

Part One -- Meeting on the Brook Steps

Chapter One

Tall buildings, four and five storeys high surrounded Lingdon City's New Market Square, decorated with scrollwork, gargoyles and bright paint, either business offices or rich mansions. The Felger mansion was one of the more impressive, as befitted the Lingdon headquarters of the Felger banking enterprise, but if young Felger didn't come out soon Gisel realized she would lose her cover and her chance to contact him. She looked around for an alternative post where she could still watch the mansion door.

The Felgers were the most powerful financial family on Gaia. They could be a perilous contact—they were the Emperor's banker as well.

Her hidden earpiece beeped. She spoke into the mike in her sleeve. "What do you have, Marc?"

"That tinker is loading his pots onto a handcart. Zagdorf's watchers will be able to see you over the top of the empty stall in a few minutes."

The peddlers would soon pack up and leave as the afternoon grew old. "Right. I'm already looking for a new vantage point. If Felger doesn't appear soon I'm abandoning today's plan."

Iskander's industrial developments had progressed well for the past three years, but they had slowed of late. They must find new markets to keep up momentum, and that meant using bankers with manufacturing interests. The Felgers were Iskander's first choice. Fine for Gisel's father and the administrative council away in Tarnland where their industrial facilities were. She was the one living with Zagdorf's spooks hunting her. Live or maybe die, she gritted.

She checked around her and then strolled down the line of market stalls as if she were a kitchen maid looking for fruit or vegetables. Her homespun caraco jacket and woolen petticoat had been her choice for disguise several times before. Her cornet, worn on the back of her head and decorated with multicoloured ribbons identified her as a Heterodox maiden. Not quite true.

Arriving at the vegetable stand at the end of the row she looked down her

nose at the young fellow serving customers.

"Oh, law'," he exclaimed when he saw her. "Not you agin. Tha' should pay me for all the turnips ye bruised and marked with tha' pokin' an' proddin'."

"Ye asked me to try them."

"I never asked ye to mash them to pulp." His voice didn't sound angry and his eyes told her he believed he flirted with some servant maid.

She turned away to look for the front door to the Felger mansion. If she stayed here, only a sack of cabbages stood in the way. "I will give ye two groats for your trouble if ye sets they cabbages on the ground."

He looked at her with a quizzical expression. "Why?"

"Never mind why. Here are the two groats. Just look sharp an' do it."

"Certainly, yer ladyship," he said as he manhandled the sack to the ground, his manner even more curious. "What be tha' purpose?"

She shook her head. Well done, Gisel, make sure all the locals recognise you. "I'm watching for my betrothed to come out of that door," she said with a nod toward the Felger mansion.

His eyes lit up. "What be he up to?" His smile included a buxom lady with a market basket who arrived at the stall.

"Mind your own business. Just see to this good lady and pay me no mind."

A few days earlier she tried to contact Yakob Felger, the principal in Lingdon and he had brushed all inquiries aside. She had since been told he was a strong Imperial supporter. Today she attempted to try the son, a recent graduate of the Acadamy at Heerford. Perhaps his youth and enthusiasm would give her better luck.

Her earpiece beeped again. "There's activity over there," Marc said.

"Yes, I see them."

Two men descended the mansion's steps into the late afternoon sun, pausing in the narrow forecourt behind the iron railings to look about them. One was her messenger, the other a tall well proportioned fellow with fair hair showing under an unadorned hat. About twenty, she'd guess, near her own age. He must be Yohan Felger, the one she looked for.

She glanced around once and left the market stall at a measured pace. Felger and her messenger went through the gate as the mansion door slammed shut behind them. They turned to walk toward Goldsmith Alley and the river.

"They are our fellows," she said into her mike. "I'll tail them to the river."

"Take care," Marc replied. "One of the troopers here has started after them. He's wearing a wide brimmed hat with feathers."

"Got him. I'll tuck in behind. What about you?"

"Another trooper has headed off the other way...may be going for reinforcements. I'll tail him."

She hurried along Market Street, staying fifty feet behind Zagdorf's trooper. Ahead, Felger and his companion took the turning into Goldsmith Alley. The trooper followed them a like distance behind them.

A quick look before she left the market. Good, no one following. She lengthened her stride, not too much, a servant girl wouldn't run. But a servant girl wouldn't have this crawling feeling down her spine. She'd get back into the routine in a few days; must have grown rusty in Tarnland over the winter. Breathe, Gisel—keep it cool. You've done this before.

Zagdorf's man paused where the street turned until the unsuspecting duo moved out of sight. He seemed to know his business. As long as he didn't notice *he* was being followed. Gisel waited for a group of tradesmen to cross the street between them, then walked on quickly to catch up. A man and woman exchanged some comment as Gisel stepped across the street's stinking refuse to go around them. Careful, girl—ease up—don't act out of character.

As she gained on the watcher she placed a hand into her waist pack. She carried a hypodermic loaded with phencyclidine . The only safe place to act was near the end of Goldsmith Alley. Usually quiet, and with this brisk wind from the river, cold enough no one would tarry in doorways or dawdle about their business. Around the corner, Gisel caught up to Zagdorf's man. He barely gave her a glance. She walked on past him as he waited in a doorway for Felger and the messenger to get out of sight. When they disappeared from view, the street was deserted. The watcher sped up to pass her. Gisel kicked him in the ankle and

brought him down.

With an angry cry he fell into the alley's muck. She stooped over him as if trying to help. With a slap she jabbed the needle into his arm. He gave a groan and slumped face-forward into the mud.

Gisel rolled him onto his side, and sprang to her feet. She hiked her skirts. A quick sprint and she was half a street away.

She slowed to a walk as she reached the next intersection. Yohan Felger and the messenger were just leaving Goldsmith Alley where it opened out on the foul smelling river bank. Unlike the alley, the embankment was thronged. Some travellers descended the steps to reach rowboats and wherries waiting below, while others stepped onto the embankment after disembarking. As she made for him, her quarry halted at the head of Brook Steps and began to gaze about.

For the first time she sized up the young man whose name she'd only heard three days before. Meister Felger wasn't wary enough; he'd never noticed the man following him. On the other hand, he looked a strapping fellow, and had obviously recognized her message entailed more than a quick stroll down the street. He wore a thick woolen cloak, which he'd need on the river and, she suspected, carried a concealed weapon beneath its folds.

She slowed her pace while she weighed the situation and stared hard at Felger's face when he turned his attention from the river. If only she could penetrate his mind to learn answers to her questions. Either he would support Iskander against the Empire or betray them. Which? She'd never learn the answer unless she allowed him into her life.

"I don't see him, your Honour." Gisel heard the messenger say.

Yohan Felger gave an impatient snort. "You're sure he's not here?"

Gisel hurried up to them, knowing they were expecting to find Mawgan, her coxswain. In this male dominated society she'd had to get a man to hire a messenger. Felger turned toward the shops and taverns lining the river road, barely glancing at her.

"Well, I cannot wait here for him all day. Perhaps we'll find him in one of the taverns hereabouts."

Gisel decided to conceal her identity behind her assumed accents a few minutes longer. She walked past to the head of the steps, and then halted with a cry. She pretended to trip and stumbled toward him.

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Yohan Felger scanned the embankment, his mind so filled with the strange note that had brought him out into the streets, he barely gave the pretty young woman the slightest attention, until she almost fell into his arms.

“Be careful, young Mistress, or you'll tumble down the steps.”

When he let her pull away again, she staggered and almost fell. “Ow. I think my ankle is twisted. May I prevail upon you to help me down those slippery steps, governor?”

He dropped his arms and drew back. She spoke well, but her voice held a definite foreign accent.

A gentleman must be careful of cut-purses and floozies plying their trade near the river. This girl sounded respectable enough, even if she seemed alone. She looked very attractive, almost beautiful, with a modest curve of bust under her kirtle and jacket— but her dark eyes held him. They were deep enough for a man to drown in. By her dress and speech, he judged her a servant from a good household, perhaps even a daughter of a good family, forced into service by bankruptcy. He could not see the responsible male companion who should be with her as he considered her request.

“I'm alone, Sir, except for my boat's crew. I hope you will not judge me forward for speaking.”

His father had not let him out of the counting house since he returned home—it would be a pleasant feeling to hold a pretty girl again. “Not at all. I can certainly help; put your arm about my waist while I support you.”

As they descended the stone steps together Yohan wondered who she might be. Her manner struck him as bright and confident; more than a drawing-room decoration. Likely some important personage awarded her a position of trust because of it. She was tall for a woman, not much less than his own six feet, so likely she'd had a good childhood without threat of starvation.

A young woman whose company might prove pleasurable. He felt dashing and debonair with an arm around her waist.

The messenger, still standing at the head of the steps, called out, "I see the man, your Honour; in yonder boat!"

Yohan looked across the water to see a ship's gaff-rigged cutter heading toward them. The seaman aboard dropped the sail and stood in the bow to fend off.

"That's my boat, Meister Felger," the young woman said, smiling at him. "Thank you for coming in answer to my message."

Yohan stopped; his eyes sought hers. "Your message? How do you know my name?"

"We have been trying to speak with the Felgers for a month; I took care to learn of all your family in Lingdon. I'm here to take you to a meeting, as my note said. Come with me..."

"Come with you...impossible. Who are you?"

"My name is Lieutenant Gisel Matah, of Iskander Security. My present duty is to escort you to a ship downriver."

He stared. Iskander! The very name meant intrigue and danger. These strangers flouted the Emperor's will in the Kosmoneos; they had transformed the Autarch of Tarnland's war into triumph with remarkable weapons, and now...here he was speaking to one of them in the Lingdish Kingdom. His pulse quickened. What did they want with the Felgers? This could be the excitement he'd been craving. Anything to get out of that counting house...well...almost anything.

The boat the messenger identified reached the steps and the seaman, in a striped jersey and blue breeches, stepped out over the bow, a painter in his hand.

"Jump in, Lieutenant. Best we don't tarry."

Yohan let go of the girl to take a step back. He'd better ensure his safety. He reached a hand into his cloak to feel for the pistol he'd tucked into his belt. Not there.

She grinned at him and pulled something from her jacket. "Is this what you're after? Sorry, Meister, I thought it safer if I took it."

He glared down at the pistol in her hand, his pistol. Oh curse! What a fool he had been. The first pretty face to come near him...and he was caught.... But wait, she didn't point the pistol at him, neither had she cocked the flintlock. He flicked his eyes quickly to her face.

She smiled broadly and shook her head. "Not a chance." She turned to bang the muzzle hard against the stones of the embankment wall. The pistol-ball and wad dropped out into her hand. Tossing them into the water, she presented the empty weapon to him with a slight bow. "I assure you, you are not being kidnapped. Please get aboard."

Yohan's mouth refused to shape his protest; why had he been so foolish? If he were able to swim he'd jump in the river, foul as it was, to make his escape. He could run up the steps, but likely the seaman was armed, or could catch him by the legs before he could get far. He often dreamed about taking dangerous assignments for the Felger enterprises, always his fancies ended with honour and success. Now, he had to do as the young woman said, and take his chances.

A loud call from above drew his attention. Another fellow, in waterman's clothes, breeches tied at the knees, glanced back over his shoulder as he ran toward the steps.

"Are you coming aboard. Marc?" the young woman called up to him. "Hurry."

This man descended the steps rapidly, pushing past the messenger waiting for his payment. "Yes, soldiers chasing me."

The girl, he could hardly credit *lieutenant*, raised a handful of coins to toss to the messenger at the head of the steps. She swung about and took him by the shoulder. "Let's go, Meister Felger. No time to argue."

They all scrambled aboard. The seaman pushed off against the embankment wall and sculled out into the river current. The young woman urged Yohan to a seat in the stern as they set about raising a sail on the mast and gathered way when it filled. She pulled off her cornet and ribbons and shook her hair free before seating herself and taking the tiller. "We are taking you to an Iskander ship down river. I'll try to answer your questions as we go."

"Whose soldiers are following us, the King's?"

"No, the King of Lingdon has no grievance against us. They're the Emperor's men. He always attempts to keep everyone away from us. Didn't Commandante Zagdorf bring such a message to your father?"

Had he? His father met the Commandante a week ago, and been short tempered afterward. Of course, he hadn't explained his concern, not to his son. Everything the Felger family did must be measured against the Emperor's wishes. Every appointment and communication must have its substance secured from outside knowledge. So how did the Iskanders learn about the meeting?

The seaman returned to take the helm and the lieutenant moved to the thwart. They sat without speaking while they slipped into a shadowed channel beneath the Lingdon Bridge. He struggled against the urge to raise his head, hoping none of the householders on the bridge would choose this moment to empty a chamber-pot out of a window.

As they emerged once more into daylight, Yohan studied the other water craft on the river. None of the occupants seemed capable of giving help, he abandoned all thought of getting away. The little cutter positively danced across the waves, an occasional splash of spray wetting his face as the coxswain steered them around other river traffic; anchored wherries awaiting their fares, and rowboats pulling across the current. The riverbanks showed a fringe of mud, and the smell of river slime and city waste wafted to him on the breeze. Ahead of them lay the city docks, with larger merchantmen anchored in midstream and smaller craft beginning to list at the wharfs as they grounded on the falling tide.

The young man leaned forward to offer his hand. "Lieutenant Marc Chronon, Sir."

Yohan took the proffered hand, hoping he was not committing himself too much. Not even the King of Lingdon dared cross the Emperor's will, but these two seemed to think little enough of it. "The Felgers are merchants and bankers, not soldiers. Why should we involve ourselves with you?"

The young woman leaned toward him. "Our finance officer is awaiting you on the ship we are going to. He will explain everything. I assure you we have

studied our options and learned the Felgers are exactly the people we need. I expect a commercial partnership is in the cards."

"I'm not sure I want to meet him. If the Emperor's soldiers know I am aboard...it could bring trouble to the Felgers...to my father."

"It's too late for you to go ashore now. We can't undertake to get you home safely until we have evaded these troopers."

He glared at her. The off-hand way she said it! What right had she to dismiss his concerns so...? "The Felger enterprises are closely bound to the Emperor. More than half our business is conducted within his domain. Do you think I would jeopardize that?"

She shook her head. "Iskander is contacting the Felgers outside the Empire to keep our affairs secure as well. No, we don't want that jeopardized."

She seemed so self-confident, so arrogant. What a little minx, he must get the better of her. "But you already have—what can your words be worth?"

"I'll make you a promise if you want to back out. I'll tell Zagdorf myself."

Marc reached out a hand. "Hold on, Gisel. Don't be too reckless."

"Reckless be damned! I mean it, but I don't think Meister Felger will turn us down." She took hold of his arm. "I know about your debate at Heerford when you defended the idea of making new inventions. Everyone's heard of it."

Yohan laughed. "But you do not know they gave me the pro side of the debate because it was contrary to our beliefs. It was a test."

She seemed taken aback for a moment. "I do not believe you were not influenced by your rhetoric...everyone else was."

He shrugged. "The idea has merits, but the argument is lost while the Emperor opposes it."

"Which is why you should listen to Iskander. Why you should support our policy. We are already having people accept our position—which is identical to your defence in the debate. We will keep bringing new inventions to the world until even the Empire will lose much of its power unless they follow the same policy."

Yohan gasped. "You believe you have so much power yourselves?"

"We believe that all nations want to improve their lot...and see our steam engines, our steel, our medical advances, our weaponry as the way by which they will attain their goals. The Empire has been the sole decider of the law for too long."

Yohan found her words extravagant although Iskander did have a great reputation. As a junior in the Felger Enterprises he knew little of family policy, and until he earned important business contracts of his own, the Baron and the other family heads would never take him seriously. However, if he gained something from this meeting with the Iskanders. Something that could not be belittled or dismissed as a pipe dream...

"What you propose is very dangerous. Even here in Lingdon, my father cannot dismiss the Emperor's wishes. You must know how tightly he controls the mainland with his Civil Guard, his secret police, and his armies."

She gave a rueful laugh. "You are speaking to someone who has fought all those powers more than once. He never ceases trying to do the same in Lingdon; that's why we're in this boat. He opposes us and we are wearing him down with every new plan."

"Perhaps, but my words and opinions are of small import. Something as serious as deceiving the Emperor would need lengthy consideration by all the family heads."

"That's what we are hoping for. How do we arrange that?"

Yohan hesitated. What had happened to the soldiers Marc mentioned? These Iskanders seemed oblivious to danger, even if they didn't know everything. "Only the Baron can call such a meeting."

"Baron? He's the top dog?"

Yohan smiled at her characterization. "Baron Anton Felger is the family head. He lives at Castle Weshortz, in Upper Wasbia."

The two lieutenants looked at one another. "Where's Weshortz? We know Wasbia from our involvement with Burgundene." Marc said.

Lieutenant Matah nodded. "Wasbia is divided in two. Upper Wasbia is the part outside the empire—backing onto the Alps."

"How can we get in touch with the Baron?" Marc asked.

Yohan looked away. The Baron had not been heard from since beginning a visit to Lubitz a month ago. And Lubitz was at war with Iskander and their ally Tarnland. Better he keep the Baron's movements and plans to himself. "My father would have to write a letter."

"Fair enough. When you meet our Director Mich'l you can discuss the details he can put in it."

As simple as that. Did she think the Felgers would jump at Iskander's convenience? His father hated their very name. Yakob Felger loved the Emperor, even welcomed his iron handed control. Should he explain how unlikely it was Father would consider their request? He wasn't given the opportunity...

Their seaman stood up to peer over the watercraft on the river behind them. "Be them the soldiers, Lieutenant?"

Both lieutenants turned to look.

They could see about a dozen men in half armor rushing down a wooden staircase to a jetty downstream of Lingdon Bridge, a cable's length distant. They scrambled into a lugger moored there, some hoisting the sails to the masthead as others pulled on sweeps to leave the crowded shallows.

"That's them," Marc said.

Even at this distance Yohan could see resolute faces as the musketeers leveled their weapons over the bows.

"Dammit. They've found us." Lieutenant Matah said. "I hope you don't mind a little excitement, Meister?"