

The City of Ferrid

by

Nyki Blatchley

THE CITY OF FERRID

Copyright © 2009 by Nyki Blatchley

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission. For information address Scribblers and Ink Spillers, LLC, P. O. Box 5917, Gainesville, FL, USA 32627-5917.

Printed in the United States of America

Crystal Codex and The Crystal Codices Collection is published by Scribblers and Ink Spillers, LLC, P. O. Box 5917, Gainesville, FL 32627-5917

**A Crystal Codex from
The Crystal Codices Collection
published by Scribblers and Ink Spillers, LLC**

Billows of white, choking steam wreathed the locomotive and streamed back, tendrils finding their way through even the most tightly shut windows. Demolin Nardins surreptitiously wiped at the filthy glass, longing to glimpse the countryside sliding past outside. Even the small wood they were passing seemed somehow more wonderful and more woody than those he knew at home.

Or would he be thought boorish and colonial by the sophisticated locals that shared the compartment? In fact, Demolin reflected, he probably had little to fear from the bad opinions of his fellow-travellers. The family sitting at the other end - a starched, middle-aged man, his grey jacket buttoned tightly to the throat, his small wife, corseted and frilly, and their sulky-looking son - were far too busy glaring and tutting at the remaining passenger, even while pretending they weren't.

She was a girl of about eighteen, Demolin judged, with a lively prettiness. Though not actually exposed, she wore clothes that looked looser and more comfortable than anything he'd seen since arriving in this formal, proper country, although she'd have looked normal enough on the farms back home in Amnien. That might have been comfortingly familiar to Demolin, if he'd been homesick. As it was, he felt disappointed. After coming all this way to get away from a land that still had one foot on the frontier, he'd expected better.

He knew, though, that the girl's casual attire wasn't the main cause of the the family's outrage. The girl appeared to be travelling alone and unchaperoned. Even in Amnien, that would have raised eyebrows.

Outside the window, countryside began to give way to suburbs, and a guard knocked on the compartment door. "Ferrid in ten minutes," he called.

No, it's Cloniathron, thought Demolin instinctively, aware that his indignation was ridiculous. It probably didn't matter to anyone here, in the country now called Terrlith, that this was the ancient royal seat of Caurien. Demolin, though, felt a keen sense of pride in the homeland from which his ancestors had fled long ago, amid war and invasion.

On the other hand, he'd been waiting for this moment since he was a child and wasn't going to let a name spoil it for him. Demolin wanted to see the whole country, but this above all: Cloniathron, the dreaming city of the north, with its serene towers and elegant palaces. According to his history teacher, there had been a city here for at least three thousand years, and maybe longer.

By the time he'd hauled his luggage down, the smoke outside was impenetrable. No matter: he had plenty of time to explore the place and soak in its atmosphere. Sitting stiffly, luggage in his lap and waiting for the train to stop, he caught the scandalous girl looking at him, though she turned away at once. Her expression seemed troubled.

She really was pretty, Demolin decided. His parents were concerned that he never courted, feeling that he should at least be engaged by twenty. It wasn't that he didn't appreciate girls, but those at home seemed coarse and provincial. Anyway, all his attention had gone into planning and saving for this trip. Still, this girl held his attention, for some reason.

He wished that he could speak to her before they left the train, before he'd never see her again, but he could think of no way that wouldn't appear tasteless and impertinent. So, when the train came to a shrieking, hissing halt, he picked up his luggage and departed with no more than a polite nod to each of his fellow-travellers. He'd spoken to none of them for the entire journey.

The main station at Ferrid was noisy and smoky, and for a moment Demolin stood irresolute, unsure of where to go. He had a short list of addresses for respectable boarding-houses, but he was feeling a little light-headed. Now he was here, he could hardly bear to look, but at last he forced himself to follow the crowds out of the station.

Even outside, a pall of smoke hung over the street, so that he couldn't tell whether towers and palaces dominated the skyline, but there were certainly none in this part of the city. On one side of the road stood an endless row of crumbling brick buildings - slums, he thought, mixed with a few mean shops and a dubious-looking tavern - and on the other was nothing but a long, blank wall. Everything was black with soot.

Demolin put his case down abruptly and sat on it, staring around. He was trying hard not to let himself cry, when a voice spoke from behind him. Turning, he saw the girl from the train.

"You look lost," she observed, looking him up and down. "Do you know anyone here?"

Demolin stammered a few syllables before grinding to a halt. He felt himself flushing under the candid gaze of this girl who addressed a strange man in such a familiar way.

"Excuse me, madam," he said, pulling himself together, "but we haven't been introduced yet."

The girl raised an amused eyebrow. "I hope I don't look like a madam," she commented. "But, if you want an introduction, that's easily solved. I'm Kerrit Zarranin. Pleased to meet you."

Demolin instinctively took her small, outstretched hand. It felt cool and dry - he felt sure his was sweating - and he found that he didn't want to release it.

Kerrit's eyes sparkled and she cleared her throat, deftly slipping her hand from his. "And you?" she prompted.

"Oh... oh yes. I'm... I'm Demolin Nardins. I'm from Amnien.."

She nodded. "I guessed that from your accent. Is it your first trip to Terrlith?"

"Um... yes."

Kerrit spoke the same language that he did - the old language of Caurien - but she had a Terrli name. He assumed he'd be able to tell Caurans and Terrli apart at a glance, but most, like this girl with her long, dark hair, heart-shaped face and sparkling green eyes, could easily be either..

She looked amused again, and Demolin realised that he should say something.

"And... you? Do you live in... in Ferrid?"

Kerrit nodded, not taking her eyes off him. "Not far. Have you anywhere to stay?"

"I... I was given a list..." As he spoke, his situation seemed faintly absurd.

Kerrit's face lit up. "Then maybe we can help one another. I could give you a bed."

Was it his imagination, or did the girl's musical voice turn husky as she spoke? Embarrassed, Demolin saw her looking intently at him.

"Do... do you live with your parents?" he asked. "Would they..."

"No, just with my sister. But she... isn't at home now."

It might have been his imagination, but Demolin felt there was a hint of distress in the hesitation. It was hardly the most important thing, though.

"It..." His mouth felt dry. "It wouldn't be proper... A single lady: what about your reputation?"

Kerrit's expression turned mischievous. "Oh, that. I haven't much of a reputation to start with. In any case, we're introduced now, and," she looked him over quickly, "I don't think you're one to take much notice of doing what's proper. Are you?"

"What makes you think that?" Part of Demolin was outraged at the suggestion, yet there was another part, deep-buried, that felt freedom and lightness at her assessment of him.

She cocked her head. "Well, if you were, you'd be working on the farm, probably married to a nice farmer's daughter. Not far from home in the big, bad city."

Demolin flushed again, partly because he'd hoped his origins would be less obvious, but also because he wondered whether the comment about her reputation meant that she was a prostitute. Kerrit was nothing like the local prostitute at home - a woman twice his age, whose language made the farmhands blush - but things might be different in the city.

In spite of that, he was unbearably tempted to take up her offer. She was right about what he was doing. This was meant to be the adventure of his life, but how could it be an adventure unless he took risks?

"All right," he tried to say, but only a croak came out. He took a deep breath. "Thanks. I'd love to... If it's all right."

Kerrit's face broke into a radiant smile that made her twice as beautiful. The thought that he was going to be alone with her - scandalously alone - made Demolin's heart race like the wild horses in the hills at home.

Kerrit's home was a small apartment in a tenement. The street outside was dingy and dilapidated, full of similar buildings. A rough-looking drinking-house stood opposite the door Kerrit showed Demolin through..

The flat itself seemed as dark and dirty as its surroundings. There were three rooms: two tiny bedrooms, and a living-room that was only slightly bigger. The whole place was minimally furnished, its walls bare and damp, and there were no internal doors.

"It's not much," said Kerrit, wrinkling her nose as she scanned her domain, "but at least I can guarantee the company will be good." She indicated one of the bedrooms. "That's Shola's room: you're welcome to use it till she returns. After that - we'll see."

She licked her lips in a way that seemed in equal parts provocative and nervous. Demolin felt a delicious shiver go through him, but something else held his attention equally.

"Shola? That's a Cauran name. But I thought..."

He ground to a halt, realising that Kerrit was staring blankly at him. After an instant, she nodded, though her face took on a slight frown..

"We're not Terli masters and Cauran slaves, you know. We never were, and it's a long time since it's mattered at all. Is that what they think, in Amnien?"

Demolin felt himself blushing. "I... well, you see... that is..."

"No-one really cares where you come from," Kerrit told him gently. "Shola and I are descended from both peoples - not to mention older races."

"The Kyus, you mean?" Demolin was eager to restore himself a little in her eyes. "And the Vuldesta. We learnt about them at school."

"The Kyus. Yes." She looked speculative. "And others, too: perhaps some we haven't even a name for. People have been living here a very long time."

Kerrit stretched, and it seemed that she deliberately changed the subject. "Are you hungry?"

He was: he'd had only a snack since the train had left Velarma, five hours before. Though tempted by the dining-car, it had been expensive, and he was keenly aware of his limited funds.

Demolin glanced quickly around, realising that there was no sign of a kitchen. "Um, yes. I suppose so."

"Good. I know a nice place to eat." She must have seen a flash of panic in his eyes. "It's all right: this will be my treat. If that doesn't shock you too much."

In truth, Demolin was a little shocked at the idea of a lady paying for his dinner, but he reminded himself that customs might be different here.

"Thank you," he said.

The cafe Kerrit took him to was in a much pleasanter district - though the buildings looked disappointingly modern - and seemed very smart to Demolin, though she was a little dismissive when he said so.

They talked all evening: at least, Kerrit did most of the talking at first, until Demolin had drunk enough wine to loosen his tongue. He told her all about Amnien, though he tried to focus on how sophisticated it really was, drawing heavily on his few visits to the city. Kerrit talked about Ferrid: he was growing more comfortable with the name. She told him about the ancient buildings, from the Old Palace, now a museum, to the Shanalin Temple. Even the more recent Temple of the Lady, she assured him, wouldn't disappoint.

She talked of other things, too, which he found stranger. At one stage, she was holding forth passionately about workers' rights to a decent life. Demolin only knew vaguely what the word union meant, but Kerrit seemed passionate about them, so he assumed they must be all right. He was a little shocked, though, when she told him that, one day, women would have the same rights as men. He was drunk enough by then, though, to decide it was a wonderful idea, especially when he caught other diners glaring at Kerrit's words.

Even Demolin's wonderfully fuzzy head couldn't fail to notice that she avoided all questions about herself, and especially about her sister. He thought several times of pressing her, but was too happy basking in the light of her presence.

Neither was entirely steady by the time they walked back to the tenement, though Kerrit was in a better state than Demolin. They supported each other, still talking and giggling, and he was acutely aware of the warmth of her body through her light coat and the fine linen of her dress, and the way her round breasts swelled, as if inviting him to touch them. He managed to resist the invitation.

As they neared the building, two men stepped out from a shadowed alley and stood in front of them. Demolin couldn't make them out clearly, but they both looked small and wiry, and a sliver of moonlight from behind the clouds glinted on metal in their hands.

Demolin's guts turned to water, and he was suddenly sober, realising that he'd forgotten the warnings about cities at night. He tried to thrust Kerrit behind him, wondering if he'd be able to get hold of one of the blades, but she deftly evaded the push and stepped in front, face to face with the men.

The two figures took a step back, glanced at one another, then melted into the shadows.

"Come on," said Kerrit tersely, "let's get inside."

Demolin followed her in silence, wondering what had just happened. Reason told him that the men had recognised Kerrit as local, and that they didn't attack one of their own. He couldn't escape the feeling, though, that the two robbers had been afraid of her.

Demolin was never sure, later, whether he woke up somewhere deep in the night, or whether he had a strange dream.

It had been a disturbed night for a number of reasons, not least the effects of the wine he'd drunk. Demolin could hold his ale as well as most, but he'd never drunk wine before, and it had made its way, separately, to both his head and his bladder. A couple of times, he'd had to stumble out of bed and retrieve the chamber-pot, since the only privy was a shared shack behind the building.

The other main reason for Demolin's broken sleep was the knowledge that Kerrit slept no more than a dozen paces away, without even a door between them. Though her forwardness wasn't especially sexual, it was enough. The image kept drifting through his thoughts of Kerrit coming into the room, Kerrit getting into bed with him, and...

And what? Demolin knew that the proper thing would be a refusal, polite but firm, of such advances; but the mere thought aroused him so much he doubted he'd be able to say no. He'd never before met anyone who could make him feel powerful and powerless at the same time.

He'd been awake for a while before he became aware of a light coming from somewhere. His head spun, and his body was lethargic with the torpor of sleep. The light seeped through the doorless doorway, but the bed's angle prevented him from seeing much beyond it.

A voice floated with the light, eerie and disembodied. Demolin wasn't conscious of getting out of bed, but it seemed to him that he was walking out into the flat's main room.

Kerrit stood there, naked. For a while, that was all Demolin saw: the curves of her soft, pale body, the flare of hips and breasts, not large but satisfyingly round, the tumble of black hair over milky shoulders. He stood motionless, gazing at her luscious form.

Slowly, other things seeped into his senses. For one thing, he realised that, though she was facing him, Kerrit gave no sign of noticing his presence. Unseeing eyes moved across him and around the room, lit by a glow whose source Demolin couldn't see.

The light showed a pattern drawn on the bare floor: a complex geometric arrangement of circles, triangles and squares, adorned with strange symbols. Kerrit stood at the centre, eyes unfocused as she keened and chanted in a strange language. It almost seemed that the voice was independent of the body.

As the chant swirled around the room, Demolin saw Kerrit raise her right hand. The glow glittered on a small knife, which she turned to place the tip against her breastbone.

Demolin tried to call out, tried to go to her, but neither his voice nor his limbs were working. She drew the knife slowly down between her breasts. As blood oozed out from the long wound, her head turned, and their eyes met.

Demolin's mind tumbled away into nothingness.

He intended to challenge Kerrit about what he'd seen in the morning. He couldn't escape the conviction, though, that he'd dreamt the whole thing. He'd woken in bed, and there was no sign of the shape on the floor when he'd dressed and gone out.

Kerrit sat near the fire, as radiant as ever in a white dress, lower cut than yesterday's, though just decent. Demolin wanted to peer in and find out if she had a long scar between her breasts, but could think of no way of doing so without giving the wrong impression. Or maybe the right one.

"Did you sleep well?" asked Kerrit cheerfully. She was stirring a pan perched on a coal-fire, a kettle nestled in beside it.

"Er... yes." Demolin found that he couldn't bring himself to voice his suspicions, faced with such a vision of beauty. "Yes, thanks. Though I had a very odd dream."

She smiled. "I don't doubt it. You're in a strange place, a lot happened to you yesterday, and... you weren't entirely sober. It's not surprising you dreamt strange things." She lifted the ladle from the pan. "Porridge?"

Accepting with thanks, Demolin told himself sternly that she must be right: it was nothing but his overwrought imagination that had created such a strange illusion. That must be it.

As they shared a breakfast of porridge and tea, though, another thought occurred to Demolin. "We... um, we haven't discussed terms yet. I don't really know what's the appropriate rate for a room here, but I'm sure I can trust you to ask a fair amount."

Demolin knew, as he spoke, that he was being a fool, but he didn't care. Come what may, he was going to believe in her.

But Kerrit sighed, setting her breakfast aside, and looked at him in silence a moment. "Demolin," she said gently, "I don't want your money.. I told you: I need your help."

"But..." Demolin shook his head in bewilderment. He remembered her saying that they could help one another, but had assumed she needed the money. "What do you mean?"

Kerrit hesitated again, sucking her lower lip as she looked at him. She seemed nervous - even scared.

"Have you ever heard of the Dark School of Fnar?" she asked suddenly.

Taken aback, Demolin had to search his memory before finding what he wanted. "I think so. They come into some of

the ancient Cauran legends. Wasn't Fnar worshipped by the Kyus, before the Caurans came?"

Kerrit frowned a moment. "Not by the Kyus as a whole," she corrected him. "Most Kyus reviled the Evil One; but there was a cult that worshipped him, and was supposed to draw great powers from him. As there still is."

It took an instant for Demolin to realise what she'd said. "Still? But... the legend says they were destroyed, more than a thousand years ago. How could they still exist?"

"Who knows?" She shrugged. "They claim to be heirs to an ancient lore, and maybe they are. If so, they've changed. Mostly they're businessmen who resent the reforms we've won, and think Fnar can give them power. Maybe they just stumbled on the old texts, as I did."

"You?" The memory of the dream - if it was a dream - came back to Demolin. "You mean you worship Fnar, too?"

"Of course not," she snapped, almost spitting the words at him. "Lady's name, I thought you had a better opinion of me than that."

"I'm sorry." Demolin was bewildered by the force of her reaction.. "I just didn't know what to think."

"I suppose not." Kerrit's face gradually softened a little. "It's just... I'd never have anything to do with those abominations. I wish I'd never heard of them."

Looking at her face, reddened and strained, Demolin realised suddenly that Kerrit was less angry than struggling to fight back tears. Tentatively, hardly daring to breathe, he reached out and put his hand gently on hers. She started; but, after an instant, she turned her hand so that he could hold it.

"What's the matter?" asked Demolin; and, as if that were the last straw, Kerrit surrendered to tears.

After hesitating for an instant, Demolin reached out and drew her to him, holding her head against his shoulder and gently stroking her hair. Though he had no wish to see her in such a state, he found himself hoping that Kerrit would go on crying a little longer.

A moment later, though, she raised her head and dashed the tears away with her hand.

"What's happened?" asked Demolin.

Kerrit looked at him, desolation behind her determination. "The Dark School of Fnar use human sacrifice." Her voice was a monotone. "Or else they give victims as gifts to the demons they summon."

It still took an instant before realisation flooded Demolin. "You mean they've killed your sister?"

Kerrit didn't meet his eyes. "I don't think she's dead. Not yet. But... she's only fifteen. She must be so scared."

Demolin found it hard to take in. This was the kind of thing that happened in ancient stories, not in a modern city. "Are you sure? Couldn't it be..."

"I'm sure," she snapped, and he recoiled from her anger. An instant later, though, she reached out and lightly touched his cheek. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't... It's just..."

"It's all right," said Demolin, hoping that she'd cuddle up to him again; but she dropped her hand and looked at him in appeal.

"I'd found hints about this modern cult, as well as reports about children going missing - mostly from the slums, so no one took much notice - and I followed the trail. I must have got too close and drawn their attention to me. I came home one day and found Shola gone, and their filthy symbols everywhere."

Demolin stared at her. Kerrit was obviously too angry to cry again, though he guessed that was the only thing stopping her.

"Haven't you gone to the police?"

She snorted. "Of course. They wrote down my statement, but it was obvious they believed Shola had run away, and I was making the rest up. They won't do anything."

"Isn't there anyone..."

"I thought there was." Kerrit's voice was tight with anger, and with something else. "My teacher, Mr Andirans: he knows far more than I do about ancient lore, and I thought he could help me. I'd been to visit him in Velarma: that's why I was on the train. But he's dead."

"I'm sorry to hear that." It was an automatic response. "Was he..."

"You don't understand," she snapped, though Demolin understood at once that it wasn't directed at him. "I had to break into his house. Everything was locked from the inside, and he'd been strangled. His face..." She choked back a sob. "He looked terrified."

Coldness crept through Demolin. "Are you saying he was killed by magic?"

Kerrit shrugged. "Maybe there's another explanation. I can't think of one."

Demolin swallowed. It was clear enough where this was going, and he didn't like it; but he couldn't ignore Kerrit's eyes, on the edge between anger and tears. "You want me to help you?" he asked. "Why me?"

She put her head on one side, her eyes a little brighter. "Because you seem brave and honourable. And you must be resourceful, to have come all the way from Amnien."

Both his reason and his fear were telling Demolin to say no, but he couldn't take his eyes off Kerrit. She was gazing at him, tense between hope and apprehension, and he found himself asking, "What can I do?"

Her eyes turned radiant. Leaning forward and taking his face in her hands, she kissed him deeply and sweetly.

Everything vanished in the touch of Kerrit's soft lips on his. Demolin forgot both fear and excitement, only caring that the kiss should go on forever. He tried to draw her into a full embrace, but all too soon she pulled back and regarded him more soberly.

"I got a message from them," she said slowly. "A... a letter. Pushed under my door when I was out. They're offering me an arrangement: they say I can have Shola back if I cooperate."

"Do you trust them? Surely..."

"I haven't any choice," she said fiercely. "It's the only option I have, and I can't fail Shola. I'll do anything to get her back."

Demolin looked at her in a mixture of awe and concern, suspecting what she meant - that she was willing to offer herself in her sister's place. He must make sure it didn't come to that.

Then another thought struck him. "When did you get it?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"The letter. I was with you when you came home yesterday and last night. You said it was when you were out."

The ghost of a frown crossed Kerrit's face, but didn't deepen. "Before I went to Velarma. I... hoped Mr Andirans could think of something else, but it's too late for that. There's no other way, now."

They were to make contact, Kerrit said, in the Shanalin Temple at sunset. There was nothing to be done till then, so she offered to show Demolin the city.

Ferrid wasn't as big or daunting as Velarma had been. The great port-city in the south had been so vast that an hour's walking hadn't been enough to leave it behind, and whole districts behind the docks had been given over to filthy, noisy factories. Demolin saw no factories here, though Kerrit told him there were some on the eastern outskirts. Ferrid was more compact, too, but the narrow streets, lined with cramped, grimy houses, snaked and intersected and doubled back in such a bewildering fashion that he'd have been utterly lost if Kerrit hadn't been with him.

In spite of what he'd learnt, though, Demolin couldn't help but feel lighter when he reached the city centre. This was the ancient Cloniathron which he'd come to see, with its soaring buildings, crumbling but beautiful, their towers and spires dreaming serenely high above.

This was the city of the Cauran kings and queens; of the old gods, who were no more than tales since the coming of the Lady. But he knew now that it was also the city of darker things from the old days. Although he tried to lose himself in enjoyment of the city, and of Kerrit's company, a shadow lay over the day.

Kerrit too seemed tense, although she kept up a sparkling torrent of talk as they wandered the city and as they sat eating their midday meal. She told Demolin endless anecdotes about Ferrid: events that she'd witnessed herself and tales that stretched back into the depths of time. She mentioned once or twice the various organisations she belonged to that fought for reform and rights, but mostly avoided the subject. Demolin realised with gratitude that Kerrit knew this wasn't what he'd want to hear about on his first day among the temples and palaces.

He could see, though, that the bright talk was nothing but a façade to take her mind off what was coming. As the sun sank towards the roofs, Kerrit grew quieter, brooding, and held his hand for much of the time.

The Shanalin Temple was all high, slender arches, leaping effortlessly towards the heavens, topped by endless spires and turrets that seemed to touch the sky. Inside, the murals that sprawled across the walls were cracked and faded, but Demolin could still make out scenes depicting the gods, light and joyous.

Seven colossal statues ranged around the vast central hall, representing the seven gods of Shanali. As attendants began clearing the building, Demolin and Kerrit slipped behind two of them - she behind the love-goddess Linstarien, he behind Tarmin, Lord of Life - and waited till the gas lamps were switched off and the place deserted.

"Shouldn't they be here by now?" whispered Demolin, and the echoes of his hissed words came back at him like a nest of serpents.

"Maybe." Kerrit spoke quietly, and she was fumbling with something. "The sun might not quite have set."

A spark bloomed, and Kerrit lit a small lamp from the bag she'd carried around all day. Her face shone, white and strained, and she held it up to look around.

There was a sound from the darkness. Without waiting to wonder, Demolin lunged at Kerrit, shoving her back. The lamp went flying, but she had no time to protest before a detonation came from the darkness, echoing to a roaring explosion, and a chip flew from the statue, just behind where she'd been standing.

More shots followed, ricocheting off walls and pillars and statues as Demolin and Kerrit cowered in hiding, holding one another. Four, five.... Demolin counted shots carefully,

praying to the Lady that this was the same kind of seven-shot gun everyone used at home.

Six... Seven...

Hissing, "Stay here," Demolin launched himself from hiding in the direction of the shots. He heard running footsteps and followed them through an arch and up a winding staircase. The sound of panting came from above, followed by a slamming door.

Yanking open the door he found at the top, Demolin was momentarily blinded, before realising that one dim gas lamp burnt in a small, bare room. A cadaverous man, on the edge of middle age, stood at bay, and Demolin realised at once there was no other exit.

They stared at each other for a moment, unmoving. The thin man still held the gun - a chunky pistol - but didn't raise it. It occurred to Demolin that this man looked no different from the office-workers he'd seen in the streets at lunchtime: certainly not his idea either of an evil cult-member or of an assassin.

The man charged at Demolin, but his eyes had given him away. Dodging the clumsy punch, Demolin tripped him and wrestled him to the ground. Though not a habitual fighter, he'd learnt to hold his own at home, and farm-work had made him far stronger than an unfit city clerk.

The man grabbed for the gun as it flew from his hand, but Demolin got there first. Half rising, he levelled it at his enemy.

The thin man froze for an instant, then relaxed. "It isn't loaded," he said.

Demolin had hoped that it would take him longer in his panic to remember, but it was no matter. He reversed his grip, holding the pistol by its still-warm barrel.

"Maybe, but we could still find out what kind of dent it would make in your skull." When the man remained silent, eyes darting to and fro, he demanded, "Why did you shoot at us?"

The pale blue eyes avoided his. "I've nothing against you. I was ordered to kill the infidel."

"I guessed that." Demolin kept his voice level, although he seethed at this description of Kerrit. "Why? I thought you offered her a deal."

The man looked straight at him for the first time, hatred and contempt in his eyes. "The whore's dangerous. She doesn't know her place, either as a woman or as scum. Keeping her quiet is good; killing her is better."

Demolin's hand itched to smash the man's brains in, but he resisted. He seriously doubted that he could bring himself to take a life, at least in cold blood, but he hoped his enemy wouldn't guess that.

"I'll spare your life," he said, "if you tell me where you're keeping the girl."

A sneer came over the other's face. "I'm not afraid to die. Lord Fnar, the Great One, will protect me."

"Maybe," said Demolin. "Do you really want to meet your master when you've just failed him? I'm guessing he wouldn't be too pleased to see you."

Demolin held his breath. It had been pure speculation, but the other man's eyes told him he'd hit the mark.

"If I spare you, on the other hand, you'll have time to make amends."

His enemy remained silent a moment more, eyes darting everywhere. He nodded.

"Northgate Street," he said. "Opposite the Zarnien Inn. You get in..."

He broke off with a strangled gasp, clutching at his throat. Demolin thought for an instant that he was choking on something, until he saw finger-marks appearing around his windpipe. Held motionless by fear and confusion, Demolin watched his enemy's frantic thrashing stop and the wildly darting eyes become still.

He was still kneeling by the body when Kerrit came to stand beside him.. She looked at the assassin, then at Demolin. "You killed him?"

Demolin shook his head vigorously. "He just... It was as if someone was throttling him. I think it was magic."

She nodded, her face stony. "Same as they did to Mr Andirans. They must have thought he might talk."

"He did," said Demolin, and Kerrit looked sharply at him. "Northgate Street, he said, opposite the Zarnien Inn. He was trying to say more when... when it happened."

He swallowed, forcing himself to look back at the inert form. He'd seen dead bodies before - deaths from sickness, old age, accidents, once even a murder victim - but never one that had died so violently in front of his eyes. He felt both disgust and fascination.

Kerrit crouched, putting an arm lightly around him, and nodded. "I know the place. But, if they killed him, they must know he talked. They'll be ready for us."

She stood, her gentle touch propelling Demolin to his feet. "We must go."

"We're going now?" His guts were hollow with fear.

"Not at night: it's when they're strongest. But they'll attack us. We must get to safety. Anyway, there's him." She nodded at the body. "Dead, with finger-marks on his throat. I might believe it was magic, but the police won't, and at best that'll delay us. Let's get away from here."

Kerrit paid for a private carriage home and seemed tense and jumpy the whole way. Trying to distract himself from the implications of her fear, as well as the sickness in his stomach from the dead man, Demolin gazed out at the city passing them. It was fully dark, and he could see little beyond the pools of gaslight except for a few broad thoroughfares more brightly lit by what he assumed to be electricity. At any other time, Demolin would have been intrigued by this new wonder; which he'd only heard of, but all he could see in the glare was the face of the corpse.

As soon as they were in the flat, the door locked behind them, Kerrit found a piece of chalk and started scrawling symbols on the wall, rough in her haste. Demolin thought he recognised one or two from last night's dream, if it were a dream. He was starting to doubt that.

When every wall was full, Kerrit took a knife from a drawer, and his heart lurched as he recognised it. For a moment, he thought she was going to bare her breasts again, but she pulled back her sleeve and made a quick, short slash on her lower arm.

Meeting his shocked gaze, Kerrit sighed. "A lot of magic uses blood." Her tone was sardonic, but with an underlying gentleness. "Some give their own, others take it from screaming victims."

Demolin swallowed, unable to take his eyes off the blood oozing from her wound; but it made sense, and he nodded.

Going swiftly from one symbol to the next, she used her fingers to leave a dab of her blood in the centre of each. When she'd finished, she turned back to Demolin. "I hope that'll be enough." There was uncertainty in her voice. "We should be protected from most attacks tonight."

Putting down the knife, she picked up a length of cloth and made a clumsy attempt to bind the wound. Moving numbly, without thought or will, Demolin went to her and took the cloth. Kerrit said nothing but stood quietly, looking almost shy, as he bandaged her arm.

It was in the same numb state that, after the bandage was secure, he drew her to him and kissed her.

Kerrit stiffened a moment, as if she were going to pull away. Instead, she moved closer, folding herself into his embrace and returning the kiss passionately.

When she finally moved her head back, Kerrit stroked Demolin's face tenderly, though she didn't look at him. "We shouldn't be alone tonight," she said. "Come to bed with me."

Demolin awoke to a thunderstorm outside and a warm body beside him. It took a moment to make sense of either.

He and Kerrit had made love before falling asleep. He'd been worried that she'd find him clumsy and inexperienced, but she too had seemed uncertain, even shy, and it became clear to Demolin that Kerrit had been a virgin until tonight. What their lovemaking lacked in experience, though, it made up in passion and energy, and they both fell into an exhausted sleep afterwards, holding one another. He remembered murmuring that he loved her, and she'd snuggled closer, making little sounds of contentment.

Lying awake now, he wondered about her unexpected innocence. In spite of his fleeting suspicions, he hadn't believed the assassin's description of her as a whore, but he'd

assumed there was some substance behind it.. Maybe it was no more than the difference between her behaviour and how women were meant to conduct themselves in this country.

What had the man said? She doesn't know her place, either as a woman or as scum. Well, if not knowing her place meant being lively and resourceful and unafraid of her beauty, Demolin could see nothing wrong with that.

A flickering flare of lightning careered through the flat, thunder crashing overhead as it faded, and Demolin realised that the weather had taken him completely by surprise. There had been no inkling of the approaching storm, as always on the rolling countryside at home. Maybe city weather behaved differently.

Kerrit's breathing remained calm and even, and he wondered how she could sleep through this. Thunder always made Demolin restless, and he felt he had to get up. Easing his arm from where Kerrit half lay on it - she stirred and muttered something, but didn't wake - he slid out of bed..

Despite the chill in the air, Demolin walked through to the main room without stopping to find his clothes and stood, unsure of why, to await the next flash through the grubby window. The air around him felt alive, and his scalp tingled.

It came; and, in the livid glare, Demolin found himself facing a figure out of nightmare. A head or two taller than himself, it had a shambling gait and vicious claws, while its face was made bestial by burning eyes and a wide mouth lined with razor-sharp teeth.

Maybe his cry of terror was lost in the cracking thunder, or maybe his voice refused to work, but Demolin heard nothing but roaring. He stumbled back in blind terror, as darkness fell again, and tripped over a chair. He was hauling himself up by the edge of the table when another flare showed the creature almost on him, claws raised.

Scrabbling desperately to get away, Demolin's hand fell on the knife that Kerrit had used and left on the table. Used to draw blood... blood..

Grabbing up the blade, Demolin slashed wildly at his arm, then lunged at the creature in the flickering lightning. A moment's resistance, then the blade slid slowly into flesh, as the light vanished.

A shriek cut through the thunder, quickly vanishing into the distance. Demolin fell forward, clutching at the burning pain in his arm that he knew was losing blood fast.

There was another light that wasn't lightning: dim, but enough to show that the room was empty, other than Kerrit standing over him with a lantern.

Without a word, she came to him, set the lamp on the table and, taking his arm, began to chant softly. Within moments, both the pain and the blood-flow had diminished, and she used a cloth to bandage Demolin, as he had bound her wound. Finally, taking his head in her hands, she gave him a brief kiss.

"How did you think of doing that?" she asked.

Demolin was unsure himself. "I... You said blood... was important. It just seemed the right thing to do."

Kerrit nodded. "It was. Though the protection must have weakened the demon, or it wouldn't have been enough. I..." She swallowed. "I didn't expect that."

"Was it Fnar?"

She shook her head sharply. "Fnar no longer exists - if he ever did. He and most of the demons are long gone, since the Lady's victory. This must be a minor demon, left behind." She looked almost as dazed as Demolin felt. "I've read all about them, but I never imagined..."

"Did I kill it?"

Kerrit hesitated. "I doubt it, but I shouldn't think it'll be back tonight."

They kissed again, then Kerrit looked around. "It's only a couple of hours till dawn," she said. "I think we ought to stay awake. The Lady knows what might have happened if that thing had found us asleep."

Shuddering, Demolin wondered whether he'd rather know or just imagine.

They left at first light. The storm had blown away soon after the night's encounter, leaving Ferrid's streets slick and the air clear and sweet under a pale dawn.

There had been no more attacks, and Kerrit had suggested tensely that the demon might have been their strongest weapon. Although neither spoke of it, Demolin guessed that she was thinking the same as he was: that their enemies would be waiting for their arrival, making preparations.

Kerrit had made Demolin eat a little, insisting that they needed their strength, though he hadn't the stomach for much. After half an hour following her through winding streets, his rumbling belly made him wish he'd had more.

They emerged at last into a district of broad, tree-lined streets and large houses, each standing a little apart. One road, which Kerrit said was Northgate Street, ran straight up to where, Demolin assumed, the city wall had once stood, though all he could see now were more streets, vanishing into the distance.

A sumptuous, three-storey inn was identified by the painting on the gable of the ancient heroine Zarnien, proud in her

armour. Trying to distract himself from his terror, Demolin tried to imagine Kerrit in a similar pose, and decided that she'd look even more beautiful.

He'd been concerned whether they'd have to guess which of the houses on the other side was the right one, but he needn't have worried. Almost a mansion, the brightly painted building was separated from its neighbours on both sides by walled gardens. The front door, up a flight of broad stone steps, looked very secure.

Kerrit and Demolin looked at one another in silence for a moment. "I suppose," said Demolin slowly, "he was going to tell me how to get in. There wouldn't be any point in just knocking?"

Not bothering to shake her head, Kerrit examined the house's façade. "I think we'll have to get over the wall. Maybe there'll be an open window."

Demolin nodded, trying not to think of what else might be beyond the wall. He almost wished he felt able to give up this folly, but the thought of abandoning Kerrit made him feel hollow inside. Besides, he'd defeated their demon, and that probably meant they knew who he was. They'd be sure to come after him.

Slipping below the wall and hoping he was out of sight from the house, Demolin saw that it was slightly higher than he could reach, but enough mortar had crumbled from the brickwork to give a few footholds. He wondered how Kerrit would manage. His sisters and other girls at home could hold their own at climbing, but this was the city. On the other hand, nothing about Kerrit would surprise him.

Coming to stand beside him, she examined the wall. "Shouldn't be too difficult, if you can give me a leg-up."

Demolin knelt, allowing her to climb onto his shoulders, then straightened. The load lightened as she caught the top and hauled herself up, and he followed with little difficulty.

The gardens within were a neat, formal mixture of flower-beds and lawns, adorned by a summerhouse and statues, disappearing into manicured wilderness. Demolin could see nothing threatening.

He dropped quickly to the ground inside, then helped Kerrit down. Even after last night's intimacy, the feel of his hands on the supple flesh of her waist and her body pressed against his both excited and embarrassed him. It was only when she wriggled around and kissed him, her face amused, that he realised he was still holding her, though she was securely on the ground.

The sides and rear of the house were surrounded by a deep trench giving access to the basement, which seemed more hopeful than the steps to a secure garden door. Finding a staircase down, Kerrit led the way to where a small window gave onto the interior.

Peering cautiously in, Demolin saw a large room lit by smoky candles. At the far end stood a statue, whose face he couldn't make out, with a large slab of black stone in front. Seven or eight figures stood around, swathed in crimson robes with the hoods hiding their faces, much as he'd always imagined the acolytes of evil cults he'd read of in stories. To one side, a girl was chained to the wall.

He heard Kerrit's muffled gasp; but, even if he hadn't been expecting it, Demolin would have known this was Shola. Despite the girl's dirty, ragged condition and expression of blank terror, he could see a younger, softer version of Kerrit's beauty: the long, black hair, heart-shaped face and luscious body. She was prettier than her sister, he thought, but less strong and vivid, less genuinely beautiful.

"Are you listening?" Kerrit demanded in an undertone.

"Sorry." Demolin came back to himself. "Um..."

Kerrit raised an eyebrow, but there was tension in the humour. "That's my little sister," she said acidly. "Though I'd better forgive you, as we're supposed to look alike."

"But..." Demolin was going to protest that he was really thinking about her, not Shola, but she shushed him.

"I'm going to find the way in. You stay and make sure they're not alerted to anything."

"Have you a plan?"

She hesitated. "Sort of. I'll have to improvise a lot, though, so take your cue from me." She kissed him, a little hesitantly. "You must trust me."

She slipped away around the corner, leaving Demolin to resume watching the interior.

For a while, he watched Shola again. Although she was able to stand firmly on the ground, her hands were fastened above her head, drawing the white smock tightly against her and showing her body to best advantage. Demolin felt a guilty pleasure at the sight. He wondered what it would be like if - when - she was safe. Would he and Shola be friends, or would she be jealous of his relationship with her sister? It would be unreasonable, of course, since he'd have helped save her life, but girls weren't always reasonable.

Shola turned her head, her miserable face taking in the whole room, till she seemed to be looking straight at him. Demolin ducked out of the way - he couldn't risk her reacting to his presence - but her eyes didn't stop on him. Maybe the dim trench couldn't be seen from inside.

Demolin examined the room. He couldn't see a door or any other window, but he decided that was good. Any access Kerrit found would be into another room, maybe less guarded.

She'd been gone for a while. Demolin was debating whether to ignore instructions and go looking for her, when there was a sound behind him. He'd only half turned before the back of his head split open, and there was nothing.

At first, Demolin was aware of nothing but his throbbing head. After a moment, he realised that he was horizontal, but not comfortably so. He lay on his back, arms immobilised above his head and his splayed legs also bound.

Demolin opened his eyes and was dazzled for a moment by a brilliant light that hurt his head. As his vision came into focus, though, he realised that it was only candlelight.

Red-robed figures were everywhere, and he could see them more clearly now. It struck Demolin how ordinary these men looked: in spite of the exotic robes, these looked like city workers, though considerably more exalted than yesterday's assassin. He suspected that many of these well-fed faces might belong to factory-owners, or even members of the government..

There were more of them than he'd seen before, and he realised that some must have been out of sight, perhaps wherever Kerrit had come in. With a lurch of the heart, Demolin turned his head to see if she was there, but a face thrust itself at him: a plump face that looked accustomed to being obeyed.

"Congratulations." His voice was urbane, but with a hint of menace behind it. Or was it petulance? Demolin couldn't decide. "You have the honour of being our gift to Lord Fnar, the Great One, who will deliver us from the weak and corrupt."

"All hail the Great One," came the murmured response of a dozen voices..

"Oh, please," said a familiar voice from somewhere, "you don't actually think it's Fnar you're summoning, do you?"

As someone shouted, "Blasphemer!" Demolin's head snapped round. Kerrit stood a dozen paces away, her arm round Shola, now free and huddled up to her sister.

"The Lady destroyed your Great One long ago," Kerrit added, her tone amused. "At best, you've found a minor demon, too insignificant to be obliterated with the rest."

The man who had spoken to Demolin turned to face her. "I have no interest," he said, "in the opinions of woman from the gutter who's forgotten her place. Once Lord Fnar has given us power, we shall crush you scum under our feet, along with the weaklings who pretend to rule us." His voice had risen, and his race was turning red. "Under Lord Fnar, I shan't be told I can't send children down mines, or that I must pay workers more than they're worth. His power will spread from Terrlith across the world, and will last a thousand years."

He was shouting now, his eyes staring and voice staccato. The acolytes roared back, "All hail the Great One," in a tone that seemed on the edge of hysteria.

"If you say so," said Kerrit into the silence that followed. "All that interests me now is our bargain."

"We shall keep our word, if you've kept yours." The leader, face still red and strained, looked back at Demolin, who was struggling with his throbbing head to make sense of this. "How innocent is he?"

"Totally." Kerrit shrugged. "You wouldn't believe how easy it was to get him to come with me."

For a moment, Demolin thought she must be speaking a foreign language, and he was deluded that he understood; but he knew that wasn't so.

"Kerrit... what are you doing? I... I loved you. I thought..."

A slight frown came over Shola's face and she glanced at her sister, though fear still dominated her expression. Kerrit, though, merely shrugged again. "You're very sweet, Demolin, but it was you or my sister.. What do you expect me to do?"

Allowing his head to fall back, Demolin let despair wash over him. His mind switched to and fro by the second between disbelief that Kerrit could do such a thing to him and anger that he'd been so stupid.

"You and your sister," the man was saying, "will stay for the ceremony.. It will bind you to Lord Fnar, so that you can no longer trouble us.." He turned, taking in the other crimson-robed figures. "We shall begin."

Instantly, the low pulse of a chant began from all around Demolin, as the acolytes approached the slab where he lay. He couldn't make out any words, but the chant seemed twisted and full of hate. He struggled desperately against his bonds, but they were secure.

A single, louder voice cut across the muttered chant: the powerful voice of the man who'd spoken. Unintelligible syllables warped from his mouth, coiling horrifically around Demolin's mind.

There was a change in the air, and a fetid, rotting stench swept over Demolin. This was utterly different from the familiar, living stinks he knew from the farm, and his skin tingled. To the side of the altar appeared the shambling, bestial form he'd seen last night.

All chanting ceased. The acolytes and their leader fell to their knees, heads bowed.

Glancing wildly around - anywhere but at the hideous apparition - seeking some hope of escape, Demolin saw that Kerrit's mouth still moved, though he could hear nothing from her in the sudden silence.

"Lord Fnar, Great One." The leader's voice was now cowering and afraid. "We thank you for answering our call. We make this offering of an innocent soul, in token of the power you have given us."

"This is the one that dared defy me in the night." The demon's voice had no resonance, but sounded mean and cruel. It turned to Demolin. "Your soul will taste sweet."

"The Lady will protect me," said Demolin, trying very hard to believe it.

The creature laughed: a laugh that flayed Demolin. "Your Lady will not help you when you are in my power. You will live for centuries, while I endlessly devour your soul until you dream of death."

Demolin knew he should struggle, make some attempt to get away, even though it would be futile, but he couldn't get his limbs to move. He was only aware of the demon; and, beyond it, Kerrit still speaking silently. He saw her take a small piece of metal from her sleeve and slash her arm. He saw her touch a fingertip to the wound, then to her forehead..

At once, the space between them collapsed. Although neither moved, they drew together until they touched, and still drew closer. Kerrit slipped inside him effortlessly and ran like light and fire through his veins.

As the demon reached long, taloned hands for him, Demolin realised he knew exactly what to do. Gathering up the fire and light, he held it like a dagger in his mind. At the first touch of a talon, he plunged it into the loathsome body.

A shriek cut the cellar. He saw the demon stagger back and felt the air all around sucked inward. Reaching out with long arms, the creature grasped the leader of the group, whose scream of terror joined its scream of pain.

Everything around the demon was imploding, but tentacles of darkness shot outwards in all directions, grasping the people in the room. One came at Demolin but veered aside, while he saw another dart at where the girls stood. Kerrit held up her hand in a gesture of denial, and the tentacle drew back to grab one of the acolytes, who kicked and squealed in vain.

Then everything - tentacles, acolytes, even the very air - collapsed inwards with a deafening concussion that left Demolin stunned.

The next thing he knew, someone was cutting his bonds. Demolin sat up abruptly, too fast for his throbbing head, and had to wait till the room stopped spinning around him.

Kerrit was watching him uncertainly, chewing her lower lip. Two equal impulses swept over Demolin - to take her in his arms and to strike her - but he did neither.

"You betrayed me," he said, hoping his voice stayed level.

Kerrit shook her head hard, eyes wounded. "I'm sorry, my darling.. I had to make them believe that, but I was never going to let you come to harm."

"You could have told me what you were planning," he said bitterly.

A slight smile touched Kerrit's face, though she still looked troubled.. "Demolin, you're sweet and brave and wonderful, but you couldn't lie to save your life. They'd have suspected something at once." She sighed. "When they gave me this proposal, I went down to Velarma to try and find another way, but... I had no choice."

"Except to offer yourself instead. I don't suppose that..."

"Do you really think I didn't?" Kerrit flared, though he could see she wasn't truly angry. "I'd have given myself for real, if it had saved Shola. But they wouldn't accept that. I suppose they

guessed what I could do if I touched their demon." She laughed without humour. "They just didn't know I could do it through someone else."

Demolin tried to stop the anger from draining out of him. He didn't want to forgive her, but what she'd said had struck true. She really would have been willing to sacrifice herself for her sister.

He wasn't willing to relinquish his resentment, though. "So all that... last night... that was what? Making some kind of connection?"

"No." Kerrit sounded genuinely distressed. "I... I didn't expect that. I hadn't planned... I really do... You mean a lot to me, Demolin."

Unsure of what he felt, Demolin was trying to find a reply when a hand touched his shoulder lightly. Turning, he found Shola in front of him.

"You saved my life," she half-whispered. "Thank you." She smiled shyly through the slowly fading horror in her eyes.

Demolin sighed inwardly. He wanted to remain angry, but looking at the younger girl reminded him of what Kerrit had been trying to avert. He couldn't be sorry the plan had succeeded.

To distract himself, he glanced around, realising for the first time the three of them were alone. "The demons took them all? Did you know that was going to happen?"

Kerrit shrugged, but her face looked strained. "A demon denied its prey usually takes the summoners instead. We were protected partly by my power, partly because we hadn't given ourselves to it."

"So..." Demolin was unsure of how he felt about this. "What it said... what it was going to do to me..."

"Don't waste your sympathy," Kerrit snapped, though the harshness seemed aimed at herself. "Every one of them has sent plenty of victims to the same fate, for the sake of their own power. Most of them were children."

Demolin didn't reply. She was right, no doubt, but he still didn't like to think about it.

"We should go," said Kerrit. "Are you all right to walk?"

"I'll manage," he said, determined not to show weakness. "I'll need to get my things from your flat, and then..."

He broke off, realising that he sounded a little ridiculous, and saw that Kerrit was staring at him with a concerned half-smile, Shola in confusion.

"Demolin, sweetheart," said Kerrit gently, "you're in no condition to go traipsing around the city with all that luggage. Stay and rest till tomorrow, at least, and then you can decide." She smiled more broadly. "I promise you, I'll look after you really well."

"Me too," said Shola, and he glanced at the younger girl, then away, satisfied that she didn't mean quite what her sister clearly had.

"Well, all right." He couldn't deny that he needed rest. His head still throbbed, and his whole body felt drained. Besides, the idea of being looked after by two adoring girls had its appeal. "Till tomorrow."

The girls helped Demolin to stand, supporting him when his legs buckled. He righted himself with their help - Shola holding him solicitously on one side, Kerrit's warm, vibrant body pressed more closely on the other - as they started towards the door.

Yes, Demolin thought, he'd stay a few days. Then he'd see.