



Wagers of Sin

Time Scout 2

Robert Asprin

CHAPTER ONE

Skeeter Jackson was a scoundrel.

A dyed-in-the-wool, thieving scoundrel.

He knew it, of course; knew it as well as anyone else in La-La Land (at least, anyone who'd been on Shangri-La Station longer than a week). Not only did he know it, he was proud of it, the way other men were proud of their batting averages, their cholesterol counts, their stock portfolios.

Skeeter was very careful to rub shoulders with men of the latter type, who not only boasted of large 'folios, but carried enormous amounts of cash in money belts declared through ATF at Primary (so they wouldn't be charged taxes for any money they'd brought with them). Skeeter rarely failed to get hold of at least some of that money, if not the whole money belt. Ah, the crisp, cool feel of cash in hand ...

But he wasn't just a thief. Oh, no. Skeeter was a master con artist as well, and those skills (ruthless cunning, serpentine guile, the ability to radiate innocent enthusiasm) were among the best.

So-in honor of Yesukai the Valiant and for the very practical reason of survival-he worked hard at being the very best scoundrel he could make himself. Once he'd arrived (freshly scrubbed to get the New York filth off his hide and out of his soul), it hadn't taken Skeeter long to create a life uniquely his own on a time terminal unique among time terminals.

There was only one La-La Land. He loved it fiercely.

On this particular fine morning, Skeeter rose, stretched, and grinned. The game's afoot, Watson! (He'd heard that in a movie someplace and liked the sound of it.) The glow coming in beneath his door told him Residence lights were on, not in their dimmed "night" mode. That was really the only way to tell, unless you had an alarm clock with a Pm indicator light; Skeeter's had burned out long ago, the last time he'd heaved it at the wall for rudely awakening him with yet another hangover to regret.

Showered and shaved with minimal time wasted, he dressed for the day-and the next two glorious weeks. After some of the things he'd worn, the costume he now donned felt almost natural. Whistling absently to himself, Skeeter-working hard as ever on his chosen vocation-contemplated his brilliant new scheme. And the one gaping hole in it.

Surprisingly, the station's excellent library hadn't been much help. To minimize information leakage, Skeeter had searched the computers, gleaning bits of valuable information here and there (and managing to tot up more than a week's worth of earnings against the computer-access account belonging to a scout currently out in the field). That little scam was actually worth the otherwise wasted effort, as the scout had once maligned Skeeter in public-wrongly, as it happened; Skeeter hadn't even been

involved. Skeeter, therefore felt free to indulge his natural urge to cause the scout the greatest amount of distress possible in the shortest amount of time, all without leaving behind any proof the s.o.b. could use to prosecute.

Irritatingly elusive, the one piece of the puzzle Skeeter needed most just wasn't in any pilfered file.

The only place to find what he needed was inside someone's head. Brian Hendrickson, the librarian, would know, of course-he knew, just as sharply as though he'd learned it mere moments previously, everything he'd ever seen, read, or heard (and probably more-lots more), but Brian's dislike of Skeeter was La-La Land Legend. After ruling out Brian, who was left?

Just needing one more piece of expert advice, Skeeter was running out of time to find it-and had never had many friends to find it from. Well, hell, folks with his chosen vocation wouldn't have many friends, now would they? Trust just didn't come with the territory. Having accepted that years ago, Skeeter continued to mentally rummage through the list of people he might be able to ask, tossed out all scouts, most guides (Agnes Fairchild was willing-mmm, was she ever!-she just didn't know). He hesitated -- again -- on Goldie Morran. She'd be motivated, all right, and she'd probably know, too; but he wasn't about to share potentially enormous profits by confiding his plan to any of the other scoundrels who made La-La Land their permanent home. To make the score himself, Goldie-the-heartless-Morran, TT-86s leading authority on rare coins and gems, was out.

What he needed was someone who'd been there, firsthand.

Other than a handful of rich visitors who'd been through the Porta Romae multiple times-most of whom Skeeter had "liberated" from the burden of their cash and were therefore to be avoided at any cost, Skeeter finally came up with a single, qualified man in the whole of TT-86: Marcus.

A startled grin passed across his face. As it happened, Marcus was probably better suited to give Skeeter advice on this particular scheme than all the so-called experts in La-La Land. Should've just gone to Marcus in the first place and saved myself a heap of time and trouble. But he'd been embarrassed, feeling a pang of inexplicable guilt at the thought of conning his best (and practically his only) friend into helping him. Of course, he'd also have missed racking up all those on line hours against that asshole of a scout

By coincidence rare and somewhat miraculous, Marcus actually liked Skeeter. Why, Skeeter had not a single clue. Downtimers often came an with the strangest ideas, many of them quaintly useless, others so eccentric they passed beyond the understandable into the misty, magical realm of things like what made the gates work and what did women really want, anyway? He'd given up on both, long ago, avoiding stepping through any more gates than absolutely necessary and taking his flings where he could find them, not

very discontented when he couldn't. He didn't feel proud about his ignorance; business, however, was business.

So Skeeter finished the last touches on his "business uniform" then headed for Commons to hunt down Marcus, then meet Agnes and her group for the tour.

Skeeter liked the open airy feeling of Commons. Not only did it compensate (a little) for the loss of vast, open plains of his teenage years, but more importantly, it always smelled to Skeeter like money. Vast sums of cold, hard currency changed hands here. It wasn't too much to ask of the gods, was it, that some small trickle of that vast amount fall blissfully into his deserving hands?

Theology aside (and only the many gods knew what Skeeter's was: he certainly didn't), Commons was just plain fun. Particularly at this time of year. As he strode out into the body-jammed floor, picking his way through multiple festivals and reenactments in progress, Skeeter had to shake his head and grin.

What a madhouse! There were, of course, the usual tourist gates with their waiting areas, ramps, and platforms; ticket booths for those who'd waited to arrive before deciding on a destination-fine, if you could afford the hotel bills waiting for your tour to leave; timecard automated dispensers (hooked into the station's database and set up to match retinal scans and replace the original's temporal-travel data for those idiots who'd lost theirs); and of course, timecard readers (at the entrance and exit of every gate, to scan where and when you'd already been in a desperate effort to Prevent some fool tourist from shadowing him- or herself).

There were also shops and restaurants, on multiple levels, many with entrances by balcony only; bizarre stairways to nowhere; balconies and girder-supported platforms suspended three and four stories above the floor; barricaded and fenced-off areas marking either unevenly recurring, unstable gates or stable but unexplored gates; and-the piece de resistance, multiple hundreds of costumed, laughing, drinking, quarreling, fighting, kissing, hugging, gullible tourists. With fat wallets just waiting for someone's light-fingered touch ...

Just now Commons looked exactly like the North Pole might if Santa's elves had gone quietly mad on LSD in the process of decorating the workshop. He breathed in the smell of celebration and money and grinned up at the whole, gaudy, breathtaking length of Commons, loving every bit of the craziness that always overtook Shangri-La Station this time of year.

"And what," a woman's voice said practically at his elbow, "are you grinning about, Skeeter Jackson?"

He looked up-then down-and found Ann Vinh Mulhaney, TT-86s resident projectile weapons instructor. Ann was so petite she was smaller than her teenaged son. Barely came up to Skeeter's biceps. She was, however, the second or third deadliest person on station, depending on whether Kit Carson had showed up at the range for some shooting

practice most recently, or whether Ann had (since Kit's last target practice) hit the gym mats for a series of sweat-building katas and bone-pounding sparring sessions against Sven Bailey, the station's widely known Number One deadliest individual.

Skeeter felt ridiculous, towering over a woman who terrified him down to his cockles. Uh-oh. What do I do now?

Oddly, Ann was smiling up at him, like that famous painting of the Mona Lisa. Like good old Mona, Ann revealed absolutely nothing in dark, knowing eyes. The strange little smile on her lips did not touch them. For a moment, he was actually cold-sweating scared of her, despite at least a foot and several inches height advantage and a good chance at outsprinting her, even in this crowd.

Then something altered subtly and he realized the smile had just turned friendly. What does she want? Does she want to hire me to steal something, maybe, or bring her back a special souvenir as a surprise for somebody? Skeeter not only couldn't understand how Ann's husband could actually live with that deadly little viper, he honestly could find no sane reason why Ann would even talk to him.

She looked him up and down, then met his gaze. "Heard you were going through the Porta Romae."

Uh-oh. He answered very carefully, "Uh, yeah, that was sorta the plan. Me and Agnes, you know."

She just nodded, as though confirming the cinching of a wager with someone about what Skeeter Jackson was up to now.

He relaxed. Settling a wager was all right. Ann was certainly entitled to ask him questions if the answers won her a tidy sum in some bet.

But she was still smiling, friendly-like. The Christmas season, maybe? Manifesting itself in a determined "do unto others" even if it killed her?

She took the initiative once again. "So, what were you grinning about? Misadventures, schemes, and scams downtime?"

"Ann! You wound me!"

She just laughed, eyes and the twist of her mouth clearly skeptical.

"Honestly, I was just taking in all of... that."

She followed his gaze and her eyes softened. "It is; um, overwhelming, isn't it? Even crazier than last year's contest."

Skeeter grinned again. "At least I don't see any three-story, arm-waving Santas to catch fire this year."

She shared his laugh. "No, thank goodness! I thought Bull Morgan was going to fall into a fit of apoplexy when he saw the smoke and flames. Good thing Pest Control's

good at putting out fires, too."

"Yeah. They were good, that day. You know," Skeeter said thoughtfully, "I think the holiday season is my very favorite time of year on station. All of that," he waved a hand toward the insanity surrounding them, "cheers a guy up. You know?"

Ann studied him minutely. "So, the holidays cheer you up, do they? Rachel's hands are always full this time of year with half-suicidal people who don't do holidays well. But with you, well, I think I can guess why."

"Yeah?" Skeeter asked with interest, wondering how transparent he'd become since leaving Yesukai's camp.

"Let's see ... I'm betting-figuratively," she added hastily, "that the holiday season is usually the closest you ever come to getting rich. True or false?"

He had to laugh, even while wincing. "Ann, with triple the ordinary number of tourists jamming Commons, how can a guy lose? 'Course I'm happiest this time of year!" He didn't add that the pain of five missed Christmases-holidays that had nothing to do with the expensive bribes his parents piled under the tree each year-were also responsible for his determined merrymaking as he caught up on all the childhood holidays he'd been alone.

Ann just sighed. "Skeeter, you are an irrepressible scoundrel." She caught his gaze, then, and shocked him speechless. "But you know, I think if you ever got caught and kicked off TT-86, La-La Land would be a lot less fun. You're ... intriguing, Skeeter Jackson. Like a puzzle; where all the pieces don't quite fit right." With an odd little smile, she said, "Maybe I ought to ask Nally Mundy about it." Skeeter groaned inwardly. Not too many people knew. Skeeter's had been a fleeting, fifteen-second sound-byte's worth of fame, timmed between a triple homicide and a devastating hotel fire on the evening news, years ago. But Nally Mundy knew. Skeeter hadn't quite forgiven him for discovering that juicy little tidbit to hound him about.

Before he could lodge a protest, though, Ann said, "Well, anyway, good hunting-whatever you're up to. See you 'round in a couple of weeks."

She left before he could open his mouth.

And Ann Vinh Mulhaney wishes one good hunting, no less. La-La Land felt like it had turned upside down.

Skeeter glanced up, more than halfway expecting to see crowds of people thronging the Commons' floor, rather than the distant, girdered ceiling.

"Huh," was his only comment.

Skeeter glanced at the gate-departure board suspended from the ceiling and whistled silently. He would have to stretch his legs if he wanted to catch Marcus before he went off shift at the Down Time Bar & Grill. But he still had several minutes' leeway until he

had to catch up with Agnes for the Porta Romae Gate departure.

He picked his way cautiously through a horde of "medieval" damsels, knights in handcrafted chain-mail armor, and throngs of pages and squires, even "authentic" vendors and friars, all headed for Tournament down the newest of TT-86s active gates, the "Anachronism" as 'eighty-sixers called it after the name of the organization that used it most. It led, of all places, to North America prior to the coming of the paleo-Indian population that would eventually cross the Bering Strait and settle two empty continents. Several times a year, hordes--masses--of medieval loons flooded IT-86, every one of them just dying to step through the Anachronism to play at war, medieval style.

Skeeter shook his head. From the realities of war as he'd seen it, Skeeter couldn't find much in wholesale slaughter that should be turned into any kind of game. For, it smacked a little of heresy (whatever that might be) to mock the brave dead they pretended to emulate. Clearly, they got something from it they badly needed, or they wouldn't keep doing it. Especially with the cost so high.

Not only did they have every other tourist's normal expenses, they had to get permission to take their own horses and hunting falcons along, with stiff penalties if any of the uptime animals got loose and started a breeding colony millennia before they should have existed; they had to haul fodder and cut-up mice for their animals; then had to find a place to keep said animals until Anachronism's departure date and then, of course, they all had to get through the gate in time, balking horses, screeching falcons, their own provisions as well as the animals', in short, everything required for a one-month, downtime Tournament and the honor to have fought in or attended one.

The single thing he understood about them was their detestation of nosey newsies. It was rumored that no newsie had ever gotten through with them. Or if they had, they hadn't survived to tell the tale. North America was a bad place, that long ago. Sabre cats, dire wolves--you name it. Meaning, of course, that Skeeter's intention of stepping through the Anachronism was right up there with his intention of walking up to Mike Benson and holding out his hands to be cuffed.

Skeeter watched with admiration as hawkers of "medieval wares" counted up their sales and tourists pushed to hand over cash for "MAGIC POTIONS!"; crystals mounted as necklaces or stand-alone little trinkets, attuned to the buyer's aura by placing it under the pillow for seven consecutive full moons; charms for wealth, health, harmony, courage, and beauty; exquisite, illuminated calligraphy with even more exquisite prices; plus relatively cheap jewelry that commanded top-rate prices because it was "handmade in the most ancient methods known to our medieval ancestors."

In Skeeter's educated estimation, they were as much con artists as Skeeter himself. They even kept back the good stuff (he knew; he'd pilfered a coveted item or two for his quarters, to liven it up a bit), keeping it hidden to sell at the Tournament, bringing along a supply of junk to sell to gullible tourists, to help defray expenses a little. They were

con men and women, all might. They just had a different angle on the art than Skeeter did.

Ianira Cassondra-who had occasionally made Skeeter's hair stand on end, just with a simple word or two-called them fakes, charlatans, and even worse, because they had neither the training to dabble in such things, nor the proper attitude for it.

"They will inadvertently hurt people one day. Just wait. Station management will do nothing about them now; but when people start falling down sick with all manner of strange illnesses, their trade will be banished." She'd sighed, dark eyes unhappy. "And Management will most likely outlaw my booth as well, as I doubt Bull Morgan is capable of telling the difference."

Skeeter had wanted to contradict her, but not only was he half scared she was reading the future, in the back of his own mind, Skeeter knew perfectly well that Bull Morgan wouldn't know the difference, and wouldn't care, either, just so long as the crummy tourists were protected.

Skeeter thought dark, vile thoughts at bureaus and the bureauc-rats that ran 'em, and skittered through long lines in Edo Castletown waiting for the official opening of the new Shinto Shrine that was nearly finished. He dashed past Kit Carson's world-famous hotel, past extraordinary gardens with deep streams where colored fish kept to the shadows, trying to avoid becoming a sushi lunch for some Ichthyornis or a Sordes fritcheus diving down from the ceiling.

Skeeter smiled reminiscently, recalling the moment Sue Fritchey had figured out what their crow-sized "pterosaurs" really were: "My God! They're a new species of Sordes! They shouldn't be living at the same time as a sternbergi at all. My God, but this is... it's revolutionary! A warm-blooded, fur-covered Sordes -and a fish eater, not an insectivore, but it's definitely a Sordes, there's no mistaking that!-and it survived right up until the end of the Cretaceous. All along, we've thought Sordes died out right at the end of the Jurassic! What a paper this is going to be!" she'd laughed, eyes shining. "Every paleontological journal uptime is going to be begging me for the right to publish it!"

For Sue Fritchey, that was heaven.

Grapevine or not, Skeeter still hadn't heard what Sue had decided about the pair of eagle like, toothed birds that had popped through an unstable gate months ago. But whatever they were, they were going to make Sue Fritchey famous. He wished her luck.

Reaching the edge of Urbs Romae, with its lavishly decorated Saturnalia poles and cut evergreen trees, also boasting paid actors to reenact the one day a year Roman slaves could give orders to their masters, orders that had to be obeyed and often had the watching audience laughing so hard, both men and women had to wipe their eyes dry just to see the show. Skeeter slowed to a walk, whistling cheerfully to himself, winking at pretty girls he passed, girls who sometimes blushed, yet always followed his departure with their eyes.

Skeeter ducked beneath the sea of paper umbrellas tourists and residents alike carried -- protection against droppings from aforementioned wild prehistoric birds and pterosaurs--then he finally hunted out the Down Time Bar & Grill where Marcus worked as a bartender.

The Down Time, tucked away in the "Urbs Romae" section of Commons, was a favorite haunt of 'eighty-sixers. Among other things, it was a great place to pick up gossip.

And in Skeeter's line of work, gossip usually meant profit.

So he ducked under the girders which half hid the bar's entryway (another reason 'eighty-sixers liked it: the place didn't advertise) and crossed the threshold, already savoring the anticipation of setting his newest scheme into delightful motion.

The first person to see him, however, was none other than Kenneth "Kit" Carson, retired time scout. Uh-oh ... Skeeter gulped and tried on a bright grin, the one he'd learned to use as a weapon of self-defense long, long ago. He'd been avoiding Kit's company for weeks, ever since he'd tried to sweet-talk that penniless, gorgeous little redhead, Margo, into bed with him by pretending to be a scout-only to learn to his terror that she was Kit's only grandkid. Kit's underage only grandkid.

What Kit had casually threatened to do to him ...

"Hi, Skeeter. How they hangin'?" Kit long and lean and tough as a grizzled bear-grinned up at him and took a slow sip from a cold glass of Kirin.

"Uh ... fine, Kit. Just fine ... How's, uh ... Margo?" He wanted to bite off his tongue and swallow it. Idiot!

"Oh, fine. She'll be visiting soon. School vacation."

As one very small predator in a very large pond, Skeeter knew a bigger predator's smile when he saw one. Skeeter took a vow to make himself scarce from anyplace Margo decided to visit. "Good, that's real good, Kit. I, uh, was just looking for Marcus."

Kit chuckled. "He's in back, I think."

Skeeter shot past Kit's table, heading for the billiard and pool tables in the back room. Very carefully, he did not reach up and wipe sweat from his damp brow. Kit Carson scared him. And not just because the retired time scout had survived more, even, than Skeeter had. Mostly, Skeeter Jackson had a healthy fear of the older male relatives of any girl he'd tried to get into bed. Most of them took an extremely dim view of his chosen vocation.

Going one on one with a man who could break major bones as casually as Skeeter could lift a wallet was not Skeeter's idea of fun.

Fortunately, Marcus was exactly where Kit had said he'd be: serving drinks in the back room. Skeeter brightened at once. Running into Kit like that--on the eve of launching his

new adventure-was not a bad omen, he told himself. Marcus would be Skeeter's good luck charm for this venture. The old, familiar itch between his shoulderblades was never wrong. Skeeter grinned happily.

Look out, suckers. Ready or not, here I come!

Marcus had just set drinks down on a newly occupied table in the back pool room when Skeeter Jackson made a grand entrance and grinned in his direction. Marcus smiled, very nearly laughing aloud. Skeeter was dressed for business, which in this case meant a short, flamboyant tunic, more of a Greek Ionian-style chiton, really, with knobby knees showing naked below the hem and legs that were far more heavily muscled and powerful-looking than most people would have guessed from the whipcord-lean rest of him. Judging by his costume, Skeeter must be working the crowds that always gathered to watch the famous Porta Romae cycle again.

The god Janus-Roman deity of doorways and portals, had for some unknown reason decreed that the Porta Romae would cycle open yet again in less than an hour, moving the gate inexorably along to the next opening two weeks hence. Marcus hid a shiver, remembering his single trip through that portal to arrive here. He had never really believed in Rome's strange gods until his final master had dragged him, terrified and fainting, through the Porta Romae into La-La Land. Now he knew better and so never failed to give the powerful Roman gods their proper libations.

"Marcus! Just the person I'm dying to see." Skeeter's grin was infectious and genuine. Very little else about Skeeter Jackson was, which made him one of the loneliest people Marcus knew.

"Hello, Skeeter. You wish your favorite beer?" Marcus was so uncomfortable with Skeeter's lifestyle he tried hard not to mention it, in the probably vain hope he could save the young a and downtimer from the life he led. Marcus was, in fact, doubtless the only one in the whole of The Found Ones who offered the odd young man his friendship. To be raised in two times, then set adrift in a third ...

Skeeter Jackson was greatly in need of a friend.

So

Marcus, busy as he was with demanding work at the bar and an equally demanding-but more fun job as the father of two little girls, added a third Herculean task to his life: the eventual conversion of Skeeter Jackson from Scoundrel to Honest Man, deserving of the title Found One.

Skeeter's grin widened. "Sure. I won't turn down a beer, you know that." Both men laughed. "But mostly, I wanted to talk to you. Got a minute?"

Marcus glanced out at the other tables. Most were empty. Nearly everyone was out on the Commons, watching the fun as La-La Land's Roman gate prepare to open into the past. Between now and then, a whole series of antics would unfold as tourists and Time

Tours guides and baggage handlers tried to get through the portal with all their baggage, money purses, and assorted children still intact, waiting impatiently while much of the previous tour exited the Porta Romae in staggering, white-faced clumps. The rest coming back through were fine, swaggering down the ramp like aloof, supremely self-confident Roman Senators.

Marcus shook off his mental astonishment that every tour came back like this, some pleased as kittens with a bowl of cream and others ... Well, the drawings circulating amongst The Found Ones said it all, didn't they?

Marcus smiled at Skeeter, who waited hopefully.

"Of course. Let me get the beer for you, please."

"Get one for yourself, too. I'm buying."

Oh-oh. Marcus hid a grin. Skeeter wanted something. He was a thoroughgoing scoundrel, was Skeeter Jackson, but Marcus understood why, something most 'eighty-sixers didn't. Not even most Found Ones knew. Marcus hadn't even told Ianira, although with his beautiful Ianira, what she did or did not know was always a complete mystery to Marcus.

Skeeter had been so drunk that night, he probably didn't remember everything he'd said. But Marcus did. So he kept trying, hope against hope, to befriend Skeeter Jackson, asking the gods who had watched over his own life to help his friend finally figure it all out-and do something about it besides swindle, cheat, and steal his way toward the grave.

Marcus set down Skeeter's beer first, then took a chair opposite and seated himself, waiting as was appropriate for Skeeter to drink first. Skeeter had always been a free man, born into a good family, raised by another good man. Even with the eventual understanding Marcus had reached that no one here could call him slave, Skeeter was still Marcus' social superior in every way Marcus had ever heard of.

"Oh, I'm gonna miss that," Skeeter said after a long pull. "Now ... You were born in Rome, right?"

"Well, no, actually, I was not."

Skeeter blinked. "You weren't?"

"No. I was born in Gallia Comata, in a very small village called Cautes." He couldn't help the pride that touched his voice. A thousand years and his little village was still there--changed a great deal, but still standing beneath the high, sharp mountains of his childhood, beautiful as ever under their mantles of snow and cloud. The same wild, rushing stream still cut through the heart of the village, just as it always had, clear and cold enough to shock a grunt from even the stoutest man.

"Cautes? Where the hell is that?"

Marcus grinned. "I once asked Brian Hendrickson, in the library, about my village. It is still there, but the name is different, just a little. Gallia Comata no longer exists at all. My village, called now Caunterets, is in the place you would know as France, but it is still famous for the sacred warm springs that cure women who cannot bear children."

Skeeter started to grin, then didn't. "You're serious."

"Yes, why would I not be? I cannot help that I was born in conquered territory and..."

"About the women, I mean?" Skeeter's expression was priceless: another scheme was taking shape visibly on his unguarded face.

Marcus laughed. "I do not know, Skeeter. I was only a child when I was taken away, so I cannot be sure, but all the villagers said it. Roman women came there from all southern Gaul to bathe in the waters, so they could get a child."

Skeeter chuckled in turn, his thoughts still visible in his eyes. "They'd have done better to sleep with their husbands-or somebody's husband, anyway-a little more often."

"Or drink less lead," Marcus added, proud of what he had learned in his few years in La-La Land. Rachel Eisenstein, the head physician in the time terminal, had told Marcus the levels of dissolved lead in his own blood were dropping, which was the only reason he'd been able to father little Artemisia and Gelasia.

"Touche." Skeeter lifted his glass and drained half the brew. "Aren't you going to drink any of that beer?"

Marcus carefully poured a libation to the gods-just a few drops spilled onto the wooden floor-then tasted his own beer. He'd be scrubbing the floor later, anyway, so a little worship wouldn't anger his employers. They groused more about the free drinks Marcus sometimes gave away to those in need than they did about a little spillage.

"Okay," Skeeter took another swig, "you were born in France, but lived in Rome most of your life, right?"

"Yes. I was sold as a young boy to a slave trader coming down the Roman highway from Aqua Tarbellicae." Marcus shivered. "The first thing he did was change my name. He said mine was not pronounceable."

Skeeter blinked. "Marcus isn't your real name?"

He tried to smile. "It has been for more than eighteen years. And you probably could not pronounce my own name any more than the Romans could. I have grown accustomed to 'Marcus' and so I am content to keep it."

Skeeter was staring at him as though he couldn't believe what he was hearing. Marcus shrugged. "I have tried to explain, Skeeter. But no one here understands."

"No, I, uh, guess not." He cleared his throat, the expression in his eyes making Marcus wonder what Skeeter remembered. "Anyway, you were saying about Rome..."

"Yes. I was taken to the city of Narbo on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, where I was put on a slave ship and sent to Rome, where I was kept in an iron cage until the time came for me to be auctioned on the block." Marcus gulped beer hastily to hide the tremors in his hands. Those particular memories were among the ones that woke him up nights, shaking inside a layer of cold sweat. "I lived in Rome from the time I was eight years of age."

Skeeter leaned forward. "Great. See, Agnes got me a free ticket through Porta Romae, she's guiding on the tour this trip, and it's a pretty quiet two weeks, only one day of public games, on the very last day. That's why she could get me through as a guest."

Marcus shook his head. Poor Agnes. She hadn't been in La-La Land very long. "You are shameful, Skeeter. Agnes is a nice girl."

"Sure is. I never could afford a ticket to Rome on my own. So anyway, I got this great idea, see, but I've never been there, so I thought maybe you could help me out?"

Marcus fiddled with his beer glass. "What is the idea?" He was always cautious not to commit himself to any of Skeeter's perpetually shady schemes.

"It's perfect," Skeeter enthused, eyes sparkling with glee. "I wanted to do a little betting-"

"Betting? On the games?" If that were all Skeeter wanted, he saw no harm in it. It was strictly illegal, of course; but Marcus didn't know of a single tourist who hadn't tried it. And it was so much less worse than what it might have been, all Marcus felt was a kind of giddy relief. Maybe Agnes was a good influence on Skeeter? "Very well, what did you want to ask me?"

Skeeter's grin revealed relief and triumph. "Where do I go? To make the bets, I mean?"

Marcus chuckled. "The Circus Maximus, of course."

"Yeah, but where? The damned thing's a mile long!"

Ahh...

"Well ... The best place is on the Aventine side of the Circus, near the spot where the gladiators enter the arena. They come in through the starting boxes, of course, at the square end of the Circus, closest to the Tiber River. But the public entrances closest to there are very popular betting sites, as well. There are the professional gambling stalls, of course,"

Marcus mused, "but I would stay away from them. Most will find an excuse to cheat a colonial blind. Of course, much of the betting takes place in the stands themselves, while the bouts are underway." He wondered what Skeeter's reaction would be to watching men butcher one another. Many tourists came back physically ill.

"That's great, Marcus! Thanks! If I win, I'll cut you in on the deal."

If Skeeter Jackson remembered that generous offer two weeks from now-and followed through on it Marcus mused, he would have done more for Marcus than he could possibly know. Ever-present worry over finances swiftly captured Marcus' attention and swept his thoughts far away from the table where his friend was drinking his beer. Ianira, despite his protests and pride, had insisted on contributing to his "debt-free-fund" a sizeable chunk of her earnings made by giving historians whatever information she could for the "primary research source" fees. Ianira also sold genuine ancient Greek recipes for all manner of cheesecakes, though she had paid for learning to make every single variety under the whip (and more) in her first husband's house downtime.

The cheesecakes' delightful flavors and characteristics, Marcus now knew, had once been discussed in the Athenian Agora as seriously as any philosophy by the most important men in Athens. Their recipes had been lost for centuries, but Ianira, hurting still from her husband's brutality, knew them all by heart, had memorized them in a terror to survive. Now, with amusement healing old scars, she sold the recipes one by one to Arley Eisenstein, who gave her a percentage of his profits--substantial, given the cheesecakes' reborn stunning success.

Ianira made money faster than Marcus had ever believed possible, particularly after she became the proud owner of a free-standing stall that catered to the strange and increasingly bizarre "acolytes" who sought her out as though on pilgrimage. Some of them had paid the price of the Primary Gate just to look at her, praying she would say something to them. Some even gave her money, as though she were the most revered being in the world and their money was the only offering they could give.

Ah, money. When Marcus had tried to refuse her money, out of pride and dignity, she'd caught his hand and forced him to look at her. "You are my chosen, my beloved!" Dark eyes held his, burdened with so much he wanted to erase forever. Neither money nor Marcus could erase the past: brutal marriage or, worst of all, Ianira's terrifying, heavy, close-held secret knowledge of the rituals (both public and carefully hidden private), of the many-breasted Artemis of Ephesus, where she had grown to maidenhood in the world-famous temple. At that moment, those bottomless eyes flashed with what must have been the same look that had prompted the rash Trojan prince Paris to risk everything to flee to the windy plains of Troy with the much-sought-after Helen as his mistress.

Even in memory, Marcus' head spun hopelessly under the onslaught of that look. He had, of course, melted utterly at the winning smile that followed, not to mention the touch of her hands. "I am desperately selfish of you, Marcus. I do not understand this 'honor' of yours, so stubborn to pay off an illegal debt; but if this money will help fulfill that demand inside you, then I will be sure never to allow you to deny my help." In a rare gesture of emotion, she clutched him tight as if afraid to let go. Her upturned face revealed a sea of tears bravely held brimming on her eyelashes. Still holding him, she said in roughened voice, "Please. I know you are proud and I love you for it. But if I lose

you..."

He had crushed her close, trying with everything in him to promise that he was hers forever, not just the way things were now, with no formal words spoken, but the correct way, the way of formally taking her as his public wife just as soon as he could rid himself of hated debt to the man who had brought him here and set him the task of learning-and keeping secret records of-which men traveled the gates to Rome and Athens and what they brought back.

He didn't understand his one-time master's orders, any more than he understood how beautiful, highborn Ianira could love a man who had been a slave nearly all his life. So he simply kept the records, considering it a challenging puzzle to be solved, a clue to what made his former master's brain work while slowly gathering the money to pay his slave debt. He took Ianira's money, little as he wanted to, because he was desperate to get out from under such debt, to gain at least a little of the status that would put him on something approaching her own level.

Marcus' bittersweet thoughts were rudely interrupted by the unmistakable voice of Goldie Morran. Instant irritation made his skin shudder, like a horse's when big, biting flies descended to slake their thirst. Marcus sometimes wondered, looking at Goldie Morran, if she had been called Goldie for the shining, golden hair Roman women had once so coveted they'd had wigs made from the tresses of their slaves (impossible to tell now-Goldie's hair was, at present, a peculiar shade of Imperial Purple, leaving little clue as to its original color), or because she was an avaricious old gargoyle who wanted nothing in the world more than cold, hard cash-preferably in the form of gold-coinage, dust, nugget, whatever she could get her claws on.

Harpy-eyes glanced his way. "Marcus, get me a beer."

Then she sank down into one of the chairs beside Skeeter, inviting herself into their private conversation. As Marcus poured beer from the tap, seething and manfully holding it back-Goldie Morran was a regular customer-she glanced at Skeeter. "Hear you're going downtime. Isn't that new, even for you?"

Marcus set the beer in front of Goldie. She took a long, slow pull while waiting for Skeeter's usual outburst.

Skeeter surprised them both.

"Yes, I'm going to Rome. I'm taking a slow two-week vacation so I can get better acquainted with Agnes Fairchild. She and I have become rather close over the last week or so and, besides, she has the right to take a guest with her on slow tours." He spread his hands. "Who am I to turn down a free trip to ancient Rome?"

"And what," Goldie glanced up coyly, the neon lights in the bar doing strange things to her sallow face and genuinely purple-silver hair, "what exactly is it you intend to steal."

Skeeter laughed easily. "I'm a scoundrel and you know it, but I'm not planning to steal

anything, except perhaps Agnes' heart. I might have tried for yours, Goldie, if I thought you had one."

Goldie made an outrageous sound, glaring at him, clearly at a loss for words-perhaps a Down Time Bar & Grill first. Then, turning her back to him, Goldie gulped down the remains of her beer and slammed down a scattering of coins to pay for it. They jounced, slid, and rolled in circles; one even fell to the hardwood floor with a musical ringing sound.

Silver, a part of Marcus' mind said, having become intimately acquainted with Roman coinage and its forgeries.

Goldie, leaning over Skeeter's chair very much like a harpy sent by the gods to punish evildoers, said, "You will live to regret that, Skeeter Jackson." The chill of a glacier filled her voice. And underlying the frozen syllables, Marcus heard plainly a malice thick as unwatered Roman wine. It hung on the air between them for just an instant. Then she whirled and left, flinging over her shoulder, "Why you choose to become friends with uneducated, half-wild duntimers who can scarce bathe themselves properly is beyond me. It will be your ruin."

Then she was gone.

Marcus discovered he was shaking with rage. His dislike of Goldie Morran and her sharp tongue and prejudices had just changed in a way that frightened him. Dislike had flared like a fire in high wind, smoldering from a half-burnt lump of coal to a roaring conflagration consuming his soul-and everything foolish enough to come too close.

Marcus was proud of his recently acquired education, which included several languages, new and wonderful sciences that seemed like the magical incantations that made the world run its wandering course through the stars-rather than the stars wandering their courses around it-even mathematics explained clearly enough that he had been able to learn the new ways of counting, multiplying, dividing, learning the basics of multicolumn bookkeeping along with the new tools-all of it adding up to something no scribe or mathematician in all of Ancient Rome could do.

Perhaps a boy from Gallia Comata could be considered half-wild, but even as a chained, terrified boy of eight, he had known perfectly well how to bathe and had amused his captors by requesting a basin each night to wash the dirt and stinking fear sweat off his skin.

He actually jumped when Skeeter spoke.

"Vicious old harpy," Skeeter said mildly, his demeanor as perfectly calm as his person was neat and eternally well groomed. "She'll do anything to throw her competition off form." He chuckled. "You know Marcus here, sit down again-I would dearly love to see someone scam her."

Marcus sat down and managed to hold his sudden laughter to a mere grin, although he

could not keep it from bubbling in his eyes. "That would be something to witness. It's interesting, you know, watching the two of you circle, probe defenses, finally sending darts through chinks in one another's armor."

Skeeter just stared at him.

Marcus added, "You both are strong-willed, Skeeter, and generally get exactly what you want from life, same as Goldie. But I will tell you something important." In this one particular case, at least, Ianira was not the only "seer" in his family. The story was there, plain to witness for anyone who simply bothered to look, and knowing people as he did, the future was not difficult to predict. He finished his beer in one long swallow, aware that Skeeter's gaze had never left his face.

"Goldie," Marcus said softly, "has declared war upon you, Skeeter, whether you welcome it or no. She reminds me of the Mediterranean sharks that followed the slave ship, feeding off those who died. No ... the sharks did only what they were made to do. Goldie is so far gone in the enjoyment of her evil deeds, there is no hope of salvaging anything good from her."

He returned Skeeter's unblinking gaze for several moments. Then his friend spoke, almost coldly as Goldie had. "Meaning you think me worth salvaging. Is that it, friend?"

Marcus went ice-cold all through. "You are a good man, Skeeter," he said earnestly, leaning forward to try and make his friend understand. "Your heart is as generous as your laughter. It is merely my hope that you might mend your morals to match. You are a dear friend to me. I do not enjoy seeing you suffer."

Skeeter blinked. "Suffer?" He began to laugh. "Marcus, you are truly the wonder of the ages." His grin melted a little of the icy fear in Marcus' heart. "Okay, I'll promise I'll try to be a good little tourist in Rome, all right? I still want to do that betting, but nothing more devious than that. Satisfied?"

Marcus sagged a little in his chair. "Yes, Skeeter. I am." Feeling more hopeful than he had in months, he was forced to apologize for having to abandon his friend so soon after coming to a somewhat uneasy understanding of one another's intentions in this odd friendship. "I am most sorry, my friend, but I must return to work, before the manager returns from watching the Porta Romae cycle, and I have not yet finished all the chores he set me to do. Go with the gods when you step through Porta Romae, Skeeter. Thank you for the beer. And the company."

Skeeter's grin lit up his face again. "Sure. Thank you. See you in a couple of weeks, then. "

Marcus smiled, then busied himself cleaning vacated tables and wiping down the bar. Skeeter Jackson strolled out like a man about to own the world.

CHAPTER TWO

Agnes Fairchild was a nice girl. Not too pretty, but sweet and generous. And great in bed. By Skeeter's standards, the shy, academic types were often the most fun: overcoming their inhibitions and showing them a thing or two about mad, wet sex was as good as getting a stunning "10" into bed. He often regretted the fact that his lovers never stayed with him long, but, hey, there were new women coming through La-La Land all the time. And after Skeeter's childhood experiences, he was not choosy about looks. Willingness and sincerity were what counted. A knockout in your own bed was great. But a bombshell in somebody else's bed was no fun at all.

So when Agnes Fairchild walked into Skeeter's life, he was more than pleased. And when she opened up the chance to do some scheming outside the time terminal, he showered her with every charm at his command. She even taught him enough Latin to get by in case they were separated-which he wouldn't and did not allow to happen-not until the day of the games. Agnes was good at her job, too. Skeeter enjoyed tagging along with her tour group almost as much as he enjoyed a passionate lover willing to share intimacy during sultry Roman nights. The ancient city come to life was like a Hollywood movie set to Skeeter-but a movie set full of real people with real money he could pry loose from real hands that wouldn't miss a few pilfered coins, because they were all dead already.

Of course, he didn't tell Agnes that. He just enjoyed her company and sights like Augustus' giant sundial and the huge Emporium of market stalls that backed the wharves and warehouses of the Porticus Aemeha -- where he picked up a bit of profit with light-fingered skill-and bided his time while charming everyone from the richest billionaire in the group-whose money pouch Skeeter coveted-to the smallest, wide-eyed little girl who called him "Unk Skeeter." He even liked tickling and teasing her when she tickled and teased him. She was cute. Skeeter had discovered to his surprise that he liked kids. There'd been a time when the sight of another child-particularly boys-had made his blood run cold.

Long time ago, Skeeter. Long, long time ago. You're not everybody's bogda any more. You're not anybody's bogda anymore. And that was the best part of all. As long as he kept up the con games, the swindles, the mastery of skills a-bitter, deadly childhood had taught him, Skeeter Jackson would never again be anybody's isolated, lonely, private tribal spirit-in-the-flesh, a position that had, much of the time, amounted to that of victim, unable to retaliate when teased, taunted, or hooted at in careful privacy by the other boys, because it was unseemly behavior for a bogda to roughhouse, no matter what the provocation. So he'd developed the knack of endurance and remained a victim because that was the only thing he could do, other than steal the belongings of certain tormentors and plant them in the yurts of other tormentors. He'd grown skilled at the game and enjoyed the results with bitter, malicious glee.

And all of that was something few people understood, or ever could understand,

because Skeeter would sooner die than admit any of it to those who hadn't already figured it out for themselves.

He wondered, sometimes, if his friend Marcus carried memories as frightening as his own? After two weeks in Rome, he was convinced of it. After witnessing what went on casually on the streets, he deliberately asked Agnes to take him to see the slave markets. What he found there ... well, if Skeeter had harbored any shred of scruple, it was erased by the sights and sounds of that place.

Anything he stole from any rich Roman bastard was money the wretch deserved to lose: The more, the better. For a moment, Marcus' words about him and his standing with Goldie Morran made sense. There were levels and levels of depravity. Compared to these pros, Skeeter was a saint. He watched through narrowed eyes endless parades of rich, arrogant Roman men carried through the streets in fancy sedan chairs and recalled the bitter cold winds which swept endlessly across the steppes where he'd grown to teenhood.

He recalled, too, the glint of winter sunlight on sharp steel and the myriad ways of killing a man the people who'd raised him had taught their sons. And as he remembered, Skeeter watched wealthy Romans abuse helpless people and bitterly wished he could introduce the two groups for an intimate little get-together: Roman to Yakka Mongol, steel to steel.

Because that would never happen in Skeeter's sight, he elected himself the Yakka Clan's sole emissary in this city of marble and misery and money. He could hardly wait to start depriving them of serious amounts of gold earned on blood, not just a purse here and there just begging to be lifted by nimble fingers. His long-awaited chance finally came the morning of their last day in Rome. The entire tour group left the inn near dawn.

"Form up in your groups," Agnes called, echoed by other Time Tours guides and even a freelancer or two hired for guiding their employers safely to places not on the main tour, then safely back again. Since Skeeter was closest to Agnes, it was her voice he paid most attention to as they formed up in the silvery, pearl-hued morning. "We'll be taking seats together in the upper tier, which is reserve for slaves and foreigners. Be sure you have the proper coinage with you to purchase admission tickets and don't forget to collect a colored handkerchief to cheer on your favorite racing team. The gladiatorial games will begin after midday, once the racing is completed..."

Skeeter wasn't really listening. He was planning his scheme and trying to recall Marcus' instructions. He had a pouch half full of copper coins, mostly unciae, or one-twelfth of an as, the as being a pound of copper divided into twelve "ounces" (the first coins Romans had minted, according to Agnes). They were- mixed with a few silver denarii and sestercii, plus a few gold aurii on top just to make it look good. Agnes had loaned him the silver and gold coins so he could-as he'd explained it impress local merchants that he really did have money. That way, they'd be less likely to gyp him.

"Agnes, I don't want them to think I'm some provincial rube not worth wasting their time on."

And like the sweet girl she was, she'd believed every word.

He wondered how long she'd be able to stomach watching what Romans did to non-Romans. Two weeks was more than enough for him, even without watching the games, and he'd spent five years in the yurts of the Yakka clan.

"Skeeter?"

He glanced up and found Agnes smiling at him. "Yeah"

"Ready?"

"Am I ever!"

Her smile was so enchanting, he kissed her, earning hoots and whistles from half the crowd. She blushed to the roots of her mouse-brown hair.

"All right, people, let's go!"

Skeeter followed eagerly as Agnes led the first group away from the inn Time Tours owned on the Aventine Hill and ushered her charges into the narrow, winding streets of an already crowded, noisy Rome. Games day, Skeeter identified the electric difference from the tours' previous mornings. Skeeter hung back, letting Agnes gain distance. Tourists eager for their first and for many of them, only-look at genuine Roman games surged ahead. Skeeter grinned, then slipped quietly away from the group and headed for the Circus Maximus by the route Marcus had given him two weeks previously.

He knew the entrance he wanted was near the starting gates of the mile-long structure. Shops selling food, wine, commemorative mugs with scenes of chariot racing molded into them, even shops selling baskets and seat cushions did brisk business despite the early hour. The morning air was clear and golden as dawn brightened the hot, Latin sky. The scents of frying peas and sausages mingled with the smell of wine, the stink of caged animals, and the sweat of several thousand men and women pushing their way toward the entrances. A few betting stalls did even brisker business, a sight that made Skeeter all but salivate.

Yesukai, your wandering bogda has done found himself in paradise/

The streets were confusing, though, and so were the entrances. There were more archways into the great Circus than he'd expected. And crowds jammed each one. Which entrance, exactly, had Marcus meant? He walked all the way to the squared-off end of the Circus, down by the stinking Tiber, which flowed past the starting gates just beyond a couple of little temples he recognized from photos. The scream of caged cats and the bleating of zebras assaulted Skeeter's ears. Down here, too, were men stripped to the waist, hauling the great cages into place from barges tied up at the river. Teams of high-strung racing horses fought their handlers, while collared slaves rolled tiny, tea-cup