

Elfing

by Corinna Turner

Kindle Scout Sample

Chapter 1—Raven

I was hungry. So hungry that most eleven-year-old girls of my rank would have been crying, throwing a tantrum, or fainting. Perhaps all three. Not me. I was thinking what to do about my hunger. I began each day with the same all-consuming thought.

I sat on a thin blanket under the overhang of an old, crooked stone house. I had to bend my head to sit up, but I scarcely registered the minor discomfort. Rain splashed from the eaves to the cobbles of the street only a few feet in front of my nose, but under here it was fairly dry; a good sleeping place. I contemplated the various possible solutions to this particular morning's hunger, until a tiny scuffling noise preceded a whiskered nose from a narrow crack in the wall. When I remained motionless, the rat scurried almost soundlessly to the side of the blanket, attracted by a few crumbs so tiny even I hadn't noticed them.

My hands shot out and seized the rat, wrapping around its plump body. Ignoring the squealing and the snapping teeth, I gripped the head and twisted, feeling the sudden give as the vertebrae in its neck parted company. Laying the twitching rodent beside me, a rare smile snuck onto my face.

So early in the morning and I had already acquired my day's meal! I would take the rat down to the Scrinny Lane cookhouse, where I would skin it, cook it, and eat it. The bones would go to Old Joe the gluemaker as payment; the skin to the skin man in return for a precious half copper. In the new language I had learned since my mother's death, a half copper equaled a piece of bread. If I was extravagant, I would eat it for supper. Otherwise it would go some way towards staving off the hunger on the morrow.

The smile fading, I shuffled to one side, picked up the blanket and knotted it around my shoulders like a cloak. The rat I tucked out of sight in my jacket. Its body still jerked slightly, still refused the truth. I wriggled out into the street, straightened and froze.

Two urchins stood waiting. Unlike me, who merely dressed as a boy, these were actual boys, bigger than I. Born in the gutter and never slept on a feather bed in their lives. They would cut my throat for the rat.

"We heard a squeaking," said one boy, holding out a hand, his eyes cold.

"Do you see anything?" I said—running even before I had finished speaking.

The boys followed close on my heels. So close that when my bare foot slipped from under me on a slimy cobblestone the first was on me immediately. As I fell I caught sight of a mangy dog lurking by the side of the street. I struck the ground painfully, one hand already inside my jacket. The boy landed on top of me, a knife appearing in his hand like magic. Dragging the rat free I flung it towards the dog, which moved in a brown streak. The urchin had a choice of cutting my throat or getting the rat. It was no choice at all; he was already in mid-air after the meal. Back on my feet even as the rat struck the ground, I bolted.

I stopped in the comparative shelter of a lopsided building, wet, tired and sore. I didn't bother contemplating the downturn in the day's fortunes, too busy checking over my clothing.

My knees and elbow were badly bruised, but nothing was torn, so I headed for a disreputable inn I knew where the landlord did not keep a porter on and usually allowed me to earn a few pence carrying the luggage.

When I arrived, the cheap coach was throwing out a passenger at the door. It was nothing personal; that was just how the cheap coaches went about things. The passenger, having gained the cobbles, ducked as his two cases were thrown down beside him. The coachman flogged his broken-down horses for a good few seconds before they were convinced to move and the coach swayed unsteadily away through the wet streets of London town.

I was already in motion. Stopping beside the passenger I put on my stolid, dependable expression and, with a tug of my forelock, took hold of the cases.

“I’ll get those, sir,” I said, in my feigned gutter accent. Was it really feigned? When had I last spoken as myself?

The traveler did not want to spend money on a bag boy, I could tell. He had planned to carry them quickly into the inn himself. Recoiling from appearing miserly when actually put to it, with a poor attempt at grace he gave me a curt nod and entered the inn, looking back only three times to check the luggage was following.

I dragged the heavy cases up the stairs, appreciating why the man had ducked their descent from the coach top. But my scrawny frame was up to it, and I set them down carefully in the room and waited. I only ever stuck my hand out as a last resort, it frequently seemed to do more harm than good. The traveler noticed my continued presence with a flash of irritation, dug a coin from his purse and threw it in my general direction.

I caught it and left quickly. It was a good-sized copper, and I was hungry enough that I went straight down to the inn kitchen and swapped it for a half copper and a chunk of bread. Retreating to the inn courtyard to eat my meal and watch for the next traveler, I eyed another urchin lingering there. Did he also have the landlord’s permission to carry bags?

The bread was finished all too quickly, as always, and I sat wishing another traveler would arrive. More at that moment for the distraction from my own thoughts, than for the coin I could earn. Only when I had some amount of food in my belly was I troubled by thoughts of the future. It was the only time I could afford to be.

I had lasted three years on the streets, three long, painful years since my mother died and my uncle threw me from the place that had always been my home.

“Be gone, witch child,” he’d snarled at me, “or I’ll duck you in the pond till you’re clean and cold.”

Even at eight years old I’d recognized a death threat when I heard one and I hadn’t tried to go back. Of course, I had always known my uncle hated me, but to be thrown from my own home to what should’ve been almost certain death? It had been utterly unexpected. The house in which my uncle now lived was mine, was it not? My rank came to me from my mother and there was nothing legal to take the property away from me.

Legally, though, my uncle was my guardian. No doubt he assumed me dead long since and it was a fair assumption. *Serapion* the urchin had no more chance of reclaiming what belonged to Lady Serapia Ravena than the morning’s rat had of breathing again.

In fact, *Serapion* the urchin had only one chance in the world and it was tied around my waist, carefully concealed under my clothing...

I looked up as the kitchen staff burst from the doorway, chattering excitedly to one another and followed by the cook, who swept something ahead of her with an expression of

grim courage. They were calling for the landlord and I darted over to see what the to-do was about, slipping to the front. I'd have seized any distraction.

The heap of ash was tipped over the doorstep onto the cobbles of the yard. The landlord came striding out of the building even as I crouched to peer more closely at the tiny creature floundering weakly in the midst of the soot. As grey as ash, it resembled a bird, for it had a curved, beaky upper lip and a pair of little things that were clearly undeveloped wings on its back. But it was entirely featherless and had two tiny front paws, just now making feeble movements in the ash. Fragments of broken, blackened eggshell lay around it, showing it to be newborn. Or rather, new-hatched. I had never seen anything so intriguing.

"A demon-creature, sir, a demon-creature in the fire..."

"I was sweeping out the grate, sir, and I sees it..."

"It ain't nat'ral, sir, ain't right..."

"Shall we have a priest, sir? Don't like the thought of it otherwise..."

A priest? Whatever for? I'd sensed evil often enough, and there was nothing of it here. But I'd learned long ago that other people just didn't seem able to sense things as I could. Even my mother couldn't. I had stopped mentioning my strange sensitivity only a short time after learning how to talk about it at all.

The landlord leant over to scrutinize the 'demon-creature'. "Evilest looking blighter I ever did see," he pronounced, "but soon sorted." He raised his foot. His intent was obvious.

The baby animal raised its head and peered around with a pair of huge golden eyes. It gave a little cough and a cloud of ash came from its beak. It must be half choked. Without even considering it, I reached out and snatched it from the path of the landlord's foot.

The assembled group turned a look of astonishment on me and the landlord swelled with rage. "You impudent little..." He took a step towards me.

For the second time that day, I ran for my life. Or in this case, the life of the creature I held pressed to my chest. I would survive a beating, it would not.

The landlord did not pursue me beyond his inn gates, but his furious shout followed, ringing in my ears. "If you *ever* come back..."

An inn without a porter was rare. One where I was trusted to carry bags was rarer still. I had lost the closest thing to a real job I had ever achieved, and for what? A deformed chick? I must be mad. Panting and heart pounding, I slipped into an alley and sank down on the cobbles to take a closer look at just what I had saved.

My hands were filthy with soot and the chick, or whatever it was, still grey, so that must be its natural color. It could not be a chick, I realized, as I looked more closely. Apart from its four legs it also had a tail, a very lizard-like tail. Its little, clawed front feet scrabbled gently at my thumb in a way that reminded me of a mouse. It could hold things in them, I suspected. It was, I concluded with a sense of shock, some rare exotic creature from across the seas. How its egg had come to end up in the inn fireplace was a question I did not even bother pondering. But if it was rare and from far away, then it was worth an enormous amount of money.

I looked at the tiny thing again. It fitted snugly in my palm, leathery hide soft against my skin. I'd never get close enough to the nobility to sell it for a pet. I'd have to sell to a middleman and it would go to an apothecary to be dried and powdered for potions. And much as I usually ignored the fact, I was terribly, achingly lonely. The creature raised its head again

and gave another little cough, and I knew I could not sell it. It was mine and I would keep it. It would not eat much.

Talking of food... I looked again at my new companion in distress. It would need milk, or something... I tucked it securely inside my jacket for warmth and set off once more along the streets. Climbing up some abandoned scaffolding to the rooftops, I entered the attic of a deserted house through a hole in the roof. The rotten floor groaned under my weight, but I moved lightly to a pile of old rugs in a dry area of the room. There, curled in a little nest, lay a cat and her five kittens. The mother cat regarded me warily with yellow eyes, but did not run or move to attack. The cat and I had shared the loft on many a night.

Now I put my handful down carefully at the edge of the nest and crouched there, watching, ready to snatch it back out if the cat tried to harm it. This was a very long shot, and I knew it. The creature was unlikely to know how to get to the food on its own, for one thing, and the mother cat might try to savage it if it got close. I'd probably have to catch the cat and hold her down while carefully guiding the lizard-chick to the teat. But I wouldn't do it immediately when there was just the feeblest chance I wouldn't have to shatter the trust that existed between us.

The lizard-chick peered around, coughing again. Its babyish gaze travelled from me to the mother cat and it swayed forward unsteadily, opening its beaky mouth again to let out a soft, quavering cry not unlike those of the kittens. The mother cat went on watching me, seeming scarcely aware of the intruder now easing its way slowly, but persistently, in among her brood. Finally the lizard-chick's mouth closed around a teat and it began to swallow. Every so often it released its mouthful to give the kittenish cry again. The cat still did not react.

I watched in something close to wonderment. The mother cat hadn't noticed the interloper, of that I felt sure, and the back of my neck prickled in the way I associated with my odd senses. My new pet intrigued me more and more.

Although I usually avoided staying in the same sleeping place for more than one night at a time, I remained in the loft for over a week. By then, desperate to sleep elsewhere, I began to consider coming to the loft in the daytime to let my pet feed. But my problem was solved when my casual offering of a crumb of bread was eagerly swallowed by the lizard-chick.

"You don't need milk any more, huh?" I said, stroking under the soft leathery chin. "Well, time for a name, I suppose..."

I turned my pet around in my hands. I had already established as well as I could that the lizard-chick was female, something most young noblewomen could not have done. Now I considered the question of a name. The baby was still a uniform grey all over, apart from her beautiful golden eyes.

"You are quite like a bird," I mused softly. "And you're mine. I'm a Ravena, in name, at least. Ravens are black not grey, but you're close, and there are girl ravens as well as boy ravens. I'll call you Raven. Then you're part of me."

Chapter 2—Winter's Tail

I huddled into my cloak and blanket, shivering, and pressed closer to the chimney wall at my back. That blessed spring weather had been swept away by a very nasty sting in winter's tail. I needed more food. Food was money, though. Raven fared better than I did in cold weather, of course, tucked away inside my clothes, not only for warmth but also kept from prying eyes.

I touched the ring tied so carefully around my waist. I hadn't been to the palace this week, but I knew I could not go. Not until this weather broke. I could spare neither the time nor the energy. It wasn't as though I had ever heard so much as a *word* about the Duke of Albany. A man I had never seen, nor knew anything of, but whom I believed to be my father.

Not that it was conclusive in the slightest. In my entire life, no one, not my mother, nor my own maid, nor any of the other servants, had ever mentioned my father to me or even in my hearing. There was an obvious conclusion to be drawn from this, even by a well-brought up girl, and I had eventually reached it. Astonishing as it might seem, considering my pious and impeccably behaved mother, I must be illegitimate.

Which might have explained my uncle's dislike for me, had it not been for the fact that he liked my mother. Though I'd sometimes wondered how genuine that liking really was, when all his visits seemed to end with my mother giving him money. But only after he had paid his deathbed visit had I, for the first and last time, heard of the Duke of Albany. My mother had been almost gone by then but had insisted upon seeing me again, probably, I now suspected darkly, because my uncle had divulged his intentions, leaving her in desperate straits regarding my future.

Only then, in such dire necessity, had my mother spoken of this man. And only a few words. A few words—and a ring—pressed into my shaking hand.

"Go to the Duke of Albany," my mother had whispered, and with her last breath, "he will look after you..."

Of course, going anywhere as an urchin was far from easy, let alone going to find a man one did not know and had not the slightest idea how to find. Initially, I had naively believed I could seek help from one of my mother's few friends, sure they would have a carriage harnessed for my conveyance to this Duke's residence. My already disheveled state and the common belief I was with my uncle on his country estates had denied me access even to the upper servants and brought threats of what would happen if I persisted in my 'lies'. Before long, survival left me with no time to worry about the Duke of Albany.

Thanks to Siridean, and later kind old Father Mahoney, I had slowly mastered my new life and eventually managed to take up my weekly pilgrimage to the one place where I thought I might hear of, or even find, this elusive Duke. The old gossips that hung around the palace entrances could be guaranteed to know all who had attended court in the past week, and all the scandals of my old world. But it had been over three years, and I had learned nothing...

Another urchin, slightly bigger than me, but thinner, was coming along the backstreet, shoulders hunched and shaking with cold. As he came level, his eyes darted to me. His desperate eyes.

I rose to flee just as he lunged. I raised my arm before my face and swung it sideways, feeling the jar as my wrist struck his, but his other hand reached my throat, or more specifically, the fastening of my precious cloak. I felt it come loose and hurled myself forward, knocking him to the ground.

We struggled in a breathless silence. He landed several blows to my head and took advantage of my disorientation to break free and flee. With my cloak. I sat up, willing my head to stop spinning, and wound my fingers into my blanket. I'd tied it over my shoulder, like an ancient Roman's toga, and it had not come free as easily as the cloak.

Raven chattered a warning and I looked up quickly. A much older boy walked rapidly towards me, staring intently at something that lay in the mud. I struggled to focus on that tiny circle of gold.

My ring!

Raven shot forward, and the boy and I dived after her. My hand closed around the ring and I twisted halfway to my feet, turning to grab Raven and flee. But... *Oh no!*

The boy held Raven. He had his hand wrapped around her long neck, and her body dangled. Her head twisted helplessly against the circle of his fingers, but she could not bite.

"This'll fetch a tidy penny," said the boy. "I'd rather 'ave the trinket, though."

I looked at the ring in my hand, anguished. It was my only hope.

"The 'pothecary won't care if it's alive, 'long as it's fresh," the boy sneered. He took hold of Raven's body and began to pull. Raven's head tilted up and her legs flailed. He would break her neck!

"Stop!" I gasped. "Stop, you can have the ring!"

I held it out carefully, my other hand extended for Raven. With the utmost caution and mutual mistrust, we carried out the swap. I stumbled backwards several paces, out of immediate reach, Raven clutched to me.

"You jus' gotta be a girl," sniggered the boy.

"Am not!" I retorted, with suitably boyish indignation.

The boy shrugged. "Ain't short of coin now," he said, grinning at me and twiddling the ring between finger and thumb. "I can do better than you, anyway. Master Simmons don't bother with the likes of you."

He won't bother with you for long, if you boast like that, I thought to myself. The boy had lifted one foot and turned the heel of his boot to reveal a secret compartment. He placed the ring inside, closed it, smirked at me and left. I sniffed in disgust. If I had a compartment like that I certainly wouldn't show it off, even to a helpless urchin. I'd need boots first, of course. Now that I thought about it, he probably had the compartment to keep things from his Master Simmons. Lunatic. Even I had heard of Master Simmons. And stayed well away from him.

Shivering twice as hard, I made my way to a small area of greenery that straddled the gap between two rows of houses, running back some distance. I sat down with my back to a house wall and stared despondently at the grass in front of me. The mass cemetery was too recent to have been built over. On Sundays there might be poor folk there, placing some single flower on the communal grave. Some urchins would take these and sell them to the next person, and so on, until they wilted.

Today it was quiet and I could sit there alone, shaking with the shock of my loss. *What do I do now?* A comforting warmth stirred in my nape in response to this desolate question, although no answer presented itself. Raven pressed her face to my neck, making soft cheeps of apology. I stroked her gently. It wasn't Raven's fault.

Sometimes I came to this particular grave to escape the bustle. After Siridean had died they'd tossed him in there, with everyone else who couldn't pay for better.

I drew my dagger and held it in my hands, my thumb rubbing around the pommel, cleaning away the protective layer of mud. Hematite gleamed underneath. The shiny silver stone passed well enough for plain steel when strategically daubed with muck. I stared down into it. For a long time, until I found Raven, the dagger had been my only friend. The eyes were there today, looking up at me out of the stone. They looked like Siridean's eyes. I hugged it close, remembering the last time I'd felt as bereft as I did now.

Selling the dagger had been the rational thing to do. I couldn't eat the stone, and a plain dagger would surely do just as well. So I'd reasoned. I'd felt miserable about it, though. Misery turned to pure panic the first time I tried to hunt something. I'd never missed so badly before!

I fled to the quiet cemetery and threw the new dagger at a sapling over and over again. I hardly hit it once. What was the matter with me? I'd chosen a dagger that felt almost identical in my hand, the shape, the length, the balance...

It didn't make the back of my neck prickle, though, the way Siridean's dagger did when I held it and concentrated on my target. The harder I'd concentrated, the better my success. Siridean had taught me the importance of concentration. But I concentrated until I thought my head would explode, and still the new dagger would not fly true. It was then I accepted that the eyes I'd often seen looking back at me probably weren't just a trick of the light. Siridean's dagger had been a very special gift. It had kept me alive this long, and now I had sold it. I felt near despair.

I went back to the shop with the coins, though the shopkeeper would not have bought if he didn't think he could sell it for more, so I held out little hope of being able to buy it back.

But the man answered the door with dark-shadowed eyes and wild words. "Such a night! Such a night I have never had!" He thrust the dagger at me and snatched the coins. "Take the cursed thing and be gone with you!"

I had appreciated the dagger much more after that. It had forgiven my ignorance and come back to me. I doubted I would get the ring back so easily. Common sense whispered that I would never get the ring back at all, but I couldn't accept that. To accept that would be to accept that I was an urchin and would never be anything else, other than an inhabitant of the latest mass grave.

If *only* he'd put the ring into a *pocket*... I might have been able to get it back. It was just barely possible, anyway: but only just. He'd surely know better than to let me get too close. But a *boot compartment*? How was I supposed to get into that without him noticing?

A movement opposite drew me from my thoughts. I tensed, peering, my hand shifting its grip on the dagger. A dog was slinking from the undergrowth—a big dog, but thin-sided and limping, which was probably why. One look at its hunting stance was enough to bring me to my feet in a crouch of my own. It sniffed my scent and showed its teeth in a silent snarl. I eyed it back, just as intently.

If I let that thing get to me I'd be in trouble. I touched the hematite and my resolve strengthened. The dog still advanced, head low and teeth bared. There was definitely nothing wrong with its teeth.

Wait, I cautioned myself as it came closer, *wait*... Its muscles bunched to rush me, and I threw the dagger with all the force and concentration I could muster.

Staying safely where I crouched until it had stopped its demonic howling and thrashing, I then advanced carefully to reclaim my dagger. It was my stomach's turn to growl, and I looked the animal over with rather more interest. Thin, but large, which meant there was still plenty of meat. It might keep me alive until the weather broke. But even this could not raise my spirits by much. I'd lost my mother's ring. Why would the Duke of Albany listen to me now?

I shifted the dog slightly with the point of my toe, considering how best to proceed. The entire dog would be quite heavy to carry, but I would keep the skin and bones and not lose a ha'penny of its value. It wasn't like I wanted to leave any of it behind; even the offal was valuable sustenance. I would just have to carry it. Reluctantly, I reached for the knot on my blanket, to undo it and use it as a makeshift bag.

Again a movement drew my eye. I looked over to the streets and saw the boy who'd stolen my ring. I stiffened, ready to leave the dog and run, assuming he'd followed me to try and get Raven after all. Then I realized he was turning and walking away. I hesitated, torn. A dead dog would go nowhere towards the price of the ring, but if I could ever hope to get it back, I needed to know where the boy was to be found...

I dragged the dog quickly into the bushes and concealed it as well as I could, hesitating one last time. All that meat! Another stray dog might well find it in my absence... But I left it and hurried after the boy. There wasn't really any decision to be made.

The boy walked purposefully, and the streets through which he passed were familiar to me, making concealment easy. Trying to follow someone without it being obvious to everyone else around was rather less easy, but I'd had cause once or twice before and managed well enough.

Eventually, I peeped around a corner to find that he'd stopped in a little back square and was speaking to a man. I eyed the man suspiciously. He had rather yellow hair and a youth with feral eyes much like the dog's prowled nearby, watching everything. The square was deserted.

"...Y'know Ralph Fletcher were taken for cutt'in that purse? 'An the throat with it?" the boy was saying.

"I know Ralph Fletcher's got himself in jail to hang just after I paid him to do an extremely important task, aye," the yellow haired man replied malevolently.

"Aye, your honor, well, I know'd what Fletcher were good at," the boy continued, "and if you were needing a one for such jobs I thought you might..." he dropped his voice and spoke rapidly for a few moments.

He wasn't just boasting. That was Master Simmons. Time to go...

I made to ease back out of sight, but even as I did the boy turned and pointed directly at me. So much for my unobserved stalking.

Master Simmons' head rose. "Wait." He hooked a finger at me.

I bit my lip but did not dare to disobey. I advanced warily. The boy accepted something from Master Simmons, writhed fawningly and left. The feral youth was still there, out of earshot but close enough. Still... slightly better odds. Numerically, at least.

"Well, boy," said Master Simmons, when I stood before him. "How does this take your fancy?" He held out a fat gold piece.

I stared at it, more enthralled by the sight of gold than I had ever been in my life. That tiny thing would buy back my ring.

“Thomas tells me,” Master Simmons went on, when he saw he had my attention, “that you are uncommonly accurate with a dagger over a long range.”

My insides began to curdle and I shrugged as non-communicatively as I could. I had a feeling that precious coin might as well have been on the moon.

“Do you know a man,” asked Master Simmons, “called Sir Allen Malster?”

I swallowed. Everyone knew Sir Allen Malster. He was one of the Queen’s special agents, and he’d seen an awful lot of men like Master Simmons tried and executed. I shrugged again.

“I would be very happy... *this* happy, in fact,” Master Simmons twitched the gold coin, “if Sir Allen were to suffer a very accurate sort of accident from a very discreet sort of range.”

I swallowed again. “I jus’ killed a dog, s’ttrue, sir,” I replied. “But the dog were terrible fierce, I’d never even ha’ tried, else. I’m glad I hit it ‘cus I’m terrible hungry, but it were a surprise, sir.” I shrugged as though the implication of my words were obvious.

Master Simmons’ hand closed around the gold piece. He might suspect the true reason for my modesty, but he would not risk a bumbled attempt.

“What a shame,” he said, with one of the most insincere smiles I’d ever seen. “You’d best go eat your dog.” He turned away in brusque dismissal.

I was only too happy to get back to my dog and away from him. I hurried off, resolutely trying to turn my mind to the matter of the dog’s preparation and consumption. But before I’d gone very far, my niggling conscience spawned an idea that was not easily ignored. An idea about how to acquire at least part of the ring’s value. An idea that made my mouth dry with fear.

My conscience told me that I ought to warn Sir Allen Malster. And my head told me that he might be grateful enough to pay for details. I tried to shake the thoughts away. It was absurd. People were probably trying to kill the man all the time. And money would do me no good if Master Simmons found out.

If I could manage it without being seen... What did I really have to lose? If I couldn’t find the Duke soon, I probably wouldn’t be alive to do it at all. And finding the Duke would be of doubtful use without the ring. I swallowed very hard.

The dog would have to wait a little longer.

Chapter 3—The Price of a Ring

I lay on the roof of Sir Allen Malster's modest town house, gutter sludge soaking through my breeches. Raven sat at the back of my neck, under my hair, still and quiet. I prayed the guttering was well attached as I leant out and pitched the first stone at the balcony window. It was pitch black, and the town house nestled in the midst of a terrace. This was the most secret method of contacting the man I'd been able to think of.

I'd waited until it was good and late and a candle had been lit in the room, and I thought there now a very strong chance that it would be Sir Allen Malster in there, alone. I threw three more stones before I saw the window open silently on well-oiled hinges. My breath caught in my throat as a fully-cocked crossbow came first through the opening. But I held my tongue. I needed to be sure it was Sir Allen Malster, not a servant.

I could just make out a pale-haired head in the window.

"Who's there?" asked a harsh voice.

I thought it was him. I hoped it was him. "Friend," I whispered.

The crossbow rose to cover me as he stepped halfway onto the balcony. "Put your hands on the guttering."

I shifted carefully until I could do so without falling. My open hands were dimly visible in the light coming from the window, and to my relief the crossbow was lowered slightly.

"Sir Allen Malster, sir?" I checked.

"Yes. What do you want?"

"Someone seeks your life. But I suppose you already knew that." I could not keep a trace of bitterness from my voice. I'd taken this terrible risk for nothing.

The man glanced at the crossbow. "A normal precaution when answering mysterious taps on the window at this hour," he said coldly. "Who is it?"

Hope flared again. He had not known. "I forget," I muttered.

"What?" he snapped.

"Too hungry," I persisted. "I've forgotten."

With the light behind him I couldn't see his face. Sir Allen Malster got results, but his methods could be rough. I prepared myself for being dragged from the roof, dangled off the balcony and threatened with dropping. The moment's silence seemed very long. I could hear street noise coming faintly over the roof from the front of the house, but my heartbeat was the only other sound.