

SEDIGITUS SWIFT

The Eye of Rsera

Archelaus

Washington, DC

As the major port serving our glorious island home, Karandoz steadily increased in prosperity as the Continent slowly recovered from the centuries of economic stagnation brought on by the Time of Troubles. Though trading chiefly with Ondiran and Esdiron, it also brought in goods from as far away as the Great Western Ocean, enabling the merchant houses to pile up wealth that would later be used to finance industrialization.

—*Karandoz, Ships, and the Sea*

Colmar awoke to find a rat cautiously sniffing his hand. The sturdy, dark-haired man eyed the creature balefully, and it hastened away. He sat up with a grimace, his body aching from a night on the stone floor. The cold light of dawn barely penetrated a narrow lancet window high in the wall above. Rubbing his hands together, Colmar swore softly at the bone-chilling damp. They were too close to the river, he reflected, but then the sort of people who built prisons no doubt considered that an advantage. He looked about him. The cell was spacious but squalid, with no furnishings save a smelly latrine bucket and a little soiled straw. Of his five fellow prisoners, only one was awake, an ancient beggar who sat by the door, lousing himself. The old man paused to give Colmar an ambiguous, toothless grin. Suddenly one of the sleepers gave a strangled snore and rolled over.

Colmar did not know his cellmates. Brought in late the night before on a false charge of theft, he had not been in a conversational mood. A large contingent of the Karandoz city watch had taken him by surprise in an irritatingly competent arrest. He knew, of course, who must be behind it. Had she attempted to take him with her own men, there would have been a scuffle, and she might have lost some valuable retainers. The lady had a nice sense of economy. Colmar shook his head regretfully. He had not expected her to find him so soon. Indeed, a fortnight's headlong flight had bought him but three days' respite: it was hard to hide from a sorceress.

Distant temple bells rang their first peal of the day. Colmar began to wonder what exactly might pass for food here (not that he was feeling choosy). After some considerable time, during which he put the latrine bucket to its intended use and wiped his hands on some moldy straw, footsteps and voices resounded in the passage, and the door opened. A guard appeared. "You!" he barked, with an impatient gesture to Colmar. The beggar across the room cackled gleefully. Several of the other inmates were now awake as well, and Colmar gathered that they did not believe this early summons boded well for him, either. He sighed and got up. Whatever this was about, it was not likely to be breakfast.



Two armed guards escorted Colmar to a heated room on the ground floor of the building. Valdira was there waiting

for him, along with a heavy-set, middle-aged man whom Colmar rightly took to be some kind of superior jailer.

The sorceress smiled delightedly as he came in. "Thank heavens, he's safe and sound!" She spoke with a slight Ondiric accent, but her command of Tseren was impressive. She turned to the warden. "This isn't the first time something like this has happened, you know. I was so worried about him having broken loose in a foreign port."

Colmar stared, baffled by this flow of seeming nonsense. The warden, on the other hand, appeared unfazed, interjecting an obsequious "Yes, milady," and a "Quite so, milady." Evidently Colmar looked as though he might add some untoward remark of his own, for one of the guards punched him preemptively with the butt of a spear.

Valdira made a great show of distress. "Don't hurt him!" she entreated. "The poor man's quite deranged. Half the time he doesn't remember what he's stolen, or even his own name." She sighed tragically. "It has been such a trial for our family. He has these strange delusions, you see. Once, he took it into his head that he was an Asardian archpriest—he stole the robes and everything. It was most embarrassing!"

Colmar swore under his breath, recognizing that at this point any outburst on his part would serve only to confirm Valdira's diagnosis. Determined not to give her the satisfaction, he limited himself, with difficulty, to glowering at her. She was slender, with fair hair, gray-blue eyes, and an aristocratic bearing; under other circumstances he would have found her attractive. She had obviously overawed the warden, who seemed most unlikely to behave this

fawningly toward everyone. Colmar easily perceived the larger design of her little ploy. The arrest had allowed her to search his room in peace, while he was held, helpless, until called for. Not having found what she sought, she could now take personal custody of him, as a tame lunatic. He found his assigned role to be a thoroughly humiliating one—no doubt precisely as she had intended.

Meanwhile the warden was clucking his tongue at Valdira's sad tale of twisted kleptomania. "Now then, my boy," he began sententiously. (Colmar was thirty, but the warden had reached an age where he regarded anyone younger than himself as youthful.) He enunciated with exaggerated care, presumably on the assumption that Colmar, as an Ondir, was unlikely to speak Tseren very well. "We take theft—*stealing*—very seriously here. You are indeed fortunate—*lucky*—that her ladyship does not wish to take the matter further and that I have consented—*agreed*—to release you into her kind care." He produced the few possessions taken from Colmar the night before and presented them to Valdira. "A pleasure to be of service, milady. I'm sorry we could not find the article in question. I just hope you can keep this fellow out of further trouble."

Colmar scowled, having every wish to cause a great deal more trouble than either the warden or Valdira could readily imagine. Indeed, if only the alleged madman could have retrieved his sword, now in that accursed woman's hands, he might have done a good deal to live up to his new reputation, but under the circumstances all he could do was fume in silence as the guards prodded him again

with their spears and conducted him to the prison gates along with his new captor.



Outside waited two of Valdira's burly minions, engaged in a leisurely game of knucklebones. While the sorceress bestowed a coin upon each of the prison guards, her men-at-arms tied Colmar's hands behind his back with a stout cord, poked him once or twice in the solar plexus, and made rude remarks at his expense. Valdira then endowed the heftier of her two followers with Colmar's sword, and the party set out through the narrow cobbled streets.

Presently they entered a large square, where the morning's market was in full swing. It soon became difficult to walk for haggling peasants, heaping produce-carts, and bawling livestock. Geese hissed savagely as the procession passed. One bird attempted to bite the larger man-at-arms, who consulted with Valdira and then purchased the fowl for the day's dinner. Nearby beggar children could not resist drawing unflattering comparisons between Colmar and the captive gander. Laughing gaily, Valdira continued to lead the way past towering sacks of grain and heavily laden donkeys, making several additional stops to acquire vegetables, wine, and some expensive seasonings. The meal was clearly intended to be a celebratory one.

As a thriving port city, Karandoz attracted more exotic commerce than spices, however, and the men-at-arms displayed a covert interest in an arriving contingent of slaves, some of whom were female and not fully clad, in accordance with the most up-to-date marketing principles.

Colmar, who was good with knots, had been trying to exploit the general hubbub in order to loosen his bonds ever since entering the market. He now seized the opportunity offered by this distraction and released himself. Employing the cord—still fastened to his right wrist—as a weapon of precision, he lashed out at the smaller of the two men, dealing him a stinging blow to the eye. With an anguished yelp, the unfortunate tough dropped the axe he was carrying and clutched woefully at the injured spot, while Colmar grasped swiftly for the hilt of the sword, *his* sword, at the belt of the larger man-at-arms. Lumbered with the goose, this worthy reacted clumsily and failed to stop Colmar from drawing the well-balanced blade. Modestly enchanted, the weapon was well attuned to Colmar's hand: the hilt warmed responsively at his touch, and the naked steel glinted dangerously. Colmar thrust out at his opponent, who avoided the on-coming blade only at the expense of his balance. Flinging the goose into the air, the man crashed heavily into a market stall, overturning a cart of round cheeses, which rolled in all directions and disappeared into the avid clutches of the beggar children. Spinning around to face Valdira, Colmar found her already casting a spell. Setting chivalry pragmatically aside, he rushed forward and used the flat of his sword to knock the startled sorceress over backward into the large fountain that happened to be behind her. His heart pounding, Colmar then fled the marketplace without further delay. He had no desire to find out what might happen next should he remain.



Indeed, Valdira did not emerge from the fountain in the best frame of mind. "Damn your verminous hides!" she shouted in Ondiric at her men-at-arms, the larger of whom was still picking himself up from the wreckage of the cheese cart, while the other tended his injured eye. "Go after him!" She frowned at the gawking market folk, who had never seen a powerful sorceress ducked in a fountain before and could scarcely be expected, in all fairness, to know how to behave. The beggar children were the least inhibited: some were laughing too hard even to steal cheeses. Valdira eyed them coldly, murmured something indistinct, and gestured with her fingers. The beggar children suddenly stopped laughing and began to hiccup. The other people in the vicinity took their cue from this minor demonstration of the sorceress's displeasure and hastily returned to business.

A practical woman, Valdira next reclaimed the goose, which she gave to the old man whose cheese cart had been flattened, and who looked altogether too frightened to complain. Wringing the water from her hair, she then cast a small spell to warm herself and dry her clothes. Although the sun was shining brightly, the spring morning was still a bit brisk for outdoor bathing. Valdira scowled. When she caught up with that wretch, she would repay him for this humiliation, with interest. Her scowl deepened. Those witless retainers of hers were in for heavy weather, as well, especially if they came back empty-handed, as she fully expected them to do, mouthing lame

excuses for their own incompetence. Who taught those fools to tie knots, anyhow, or to let an unarmed man take a sword away from them? God's teeth, these so-called fighting men were enough to make one despair, only sheer rage kept getting in the way.



Breathing blasphemy and vengeance themselves, Valdira's two men-at-arms obediently lumbered after the fugitive as best they could in their mail shirts and hobnailed boots. They soon perceived, however, that their relatively unencumbered quarry had made good his escape. As neither man was in any great hurry to return and face his mistress's displeasure, they decided to separate and search for Colmar individually.

The larger one, Borek, was also the more intelligent and conscientious of the two. Fourteen months in Valdira's service, he was shrewd enough to suspect that the odd reverence he felt for her person—one that firmly checked the more basic desire he felt for her body—might owe something to sorcery. In any case, having no wish to disappoint her, he began his search by chatting with people on the edge of the square, in case they had seen which way Colmar had gone. Unfortunately, like eyewitnesses the world over, those who purported to remember anything had broadly divergent opinions about what they had seen. It did not help that Borek's command of Tseren was rudimentary at best. Ultimately, he was obliged to choose a side street to investigate with little confidence that it was the actual route Colmar had taken.

The smaller man-at-arms, Grot, was in every way Borek's junior partner. He had the misfortune to have been named after his parents' prize boar—and the even greater misfortune to have grown up vaguely resembling the beast. A recent and as yet unseasoned addition to Valdira's entourage, he had just enough sense to fear the lady's wrath. Nevertheless, with his first month's pay clinking temptingly in his pocket, the feckless fellow quickly persuaded himself that his best chance of locating Colmar lay in a thorough search of the port's taverns and brothels, where with any luck he might also find a tolerably pretty girl to apply a wet cloth to his still painful eye.



Strange to say, Colmar had ignored taverns and brothels during his hasty retreat from the market square. Once certain he had shaken his pursuers, he paused to catch his breath and remove the cord from his wrist. He could not help chuckling quietly to himself. The sorceress may have made a fool of him, but he had paid her back in kind. He took far more satisfaction from that than he could possibly have derived from killing her. True, from the point of view of his own safety, the exchange might yet prove a poor one.

He needed to get out of town quickly, but first he must recover the prize for which Valdira pursued him. Had he not taken the precaution of hiding it, she would already have attained her object. He tucked the sword awkwardly under his belt, regretting that he had not been able to recover the scabbard, a nice one, with brass fittings. His destination—a crumbling, open-air temple dedicated

to an obscure nature deity, whose cult had gone out of fashion several decades before he was born—lay on the outskirts of the city, beyond the walls. Once there, he made his way to the weather-beaten central altar, a massive stone slab, elaborately carved with creeping vines, writhing serpents, and copulating frogs, punctuated (in what seemed to Colmar an unnecessarily morbid touch) by several quite realistically rendered human skulls. Tucked in the mouth of one of these latter was a black velvet pouch, which he now repossessed.

He meant to thrust it quickly into a pocket and go, but somehow he could not resist opening it. Inside was a beautiful red gem the size of a pigeon egg. The sunlight caught glitteringly on its many facets. Colmar knew it must be very old, for the art of gem-cutting had been lost generations ago. He also knew it must be very magical, for why else would that woman pursue it so relentlessly? Surely not from mere greed, although it must be worth a royal treasury. With difficulty he shook off the almost religious reverie he felt taking hold of him, pocketed the gem, and stepped away from the stone altar. Keeping a sharp eye out for vengeful sorceresses, he then slipped back into town.



Meanwhile, Valdira had set out for her lodgings to await, with rising impatience, the return of Borek and Grot. As she walked, she could not help revisiting her frustration at Colmar's having found the Eye of Ksera before her. Three years of work, gone! Three years spent searching for the

fabulous gem, investigating its obscure history, its magical properties, its lethal protections. Three years of youth and beauty lost traveling to musty foreign libraries and sulfurous alchemical laboratories, researching arcane magicks, interpreting ancient runes and sigils, calculating the phases of both moons, and bargaining with mad wizards for indecipherable grimoires or with fidgety witches for rare ingredients. Of course, self-respecting sorceresses mostly do these sorts of things anyway, and Valdira had in fact enjoyed most of it. Along the way, she had learned two new mystical languages, not to mention a bizarre alternative system of astrology. She had succeeded in growing magical herbs in pots, though she had failed at raising ordinary newts in troughs. Nevertheless, having determined the precise location of the Eye, having divined exactly how to harness its extraordinary power (and how to avoid getting herself killed in the process), the affronted sorceress felt she had every right to rage against the fates who had allowed Colmar to stumble upon the gem by dumb luck the very hour she had arrived to claim what surely was rightfully hers.



Valdira was lodging at the Tattered Parchment, a worthy establishment catering to bureaucrats, scholars, and the occasional user of magic. Upon reaching her rooms, she immediately dispatched her third man-at-arms, a stolid and reliable if unimaginative fellow named Thigven, to keep an eye on the Bulbous Toad, the flophouse of an inn where Colmar had been staying. “I will not be thwarted,”

she told her young apprentice, Sinta. “Not by all the demons in hell, let alone by some low adventurer without the slightest comprehension of esoteric forces!”

Sinta nodded. The precocious fourteen-year-old felt much the same way about her struggle with the complex magical syllabary and vocabulary list Valdira had assigned her to memorize. Furthermore, from what she knew about the Eye of Ksera, it certainly seemed to be an object worth obsessing over. She remembered when she had first worked up the courage to ask about the mysterious gem, some three months ago, in the early days of her apprenticeship. Sinta was irrepressibly inquisitive, as befits a good apprentice, and she was both proud and grateful to have been taken on by such a good and powerful mistress. All the same, she sometimes found Valdira moderately terrifying. On this occasion, the sorceress had fixed her with such a piercing gaze that the poor girl nearly wet herself. There followed a long, fraught silence, as Valdira evidently weighed and considered just which of the Eye’s many secrets she was prepared to divulge and which ones were best kept to herself.

“Well,” she said at last, “if you must know, the Eye of Ksera is a magical artifact from before the Time of Troubles.” (Sinta recognized that this meant it must be at least six hundred years old.) “According to legend, it was created by the great sorceress Ksera, as her sorcerer-husband Ilkvir lay dying, for she hoped to preserve as much of his magical knowledge as possible before the end came. Some authorities, of course, prefer to attribute it instead to Ilkvir himself, arguing that an enchantment of the Eye’s

complexity and power is self-evidently beyond the ability of a mere woman.” Valdira’s tone conveyed her poor opinion of these people and their foolish views. “In any event,” she continued, “the gem is said to function like a reservoir that stores magical power instead of water, power which the owner may draw upon and deplete, but which she can therefore also replenish.” She paused for maximum didactic effect, once again fixing Sinta with a piercing eye. “But more importantly, the gem is also an extraordinary repository of arcane knowledge dating back to the time of Ksera and Ilkvir but richly supplemented by each subsequent owner—knowledge just waiting to be consulted, like a vast magical library.”

Since that day, Sinta had often tried to envision what it would be like to inhabit a magnificent library through the medium of a magic gem. The daughter of an apothecary, she had come into Valdira’s service already familiar with many of her father’s medicinal recipes, along with the archaic script the guild employed to keep them secret from outsiders, but her new mistress’s personal collection of pungent, leather-bound codices, extravagantly illuminated manuscripts, enchanted scrolls, and ancient, crumbling documents (or at least those limited portions of it for which the sorceress thought her ready) had exceeded anything she had previously imagined, proving a source of enduring fascination and delight. She had to wonder whether this Colmar person—whom Valdira scornfully dismissed as someone whose interests were no doubt limited to gold and “hacking people to death”—even knew how to read.



Making his way cautiously through the streets, Colmar (who could read perfectly well, thank you very much) considered his next move. By now any belongings that Valdira had not already taken from his room at the Bulbous Toad would surely have fallen into the hands of the innkeeper, a shifty, amphibious-looking man with three hulking sons and every reason to connive at the fiction that Colmar was a dangerous madman. Of course the heroic approach would be to burst in upon the old crook, dispatch any stray sons with some quick cut-and-thrust, and force the sniveling return of what was rightfully his, but Colmar preferred to avoid the heroic approach as a rule. The outcome was too often thoroughly unheroic—in this case probably a stunning blow from behind followed by a long and deadly bludgeoning in the depths of the cellar. Tradesmen like these did not waste their time reading chivalric romances: a friend of Colmar's, a strapping, fearless fellow, had crossed a tavern keeper once and ended the evening drowned in a pickle barrel. Colmar shook his head. No, it just wasn't worth it.

The fugitive was definitely not willing, however, to give up his horse, Calofon, a fine mahogany-bay courser, who rode fast, kicked hard, and feared nothing. He needed a mount to carry him out of town in any event. To be sure, he would have to retrieve the animal carefully. Presumably Valdira would have sent someone to watch the inn. He therefore approached the Bulbous Toad by stealth and slipped into its stable from the rear.

He had suspected that the stable boy was more interested in the pilferage of saddlebags than in the welfare of the animals under his care, and sure enough the young scoundrel was even now removing a string of sausages from someone's pack. As the lad furtively cut off one link with his knife and replaced the others, Colmar approached silently from behind, raised his sword, and with a single blow of the pommel laid the boy out cold. Then, setting aside the niceties of private property himself for a moment, he helped himself to the purloined sausage. After all, he had missed breakfast.



Back in the marketplace, the morning crowd was thinning. Crouched near the fountain, examining the entrails of a large rat he had just killed with his staff and cut open with a knife, was a tall man, clad in black leather, a crested green lizard perched on his left shoulder. Several of the beggar children were watching him from a safe distance. Aggressively pale, with short-cropped blonde hair and bleak blue eyes, he had the haggard look of a necromancer who, though still young, has nevertheless spent too many years exhuming corpses, burning poisonous pulvers, and divining recent events from fresh rat gut. After a time, he stood erect and laughed grimly. "Ha! So, Angvar, the fools let him escape." Hearing its master's voice, the placid reptile on his shoulder slowly blinked its large vacant eyes and briefly protruded its dry tongue. The ominously attired magician rinsed the blood and viscera off his hands and knife, fed Angvar a grub from a pouch

at his belt, and strode away, leaving the beggar children to take quiet possession of the dead rat, which might yet be sold to a dishonest sausage-maker.



Calofon was pleased to see his owner. The stable boy had not troubled to feed or groom him, and the nearby horses had been dull company. Colmar patted the handsome charger affectionately as he saddled him. The back door being too low to squeeze through, they had no option but to depart by the front. "Come on, old friend," he urged, as he swung it open. "Let's get out of here quick, before that spiteful hellcat catches up with us again!"



Sometime later, Valdira regarded her man Thigven with exasperation. "So, he got away from you, too," she said accusingly.

Thigven shuffled his feet. "He had a horse," he pointed out. "A big one. Mean-looking, too." He scratched his armpit. "I threw my knife at him," he offered. "But he ducked."

Sinta saw her mistress distinctly roll her eyes.

The long-suffering sorceress strove to tamp down her annoyance. After all, she had not really expected Thigven to be able to stop Colmar on his own. "And the pebble I gave you? I suppose you lost it."

"Oh, no, Mistress. I put it in his saddlebag before he got there. Just like you said."

Valdira nodded approvingly. “Well, at least you did something right. Unlike your friend Borek here. Not to mention Grot, who hasn’t even come back yet.”

Thigven shuffled his feet again. He had a feeling Valdira wouldn’t like the next bit. “Um, Mistress? After he rides away, well, I go over to pick up my knife, and who do I see but that necro-, that necro-what’s-it you don’t like.” He hesitated. “The one with the lizard,” he added helpfully, to distinguish him from possible necromancers unknown, who might also have incurred Valdira’s disfavor.

“Rendor,” she said grimly.

Thigven nodded. “Yes, Mistress. Thin guy, all in black. So, he walks up, with that creepy lizard of his blinking its crazy eyes. ‘Ha!’ he says, all snooty-like. ‘So, he got away from you boys *twice* today,’ he says. ‘Well,’ he says, ‘you tell that Valdira, you tell her he ain’t gettin’ away from *me!* No, he ain’t. And you tell that Valdira, *I’m* the one gettin’ that stone, not her!’ And then he takes that big staff of his, and he hits my knife with it, right there on the ground, and green sparks fly out, and now my knife’s all busted.” He showed Valdira the sad remains of the weapon. “My good knife!” he said indignantly. “What’d he have to go and do that for anyway?”

Valdira assured Thigven earnestly that when the time came to settle accounts with Rendor, she would not leave the destruction of his knife unaddressed.

A Word from the Author

Thank you for reading the first chapter of *The Eye of Ksera*. I hope you enjoyed it! If you did, why not purchase the entire book? For your convenience, my [website](#) has links to retailers around the world who carry it, in both trade paperback and ebook form.

You might also consider subscribing to my free monthly [newsletter](#), *The News from Ondiran*, for some very short stories, advance word on upcoming works, and insights into the creative process!

The Eye of Ksera is only the first book in a growing series. Don't miss Book Two, [Sorceress for Hire](#), which checks in on Sinta a year after she completes her apprenticeship, or Book Three, [Sinta, Sorceress-Detective](#), a genre-blending tale in which the inquisitive young woman solves two murders.

Thanks again for downloading and reading this chapter!

Sedigitus

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