

## The Glass Garden

When Reeve reached the Garden of Silence he found the house-stewards had already set out a small table of wine and cakes, and he smiled at their efficiency. He had been so fast out of the house he had been certain he had beaten them. He never asked for refreshments to be served, but the stewards had taken it upon themselves to provide them. They had some secret contact working in the Basilica who would inform them whenever his regular quarterly letter from his wife arrived, and knowing he usually read it in the privacy of the Garden, would silently set out the table in readiness for his arrival. He lifted the cloth folded over the food to see what they had decided to give him this time – he knew without looking the wine would be his favourite – and found that besides the usual *doja*-cakes they had left *totes*, an elaborate form of layer-cake that was both tricky and time-consuming to make. He could not decide if they thought he needed cheering up or fattening up.

The Garden of Silence was his favourite part of the extensive grounds of his Twentyman's House. It was tucked away in a small yard next to the house, with a glass roof, a floor of glass tiles and a shallow blue-lined pool, with water that constantly rolled down one, under the other and into the third. When he had first assumed his position as Twentyman of the city-state he had been pleased to discover that the house possessed a Garden of Silence, as he had been much impressed with the one he had seen long ago as a child back on Tiq, but when he had toured his new home he had found it derelict and neglected. Leaves clogged the channels and red algae covered the glass, and even though in theory he could afford to pay for its repair from his income as Twentyman, he had still had followers to reward, the house to furnish, and celebrations for his inauguration to pay for. He knew he could not afford it, he knew he had many other things he should spend his money on first, and he knew it was unimportant, but somehow he found his first order in the house had been to bring the garden back into working order. When the house-stewards realised how much Reeve liked the small garden they had kept all staff and visitors away from it and had as good as forbidden house-guests to step foot in it, so now it was only the Human called Hester who dared come there. Reeve did not mind her intrusions; he was simply glad that some-one else appreciated its appeal.

He sat down on his favoured seat, threw his wife's multi-page letter onto the table, and leant back to enjoy the way the sunlight shone through the ever-changing sheet of water rolling across the roof. He was in no hurry to read the letter as it was a long time since they contained anything other than a list of the gowns and jewellery she had bought with his money, and who she had dined with and what fancy dishes had been served. His chief source of entertainment nowadays was seeing how she managed to avoid any mention of her lover, despite the fact that his sources back on Tiq said the pair as good as lived together and were invited to social events as a couple.

Reeve had married her because he had needed the political support of her family, and she had married him because her family had expected him to become very rich very soon. He had married her knowing she did not love him, but with the hope that it might grow in time, and he still treasured their brief period together before his appointment as Twentyman came through when she had worked hard at being a loving wife. He had not been given the city-state he had expected, the city-state he had fought for, but instead had been offered Sickie Bush out in the Colonies, and had been happy to accept it as it was said the Colonies provided even more potential for sources of revenue than the home-world city-states.

His wife had not come to Sickie Bush with him. She came from a venerable and honourable family who could not possibly dream of living anywhere other than Tiq, and although, for one happy evening, his wife had proved unexpectedly daring and had almost agreed to go with him, by the next morning she had talked with her family once more and her determination had melted away. He had had hopes that she might re-find her courage and

follow him later, but it had not taken her long to discover that being a rich woman on Tiq without the inconvenience of a husband to hand and the boredom of official duties to fulfil had many advantages.

Reever poured himself some wine and diluted it with water brought every week from a spring half-way across the city-state reserved by the landowner for his exclusive use, unfolded the tablet and began to read it. He skimmed through the detailed accounts and moved onto the marginally more interesting social calendar, and there, half-way through a laborious listing of the unusual dishes served at Twentyman Meninister's summer banquet, she changed tack and began to write instead about how Reever's military actions and the establishment of a *becj* alliance had been discussed at great length during the meal. She repeated what Meninister himself had said, and what Meninister had said other influential people had said about what Reever was doing, and described how they were being reported publicly, in a place where it was unusual for any-one to be much interested in what was going on in the distant Colonies. He was pleased she had supplied him with the information without prompting - she had no doubt been equally pleased with how the news had successfully padded out her letter to a respectable length without the need for much imaginative creativity on her behalf - but was amused she had not made a single comment on what she personally thought of her husband's activities.

When he finally finished the letter and set it aside he found there was a woman in the park watching him intently. Half of the house was open to the public and although this part of the grounds was supposed to be private, she was not the first visitor to find their way round to it. Nor was she the first visitor to simply stand and stare at him as if he were an exhibit in a statue park.

She visibly flinched when he looked up and saw her, and took a step backwards when he smiled at her. He gestured her forward in the full expectation that she would turn tail and run, but instead she took a deep breath and stepped forward. Reever did not mind the occasional unexpected visitor and positively enjoyed giving pleasure just by exchanging a word or two with them: it cost him little and bought him a hell of a lot of loyalty.

She was of tied man rank, wearing an astonishingly hideous gown and a non-matching shawl that her neighbours back in their rural hamlet had no doubt voted the best things in her wardrobe suitable for wearing when visiting a Twentyman's house. It reminded him of the clothes his mother and aunts had worn on important occasions in his youth, when he had had no more status than the woman standing in front of him.

The woman faltered the edge of the Garden of Silence, too nervous to risk stepping onto the glass tiles.

"May fortune follow you, mother," Reever said courteously.

The woman was too nervous to reply, but instead held out a small package uncertainly. She was too far away to hand it directly to Reever, and too afraid to move any closer, so stretching as far as she could she placed it precariously on the edge of one of the retaining walls.

Reever waited until she had retreated and then leisurely stood up to retrieve the gift. He identified it as a gown-girdle from the size of the package, similar to a hundred others he received every week. Some he kept, some he even wore, and the rest he sold. He sat back down, admired the attempt at an elaborate wrapping that had suffered during the long journey from her home village, and casually opened it. It was the expected girdle, made from a brilliant scarlet cloth patterned with yellow crescents in imitation of gold, no doubt taken from a recycled antique gown. "It is beautiful," he said, and although he had said the same words a thousand times before, he managed to make it sound sincere. "I am touched that you should remember me, esteemed that you have given me a gift, and honoured that you should give me something of such worth. I am so pleased with it I shall wear it tonight, when I dine, and I will remember you."

He inspected the woman, expecting her to have turned red with pleasure, but she remained tinted black in fright. She was a woman so surprised at her own bravery in approaching her Twentyman she was unable to enjoy the moment.

“It is a most vivid red,” he said, obligingly filling in the potentially embarrassing silence. “Tell me, where -”

“My name is Agned Manev Illiev,” she announced in a rush.

Reever blinked at the interruption, but was too used to the unintentional rudeness of the star-struck to be offended.

“Welcome, Agned Manev Illiev,” he replied gravely, with a half-suppressed smile.

“My husband was Teller Bener Tod,” she added in a terrified postscript.

Reever’s smile died. Teller Bener Tod was the man who had betrayed him, selling the details of when and where he would be woefully unguarded and vulnerable, and as a result Reever had been kidnapped, tortured, and would have been killed had the Humans not rescued him. Teller Bener Tod had been executed soon after Reever returned to Sickle Bush City, but he had been generous with the man’s family; they had not been killed, they had not been exiled, simply stripped of all their possessions, houses, savings and employment, while Teller Bener Tod’s name and crime was to be read out in public outside the Basilica of his home town every month for a year.

She did not look like a vengeful assassin – he would not have been pleased to be killed in the garden of his own house after surviving the torture at Basper’s hands – but he had no desire to listen to either teary justifications and explanations of her husband’s actions nor hysterical recriminations over Reever’s response.

“Indeed?” he said, already looking away from her.

“I wished to petition you on behalf of my second eldest – respectfully – I wish to respectfully petition you on behalf of my second eldest son,” she said.

“Of course you do.”

“I would respectfully wish to tell you that he had been offered the chance of training to be a *cruic* in a healing house – a most esteemed healing house – chosen out of hundreds of applicants, but this was before the – the – incident – and now they want him to give up his place so that they can give it to some-one else, and I would like to respectfully ask you to tell the people at the healing house that it is possible for them to take my son – very, very respectfully to ask you to approve this training so that my son may have a respectable profession when he is grown,” she said. “And my son’s self-brother, to respectfully show our family’s loyalty to yourself, is willing to join your militia if you would also be generous enough to approve of that, and he would be most willing to give all of his income not needed to support me and his younger siblings to pay for his self-brother’s training fees, so that you would not have to pay the whole of the training fee yourself -”

“One moment, mother,” Reever broke in. “You want *me* to pay his training fees, in addition to forcing this healing house to accept him against their wishes?”

“My deepest apologies – my most respectful, deepest apologies, honourable lord, but I’ve somehow missed out that bit by mistake – I’m not quite sure how, but somehow I’ve got myself twisted up, but indeed I did mean to respectfully ask you to provide him with a pension, as the salary from the militia – if you were so honourable as to allow his self-brother to join – will not cover the full cost of the training fee -”

“So let me see if I understand your request. You wish me to enable one son of an executed traitor access to all manner of powerful poisons, and the other son access to assorted militia weaponry, and I am also expected to pay for the privilege?”

“I can assure you – respectfully, most respectfully – they are the most loyal citizens in the whole state.”

“I killed their father!”

“But you did not kill *them*, or – or any-one else. We were expecting ...” She fell silent, remembering the long, long day she had spent cooped up in the house with her children, her parents, and her parents-in-law, expecting them all to be carted away by the militia at any moment. When the announcement came through that the punishment was only to be the confiscation of everything they had ever owned, they had been so relieved it had seemed like no punishment at all. It had not taken them long to learn otherwise, but they still realized it could have been so much worse. “Most honour -” she resumed, and then fell silent and stiffened, looking beyond Reeve as some-one else entered the garden from the house. Reeve turned awkwardly to see what she had seen, and spotted Hester coming in search of him. She had her nexus in hand and was consulting it with close attention. She always had a nexus or a notebook in hand, always busy, always working – or giving a very good impression of it – as if afraid some-one would accuse her of not working hard enough.

“Ah, the Human Hester,” he greeted.

“Hello, Reeve,” she replied, looking up briefly. “We need to talk about -” she started, and then broke off when she caught sight of the woman standing just beyond the entrance to the Garden of Silence. “I’m sorry. I did not realize you were busy.”

He knew she did not usually care either, unless there were outsiders present.

He had a sudden thought. “Come and join us,” he invited, switching to English. She hesitated, so he added, as incentive: “Let me finish this business, and then we can talk about whatever tedious little matter you wish us to discuss. Come and sit.”

She worked her way through the maze of walls to where he sat. “No, no,” he corrected. “I am the host; you must sit to my right.” She put her nexus away, fished out her translator and fitted it into her ear and sat down. She studied the woman with what he took to be concentration, but said nothing. One of her few redeeming features was the intense attention she always gave to whatever was the matter in hand.

“This is Agned Manev Illiev,” Reeve said, gesturing to the woman, who was relieved she was not being dismissed with the arrival of more interesting company, but disconcerted by the switch in languages. “I executed her husband for treachery and stripped the rest of the family of all their worldly goods. She has come to petition me for permission for one son to be allowed into the militia and one son to start training as a *cruic* in a healing house. In addition she would also like me to pay all the training fees for said healing house.”

“Why do they need your permission?” Hester asked.

“Who in their right mind is going to employ the son of an executed traitor?”

“And if you don’t give permission, what will happen to them?”

“There is always a market for itinerant fruit-pickers.”

“And if no-one will employ them as itinerant fruit-pickers?”

“Then they will have to find a rich family willing to give them charity.”

“Which is most likely going to be you, in the end, as I’m guessing few people would be willing to give charity to the family of an executed traitor.”

“No doubt.”

“How many children does she have altogether?”

Reeve asked the question. “Eight in total,” he reported.

“Is a *cruic* a well-paid job?”

“For a tied man, yes.”

“So he would be able to support his family?”

“No doubt.”

“They why not give your permission? Pay for one of them now and avoid having to pay for the other seven later.”

“But I executed the man as a warning to others. What sort of message do I send if I then reward his eldest sons?”

“You could do so privately.”

“I am not sure it is actually possible for a Twentyman to bestow largesse in private.”

“So you intend to refuse her?”

He smiled at her. “Oh, I intend to grant her petition. On one condition.”

She looked back at him suspiciously. “Which is?”

“That you ask me to do it, as a favour.”

“What?”

“You know. A favour. Ask me to gift you this. Ask me for something of great value without payment.”

“You want me to ask you to grant this woman’s petition?”

“Exactly.”

“Why?”

“Why not?” he replied innocently.

Reever found it difficult to gauge the emotions of Humans and was finding the team of them foisted onto him in Sickle Bush harder to read than most, but he knew enough about Hester to know she did not understand the reciprocity inherent in a gift-giving society and hated to be put under what she saw as any form of obligation. He had not wanted the Humans in his city and was happy to annoy them in any petty way he could.

“I do not know the correct way to do it,” she demurred. “I would hate to get it wrong.”

“You would inevitably get it wrong, I can assure you. But just ask it in the manner you would ask it of a fellow Human.”

“And if I don’t do it?”

“Then this woman’s entire family become fruit-pickers.”

She sighed. “Twentyman Reever, I would be eternally grateful if you would allow this woman’s petition.”

“And that’s it?”

“I have never yet asked you for anything -”

“Now that’s a lie. You do nothing but demand things of me. You even came out here this afternoon with the express intention of demanding yet more things from me.”

“For the mission; purely for the mission. I have never asked for anything just for myself ... I would take it as a personal favour if you were to do this for my sake.”

“Better. A *personal* favour. I like that.”

“So you will grant the woman’s petition?”

“What will you give me?”

“Give you?”

“You are asking for a great favour that is going to cost me a fair amount of money over the next five years. You really should give me some token of your regard for me.”

“Remember that bit about me asking you in Human fashion?”

“Oh, very well,” he conceded. “Say the final bit, then.”

“And the ‘final bit’ would be...?”

“Isn’t it traditional for Humans to make the declaration ‘I will owe you one’ at the end of such transactions?”

“I’ll owe you one,” she added grudgingly.

He took the expression on her face to be displeasure at being forced to do something she did want to do, and stored the information away for future use.

“Then give me paper and pen.” He knew she would have them; she always carried notebook and pen because she was wary of committing anything to digital media, even in a Freeland city-state. She was always scribbling away in it or consulting it, eternally working. Humans even thought working during meals was acceptable.

She pulled out a small notebook and pen and handed them over, and Reeve wrote out a short script, taking great care with the formation of the pictograms since he knew the woman was likely to show it off repeatedly to every-one she even vaguely knew as one of her greatest possessions. Now, of course, one of her only possessions.

He tore it out and held it out to Hester. "I have no desire to act as my own messenger, so you can pass this to her. As you are a guest in my house, I should not ask you to do so either, but as a Human you won't realise that."

Hester took the note without complaint and handed it over to the woman who accepted it as if it were gold.

"Come to the Basilica tomorrow morning, ask for my aide Liper Lugel and show him this note. He will arrange matters with the militia and the healing house, and will allocate a pension to pay the training fees. A *small* pension," he said.

This time the woman did flush red with delight, and no little relief, and fell to her knees. "Oh, honourable lord! I am unable to express the honour – the very great honour – you pay to some-one as unworthy as I in listening to my petition – my most respectfully intended petition – may you live prosperously and die honoured." He listened appreciatively as she worked her way through a long speech of thanks, amused that she was mangling the half-remembered phrases she had obviously committed rather unsuccessfully to memory as much in her thanks-offering as in her petition. He counted eight 'honourables' and another six 'respectfuls' before he realised Hester was more interested in watching his reaction than listening to the woman.

He gestured Agned Manev Illiev away. "Go now. And remember it must be tomorrow at the Basilica," he said, knowing full well that she would be at the Basilica so early the night-sleepers would not yet have been cleared out, and Liper Lugel would still be in bed.

She waited only long enough to promise Reeve a set of silver shoe-tie tags on the day her son graduated as a *cruic*, in addition to a cushion every year until that day, and hurried away before her presence annoyed him. Cushions were a common gift from tied men, and one Reeve liked as no Twentyman's house could ever have too many of them, and he made a mental note to be informed whenever the cushions were delivered, just to see if they would have the exuberant taste of her gown or the restrained style of the girdle gift.

He waited until she had disappeared round the corner of the house, and then reluctantly turned his attention back to Hester, who was still watching him.

"Yes?" he asked, politely.

"Nothing," she said, and flicked through the pages of her notebook, covered in the ugly thin-lined squiggles of Human writing. "We need to talk about the payment system for the catering out at the Farm."

"And when are we ever *not* talking about the payment system for the catering at the Farm?" he enquired.

"You know very well we have never once discussed it."

"Well, it certainly feels like we have," he replied. "Repeatedly." He shifted his position to his best 'I'm pretending to be interested' pose, because he knew she recognised it as such and was intensely irritated by it. "So, come on then, let's discuss it *again*, then."