea. If only she'd had other relatives still alive in the Kingdom of Jackals, then they both might have been spared such perennial disappointments. If Archbishop Alice Gray had such thoughts, the perpetual look of concern that she wore on her face, whatever and whoever she was dealing with, effectively masked them.

Hannah followed the archbishop into a lifting room, past the belfry – then up into the rectory testing rooms, vestries, refectory, charterhouse and lodgings for the church staff that formed the cathedral's highest level, but the lowest level of the Horn of Jago. Windowless at so low an elevation inside the mountain, and with nothing to look out on anyway except the frill of artillery tube placements waiting to drop mortar shells on anyone – or anything – foolish enough to try to storm either the capital's walls or its harbour.

It was the rectory testing rooms that Hannah was interested in this afternoon, though; always more hopefuls waiting in front of testing tables than there were fathers with seminary experience to administer the tests. While every shop, mill and concern in Hermetica City perpetually displayed

staff-wanted signs in their bow windows, the Circlist church had to turn away would-be novices queuing to enter its ranks. Or rather, sign up for the slim chance that the church might post them away from Jago and across the sea to one of the other Circlist nations.

The archbishop talked to the seminary head for a minute, before coming back towards Hannah.

'Father Blackwater has had no message from the church council, nothing in the post sack that arrived with the boat from Pericur this morning.'

'I need to sit the entrance exam,' protested Hannah.

'You are still two years away from being of age,' said the archbishop. 'You need special dispensation from the Rational Synod.'

'Do I?' asked Hannah. 'You're the Archbishop of Jago, you can grant me the dispensation.'

'No.' The archbishop shook her head, a stubborn glint in her green eyes that Hannah knew too well. 'It would be wrong for me to intervene where I have a personal interest. You are my ward; I have to excuse myself from the examination process. It is the right and rational thing to do.'

Hannah lost her temper and jabbed a finger at the other hopefuls waiting for the Entick test, the measurement of their aptitude and mastery of synthetic morality. 'So if I wasn't your ward, if I was just one of *them*, you'd give me your dispensation to sit the church entrance exam early?'

'You're two years away from the age of testing,' said the archbishop. 'And any answer I have to give would be far too clouded by my feelings for you.'

'I'm ready for it!'

'I don't doubt your abilities in casting analytical proofs, Hannah,' said the archbishop. 'There's too much of your mother in you for you to be anything other than a mathematical

prodigy. But you need a basis of experience to apply what you learn in the church, that's why there's an age set to take the test. If the church merely wanted to indoctrinate fanatics, if we wanted to train *preachers*, we'd have snatched you from your cot and invented deities to terrify your mind into obedience. You need a clear mind and a wise heart to work with your parishioners, with the experience of humility to know when you're falling short of either of those.'

'I don't even want to leave the island,' argued Hannah. 'I'd be happy to stay on Jago, not try to land the first vacant Jackelian vicarage or Concorzian parsonage that comes up.'

'I'm not concerned about you leaving the island.'

'You are,' accused Hannah. 'You want to keep me here, wallowing in the same ignorance you're sworn to try to banish.'

The archbishop sighed. 'We're not exactly a pit of ignorance here at the cathedral. I think you've been spending too much time listening to your ursine friend Chalph urs Chalph, young lady.'

Hannah could see this was an argument she wasn't going to win, and she was distracting the others taking the entrance exam. Some of the seminary fathers were looking up irritably from behind the piled leather tomes full of questions and equations to solve. A few of the candidates were trying to twist their heads around inside their rubber helmets, rattling the heavy lead-lined cables going back to the Entick machines. The goggles inside the hood measured the dilation of the iris in an attempt to ensure the questions were being answered truthfully, and her heated debate with the archbishop was probably skewing results across the testing room.

'Chalph is no fool. He said I'm going to have to leave the island to have a future,' retorted Hannah. 'Perhaps he's right.'

'"The finger that points at the moon isn't the moon,"' quoted the archbishop.

'Oh, please,' said Hannah, 'of all the koans . . . this is Jago. I haven't seen a moon through the mist for months.'

Hannah didn't hear the archbishop's reply. Someone was coming through the testing room door and her heart sank as she saw who it was. Vardan Flail. The long red robe he wore disguised the high guild master's awkward movements. The Circle knew what mutations he was hiding under that intricately embroidered crimson garb! If a foreigner were to enter the cathedral and see the archbishop standing next to Vardan Flail, they would lay eyes on his fancy red velvet mantle with all its woven transaction-engine symbols, note the archbishop's simple chequerboard-pattern cassock, and come to the conclusion that it was Flail who was head of the church here on Jago, not the archbishop.

A shiver went down Hannah's spine as she smelled the mint-like fragrance that had been infused into the valveman's velvet robes – sprayed, it was said, to disguise the smell of putrid flesh.

'I hope,' said the archbishop, 'that you aren't here to complain about the additional processing cycles that the testing sessions are going to require of your transaction engines.'

'Hope,' came the grinding voice under the cowl, 'or pray?'

'I won't tolerate that filthy language here in the cathedral!'

Which was precisely why he had said it.

'If you had need of extra processing power, I would bring the matter up in the appropriate forum – in front of the stained senate,' said Vardan Flail. 'We have power enough. It's not you that I have come to see, it is your young ward here.'

Her? Hannah looked with disgust at Flail's red cowl, just enough of the high guild master's pockmarked features visible in the shadow of the hood to turn her stomach. What in the name of the Circle did the most loathsome high guild master in the capital want with her?

'I have the results of the ballot,' said Vardan Flail.

The ballot? Hannah's stomach felt as if it was dropping down the city's deepest airshaft.

'Damson Hannah Conquest is one of the names that has been randomly selected for service within the guild.'

'*Randomly* selected by the programs running on your transaction engines,' said the archbishop.

'I don't care for your tone,' warned Vardan Flail. He pointed slowly to the testing equipment and then up towards the diode panels in the stone roof of the testing room. 'You seem happy enough to utilize the processing cycles of the engine rooms and draw power for the lights to keep your cathedral illuminated, but like everyone else here, you flinch at the sacrifices necessary to keep our island's mighty turbine halls humming.'

'I won't do it,' spluttered Hannah.

'Not turning up for balloted service is considered desertion,' threatened Vardan Flail, 'and you are far too clever to let yourself be exiled for that crime, young Hannah Conquest. With your mind you will settle in fine with us as an initiate cardsharp. We won't have that beautiful intellect of yours wasted hauling sacks of broken valves to the smelt or crawling inside the turbine halls' generators to oil the magnets. No, within a year you'll be able to turn out punch cards like you were born to it. Punch cards to control the most powerful transaction engines we possess. You will be able to make a difference that can be measured in the efficiency of everything you code.'

'And end up like you?' spat Hannah.

'These are my blessings,' said Vardan Flail, touching his arm. 'The sacred scars of duty.'

'The senate won't need to exile me beyond the city walls. I can ship out for the Kingdom of Jackals any time I want.'

'Legally perhaps,' sneered Vardan Flail. 'Although dual

nationality and the application of the draft is still a point of law that is open to examination; I should know, I checked the legality of the situation quite thoroughly before I came to see you, little lady. How many new anti-emigration bills have been passed this year? You can spend the few days before your service starts looking at the empty docks and wondering when the next Jackelian u-boat is going to come calling – because we both know there won't be any. And there's not a supply-boat captain this side of the Fire Sea willing to risk the senate's wrath by smuggling out a passenger without official exit papers.'

'This is outrageous!' said the archbishop. 'I will protest to the senate.'

'Of course you will. Everyone who is called to our service protests,' said Vardan Flail, sadly, as if the desire not to end up concealing a twisted body underneath crimson robes was a personal calumny against him. 'The bleating of our chosen is as natural as a steam storm after rain. After every annual ballot the floor of the senate is fleetingly filled with the cries of rich merchants' sons who are too good for our guild – or prelate's daughters who are too fine and unblemished to toil inside our vaults.' Vardan Flail reached out to stroke Hannah's face and she flinched back as his warm, wrinkled skin brushed against her face. 'This isn't your true beauty, girl, it's in there.' He prodded a finger against her forehead. 'Yes, it is in there, and we shall use it well. . .'

Hannah watched in horror as the valveman's claw-like fingers vanished back inside the sleeve of his robe. This wasn't happening to her. This wasn't any future fit for her! She was going to follow her guardian into the church, a quiet, easy life of meditation and reflection in the still peace of the cathedral. Thinking great and noble thoughts. Not bonded into labour for a beast like Vardan Flail, her body swelling and

cracking and breaking until she too would have to scuttle through the streets of Hermetica City, hiding herself behind heavy robes from the gaze of everyone she knew on the island. Cursing mirrors, cursing her very reflection in the canal waters.

'Off you go, Hannah,' commanded the archbishop. 'I think it's time the high guild master and I continued our conversation alone in my chancellery office.'

Hannah waited in dread as the two of them left the testing room; the queuing would-be novices uncomfortably averting their gazes from the high guild master.

Then they were both gone and all Hannah could smell was the scent of mint in the air; mint and her cruelly crushed dreams.

'What,' asked archbishop Alice Gray as she shut the door to her chancellery office, 'is this really about? I don't come to the engine rooms and try to recruit your valvemen into the church orders. Is it too much to expect some of the same courtesy from a high guild master? Or is this what we have descended to now in Jago? So few people left to employ that we must poach labour from our neighbours' staff?'

'The courtesy is for a high guild master to take the time to come and serve a ballot notice personally,' hissed Vardan Flail.

'How gracious of you,' said the archbishop. 'Now, what's your real motive? Is it Hannah you want, or. . .?'

'There might be a way,' replied Vardan Flail, 'for me to forgo the services of your ward. A singular loophole in the statutes of the ballot of service that could be exploited.'

The archbishop's green eyes narrowed. 'Go on.'

'The ballot is not allowed to fall on a high guild master's own family. A very wise clause, don't you think? You only have to see how the stained senate works – or rather, how it

doesn't – to know the harm that nepotism and favouritism within a guild would create.'

'But Hannah Conquest is not a member of your family.'

Vardan Flail dragged his body to the window looking over the cloister chamber below. 'She would be if you married me, Alice. Your ward, my ward. Everything squared. Or should that be joined on the Circle?'

'So that's what this is really about. You've had my answer on that matter before.'

Vardan Flail looked out of the window, gazing down towards the albino-pink blossom falling from the trees lining the cloister, a rain of it drifting in the draughts from the ventilation grilles. 'The unlikeliest things can blossom in the vaults of Jago, Alice. Look down there, the only trees that prosper well under diode light. Is it so unlikely that a union between the two of us might do the same? The tenets of Circlism set no store on the physical appearance of things, only our true selves. And we're very good Circlists in the engine rooms.' He pulled out a heavily pockmarked palm from underneath his sleeve's crimson velvet folds. 'The flesh fades and what remains is true.'

'Cavern bamboo also prospers like a weed down here. I don't doubt your belief in Circlism,' said the archbishop. 'Sometimes it verges on *faith*—' she pronounced the word like a curse '—but a meeting of minds is never enough for marriage, there must also be a meeting of hearts.'

'There are other things I can offer you,' said Vardan Flail. 'Like immortality.'

'A sketch of my face on paper isn't me,' said the archbishop, angrily. 'And a simulacrum of myself sealed up in the valves of your transaction engines isn't me, either. Our essence is cupped out into other lives after this. That's the only permanence you can trust, all else exists only as currents in the stream.'

'There must be someone else, another man,' hissed Vardan Flail, 'for you to keep rejecting me. Tell me who it is? Who has been courting you?'

'A long time ago, maybe, but not now. I have the duties of my position and the needs of the people of Jago to serve and that is enough for me. It will need to be enough for you too, Vardan Flail.'

'Then I will hold to them,' spat the crimson-robed form, limping towards the door. 'And I will hold to my duties with the fine mind of your ward added to the labours of the guild.'

'Over my dead body!'

'Your body really doesn't matter,' said Vardan Flail, menacingly as he departed. 'Not any more.'