

Tucholsky Wagner Zola Scott
Turgenev Wallace Fonatne Sydon Freud Schlegel
Twain Walther von der Vogelweide Fouqué Friedrich II. von Preußen
Weber Freiligrath Frey
Fechner Fichte Weiße Rose von Fallersleben Kant Ernst Richthofen Frommel
Engels Fielding Hölderlin Eichendorff Tacitus Dumas
Fehrs Faber Flaubert Eliasberg Eliot Zweig Ebner Eschenbach
Feuerbach Maximilian I. von Habsburg Fock Ewald Vergil
Goethe Elisabeth von Österreich London
Mendelssohn Balzac Shakespeare Rathenau Dostojewski Ganghofer
Trackl Stevenson Lichtenberg Doyle Gjellerup
Mommsen Thoma Tolstoi Lenz Hambruch Droste-Hülshoff
Dach Thoma von Arnim Hägele Hanrieder Hauptmann Humboldt
Karrillon Reuter Verne Rousseau Hagen Hauff Baudelaire Gautier
Garschin Defoe Hebbel Hegel Kussmaul Herder
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Bronner Campe Horváth Aristoteles Voltaire Federer Herodot
Bismarck Vigny Gengenbach Barlach Heine Grillparzer Georgy
Storm Casanova Lessing Tersteegen Gilm Gryphius
Chamberlain Langbein Lafontaine Iffland Sokrates
Brentano Strachwitz Claudius Schiller Bellamy Schilling Kralik Gibbon Tschchow
Katharina II. von Rußland Gerstäcker Raabe Gleim Vulpius
Löns Hesse Hoffmann Gogol Morgenstern Goedicke
Luther Heym Hofmannsthal Klee Hölty Kleist
Roth Heyse Klopstock Puschkin Homer Mörike Musil
Luxemburg La Roche Horaz Kraus
Machiavelli Kierkegaard Kraft Kraus Moltke
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Nietzsche Nansen Lassalle Gorki Klett Leibniz Ringelntz
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Si'Wren of the Patriarchs

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To my wife, Jacquelyn.

Author's Remarks

The story of Si'Wren was culled out of a veritable treasure trove of hundreds of little clay tablets which were found sealed and submerged for over 4,000 years in stone jars. The jars were brought up from their place of discovery on the floor of the Persian Gulf, where they had lain half-buried under successive layers of sediment for over four millennia, by an internationally renowned team of archaeologists, oceanographers, and professional deep sea divers.

Although few realized the true significance of the find at the time, it was to be recognized later as a momentous event on that fateful day when the very first stone jar was actually removed safely intact from the bottom of the sea by a crude, squealing, grease and rust encrusted loading crane, to be hoisted free after so many centuries and set at long-last on the heaving deck of the aging expedition ship.

Monetary funding for the expedition was so short at times that the only affordable ship permanently on duty throughout the entire venture was an extremely dilapidated and barnacle-festooned vessel of third-world registry. No doubt many of the people involved viewed it as a minor miracle that the near-constant threat of mechanical breakdown did not endanger the success of the mission proper.

But the mechanics and engineers worked more than a few miracles of their own when catastrophe loomed, as it did more than once, and their determination ultimately prevailed.

Safely deposited on dry land after having been lost and forgotten for almost all of recorded human history, the stone jars were finally opened to reveal, instead of wine or oil, the curious little clay tablets safely dry and cushioned in a packing medium of loose straw and uncombed wool. The clay tablets, finally exposed to the light of day after holding their secrets for so long, were gently removed from their stone keepers and carefully packed in crates to be secretly shipped to the back rooms of a major museum. There, it was hoped,

they could be systematically catalogued, transcribed, and translated by the dedicated ministrations of a team of the foremost scholars of our time.

After careful and intensive study, the story was derived and adapted -by express and exclusive museum permission- by the author, who poured himself out in an exhaustive work upon this unspeakably priceless literary treasure, to such an extent that a state of chronic ill-health and increasingly strained and weakened eyesight had begun to set in toward the end of the project. Every effort was taken to achieve the highest possible standard of accuracy, integrity, and authenticity in highlighting every nuance of meaning from so obscure an original tongue.

The author has since recovered, and the story of Si'Wren is therefore presented now in modern literary form, which -it is hoped- will be found to have suffered but little from the inevitable abuses of such a distant cultural disparity and linguistically disjointed translation. The rigorous demand of a simple, honest, and straightforward retelling of the story of Si'Wren owes its true success, not so much to the tireless and unstinting efforts of the author, working with a bank of modern university supercomputers, but rather to the remarkable purity of Si'Wren herself, and the crude directness and honesty of the original telling.

Here, then, is the final result of so much work, such danger and heartbreak on the high seas, unrelenting secrecy, and endless scrutiny, the goal, the prize, priceless beyond all calculation, the translation of those ancient hieroglyphs so painstakingly stick-marked upon the unimpressive-looking little tablets; a story written in the softness of clay, and hardened to the rock of ages. It is a brittle, harsh tale of a tormented adolescent girl who lived out her tragically short life in a time of the greatest moral evil and physical beauty that the world has ever known, a story from the dawn of human history.

PRELUDE

She never knew Jesus, the Christ, the only begotten Son of God, by name, although He most assuredly knew her when He formed her in her mother's womb. His time was not yet come.

She was never to hear of the Tower of Babel, or of Abraham, Isaac, and

Jacob, and of Egypt and Moses, of Babylon or the Jews, the Roman Empire, the Cross, or any of the modern religions of the world.

They

were not yet.

She lived out her short life, and eventually died, about the time when mocking rumors were being widely spread abroad of a foolish old man called Noah, a wise old Patriarch who was rumored to have been directly commanded by no less a personage than the Almighty Himself to build an ark, a great wooden ship. This man, Noah, was given Divine instructions that he must waste no time, but work diligently to prepare a safe haven for his family and himself against a terrible day of judgement to be rained down upon a sinful world, a day when a wrathful God would bring forth a watery flood so deep as to utterly wipe out the unspeakable evils of an accursed race.

Many were amused at the rumors of Noah and his strange Invisible God. Whether the rumors of impending doom were true or not none could say, although there was none who would not readily agree that it was a world worthy enough of such punishment. It was a cruel, backward world, where "...every man did what was right in his own eyes...", sometimes for the better, but more often, for the worse. Much worse.

It was into such a world that the little slave girl, Si'Wren, was born...

Chapter One - Little Jars

The young girl sang softly to herself as she filled another container. Topping it off, she carefully stoppered the neck of the dainty clay vase and laid it to one side with the others.

An orphan prize of the conquests of the House of Rababull, she was small for her age, with long ebony hair nearly down to her waist in back, and perpetually of a rather plain appearance as a child, which safely hid her flowering beauty, unbeknownst to herself, from the lustful eyes of others.

She liked to hum and sing while she worked, although not too loudly, and was a painstaking, diligent servant. She had just finished filling nine of the little clay jars. They contained a medicinal salve comprised of rare aromatic resins and spices which were intended to be sold by an agent of Rababull, her master, in the market place at great profit.

Rababull kept many slaves, wives, and concubines, and had many sons and daughters. He was a strong, wealthy gentleman of noble birth, a titled land owner who wore much crude jewelry, together with the softest of furs and robes, and was always dressed in the finest weaves of red and purple.

He had long distinguished gray hair upon his head. His beard was elaborately curled every morning on a carefully heated rod of iron which was always cleaned and tested first with the judicious application of a wet thumb by his personal man servant, who kept it meticulously polished and free of rust with a dash of virgin olive oil and a cursory, daily polishing.

Rababull had hard, no-nonsense eyes and speech, and he always drove a hard bargain, whether it be something of as little consequence as the selling-off of an old slave or animal too advanced in years to be of proper use to him anymore, or the buying and selling of great tracts of land. He also saw to the scourging of slaves and the torture and questioning of thieves and miscreants, not infrequently even unto pain of death itself. Life could be cheap, depending on who you were, or who your father was.

Master Rababull was more than six hundred and fifty years old, although by the standards of the moderns, more than four thousand years in his future, he would have been described as an exceeding fit fifty-five. His life experience, like his age, was vast.

He was not afflicted by an old man's failings of the mind. He was missing no teeth, neither smitten by cavities. He was sound of stature. He was still keen of ear, and ate and drank as freely as any rash youth. He suffered no impairment of bone, limb, or mind, and had suffered no ailment since the day of his birth.

His eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated, and he craved a good physical match or a hard bet as much as any man 500 years his junior.

It was morning, and Nelatha labored steadily beside Si'Wren. Nelatha had been originally sold into slavery at birth for the unfortunate offense of having been a firstborn female, and her first owner had been fond of tatoos and ritual scars, of which Nelatha had received many all over her body.

Nelatha was accustomed to making no little ado of her mere five years seniority over Si'Wren, though not in an unkindly way. Nelatha's limbs were tireless and unfailing, for she was a large woman of short stature and powerful girth. The plenteous flesh of her upper arms rippled to an odd meter as she worked, grinding successful handfuls of spices and herbs in the stone pestle and mortise, to be portioned out into equal shares for each lot of balm.

The balm was made with fresh olive oil, pressed and drained out of a great wooden casement and ram located in the back yard of the compound. The ram was comprised of a flat, wheel-like lid, with many heavy stones laid on over the top of the lid by two powerful male slaves, crushing it down onto the open-topped barrel of olives. As the slaves piled on the stones, the progressively increasing weight of the ram steadily crushed out the fresh, strong-smelling olive oil which was drained through a bung hole at the casque's base.

This was a most pleasant time for Si'Wren, who, not having had any tatoos, not so much as one, applied anywhere on her body like Nelatha, and neither desiring any, yet greatly admired and envied

Nelatha for her expert ability and wealth of worldly experience. Si'Wren always looked on with beaming countenance as the piles of freshly sorted and washed olives were slowly crushed down under the weight of so many heavy stones. She would watch the pooling olive oil in the collection bucket, diligent to pluck forth the bugs from the fresh pressing. Then the oil would be covered to settle out any remaining bits of dust, twigs, and dead insects.

Finally, the oil would be sieved through several layers of coarsely woven cheese cloth, to be stored in tall slender vases with narrow bottom ends into which the finest pollen grains and motes would eventually settle out during storage. She knew of no other method to obtain the olive oil, but this way worked quite well, and Si'Wren was faithful to obey all, and question nothing that she learned.

Pharmacopoeia was a noble trade to work in, and well-praised by all for a multitude of reasons, of which several might be mentioned.

Firstly, because of the wonderful, aromatic scents which lingered in the spice tent and were so soothing to mind and soul.

Secondly, because of constant skin contact with the salves, balms, and countless varieties of resins and floral concoctions used to make incense, which were prepared by her and Nelatha on an almost daily basis, which had a most beneficent effect, giving perpetual advantage to good health by virtue of being so frequently in direct contact with the ingredients.

There were but few drawbacks to the natural enjoyment of her work. The purgative herbs, for example, could be powerful and curiously disturbing to the bowels in their effects, and their dry powders sometimes drifted in the air in the confines of the spice tent, having a drastic effect upon her breathing passages and causing her to gasp, wheeze, and sneeze in a most extraordinary fashion sometimes.

But that was only because of their natural purging qualities, and she was soon over it with no harmful aftereffects. One of the herbs was poisonous to consume whole, whereas the oil of the seeds, pressed out in it's own little separate bucket and ram and imbibed in small quantities, acted as a safe and effective purgative to the bowels.

Yet by and large, Pharmacopoeia was interesting and rewarding work, and was pleasant enough to do. Work in the spice tent forbade the intrusion of flies or bugs, and except for the sun-drying process, there must be no direct exposure to the natural elements, lest the product become spoiled.

A well-trained Pharmacopoeist was worth much money, and merited the perpetual good favors of the Master for all of his or her days. Praise for the worker would assure eventual success and praise for the work.

Compared to this, the backs of those working the harvest fields, the threshing floor, and other more common or menial tasks such as brick-making, invited the whip, because that could not impair the work nor harm the product, and would only increase the yield of bricks or harvest of grain.

Si'Wren was knowledgeable and proficient in almost every aspect and phase of the work of Pharmacopoeia. She was well tutored in how to recognize and gather fresh herbs on foraging expeditions with Nelatha in the wilds, under the protective guardianship of an armed male slave.

Whatever other herbs were not found locally could be purchased readily enough in the market place for a fair price. Even in this, Si'Wren was becoming skillful in identifying, grading, and haggling over the prices of herbs according to their several worth, and she had already gained much knowledge and experience in this.

But sometimes when at market, she still required the presence of one with a heavy beard and a deep voice, to help her strike a good bargain, for many of the traders were so proud and vain of their ability to make a profusion of crude marks on the tally slate, as 'proof' of their ability to 'read and write' as well as to cheat and connive, as to be unwilling to bargain in any manner except 'man to man', and could on occasion be outright fiendish in their unwillingness to permit a mere slave girl to get anything like a fair deal out of them.

Si'Wren did not mind. If her Master wanted something, he would see to it that she was afforded whatever means was required to get it, and send her out with some broken-nosed, one-eyed brawler of a

slave with cauliflower ears, a total illiterate who was willing enough to trade 'look for look' in the market place, in order to back her up in the demeaning cut-throat little realm of the traders.

Perhaps Si'Wren's most notable challenge of all, however, was her resolute refusal of becoming involved in any form of Sorcery, and a natural fear and reluctance of serving it's horrible totems and mystic signs employed publicly with such pomp and ceremony. Besides this, as a female she was ineligible to rise to a very high rank in the priesthood anyways.

Few women rose to such positions of power. After all, it was a man's world. Where superior strength was needed, of what use was beauty? Woe to the man who became physically useless, in such a world.

And so, through no fault of her own, Si'Wren had already missed out on the basic qualifying factor in life of being born male, a crucial qualification if one was to become a true Master of Pharmacopoeia. But she had always shunned, in heart and deed, the vile pursuits of being a Sorcerer, and secretly regarded it as no great loss in her young life.

Neither did Habrunt, the sage Slavemaster, take part in any Sorceries himself, ceremonial or other, and from what she saw, Si'Wren indirectly perceived a like sentiment in Habrunt to her own. She had never seen him so much as partake of such dark activities, even when she saw him off by himself at such and such a time as he felt mostly unobserved by others.

Habrunt was an exceeding strong man, and his true age was a mystery to all. He had a naturally weathered face, with deep, dark, friendly eyes, which held a slight but perpetual squint, as if he were ever vigilant against the many evils of an uncertain life. Si'Wren basically entrusted herself body and soul to Habrunt's unassuming tutelage in the many curiosities of the world, as if nothing could be more natural.

Habrunt was a formidable man. His tireless, muscular physique was battle-scarred, but although she knew him to be a fearless man, she had never seen him actually fight anyone. He had no tatoos. His dark hair, like his beard, was slightly wavy, and like his face, very

pleasing to behold in the eyes of young Si'Wren, and he kept his hair cropped to a proper shoulder length, but no longer than that, as befitted his low station in life, for he was but a slave himself. Habrunt was greater in stature and strength than Master Rababull, but unlike that other, he was no idle boaster and displayed no jewelry upon his nearly naked person.

Although only a slave, Slavemaster Habrunt ranked second in importance in the House of Rababull after only the Master himself. The cast of Habrunt's eyes was of a dutiful mein, but his normally pleasant, preoccupied expression as he looked after his many responsibilities, could become hard and unyielding at a moment's notice, even piercing by aspect, such as when he was wont to evaluate a slave even unto his very soul with a mere look. For this, and other, less notable reasons, all of the slaves under Habrunt's fair-minded authority held him in regard of great fear and respect, and because the mark of Habrunt was so universally the mark of excellence throughout the House and its surrounds, he received much praise from Master Rababull for all that he did.

Such widely-held acclaim for Slavemaster Habrunt, the chief agent of Master Rababull, was in no small part maintained by his sage words of advice, characteristically brief, unerring, and straight to the point, and by the certain knowledge in every servant's mind that if one failed at the fore to heed mere words from Slavemaster Habrunt, one must harken at the last to the whip of Master Rababull.

For Master Rababull always kept a large, blood-encrusted bull whip ready to hand for his most grievous personal judgements, when the real punishments must be meted out.

The two girls, Nelatha and Si'Wren, being naturally shy and industrious, counted themselves privileged to work together in the shelter of the spice tent. The tent of animal skins was located well off to one side in the large front courtyard of the House of Rababull, which was surrounded on all sides by a high stone wall.

The Master's holdings consisted of but a very small portion of the Emperor's kingdom, yet they were large tracts of land nevertheless. They were located on a broad fertile valley plain covered by dense scattered forest and jungle. Across this plain, the Tigris and Euphra-

tes rivers flowed and converged together into one. This dry land, this lush fertile plain, would one day be known to all mankind as a large body of salt water, named the Persian Gulf.

The wide tent was open at both ends and shielded by thin gauze veils to keep out flying insects, and preserve the salves and other herbal preparations. Infestation by insects could cause the finest ointment to give forth a stinking savor, and invoke the certain displeasure of the Master. The tent was also equipped with extra flaps so that it could be closed up at night or during the day when it became too misty.

L'acoci, an old slave woman of the House, spoke once of seeing the colors of a virgin's garments, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet, as a banded scimitar slash in the heavens, a colored arch, a wound in a darkened noonday sky misty enough that it wetted her upturned face and garments, and obscured her vision most strangely.

None had ever heard of such foolishness, and all, even Si'Wren, had laughed her to scorn. Colors in the sky? L'acoci was deluded. No one had ever heard of such a preposterous thing, and the very suggestion was flatly impossible.

A heavy dew came out of the ground every night and often in the day, and caused all life to flourish. But as Si'Wren well knew from unfortunate firsthand experience, such enshrouding mists could cause rare herbs and spices, if they were left exposed, to quickly turn stale, causing Master Rababull much displeasure.

To guard against such calamity, the tent was equipped to afford proper shelter from the clammy, clinging mists, which could arise on a moment's notice and transform the torches in men's hands into pale blobs of moon glow, like spirits at large upon the land.

Within the sheltering confines of the tent, Si'Wren counted herself a cherished and defended slave, safe within the walls of her Master's House, where strange men could not ogle or frighten her. For savage, rogue men walking in the lusts of their wicked hearts went out at all times of day or night, seeking human prey, upon whom they might work their unspeakable evils, men who loudly proclaimed their honor before others, and yet were so wicked in their

ways that no woman or child dared venture alone beyond the protection of some trusted strong man or tribe.

Sometimes a local sorcerer was rumored to have kidnaped an unsuspecting victim for occult and sacrificial purposes. Such men were oft upon the land by night, when swords slept in their owners' grasps, and brave men retired upon their racks behind the stoutest walls and doors they could manage. There was no law except the law of the pack. The only real law was right of might and sword and the dictates of powerful warlords and landowners, even unto the changeable whim of the Emperor himself. Against such, mere empty words were but as the ring of brass or a sounding cymbal, dumb bells all, and the clink of the condemned slave's heavy chains. Too often, the ring of a sword was the only proper answer.

The world was a place of much beauty, but even greater evil.

Si'Wren prayed oft in her bed at night, that she might one day be given in marriage to some strong and decent man. Was it not supposed to be one man and one wife, as had once been that great and mythical Patriarch Adam and his helpmeet, Eve? Eve first bore Cain, then Abel, and then after the sons of Cain were already abroad upon the land even unto the sixth generation, Eve bore Seth. Adam and Eve were, then, one husband and one wife in the beginning. Yet now, after fewer generations than the fingers on one's hands, men stole, bought, and murdered for as many wives and female slaves as cunning, sword, and gold could get.

A good husband, if Si'Wren should one day become so blessed as to find, could be both protector and benefactor to her. She was young, and still had her whole life ahead of her. A wise woman must overlook her man's faults, and stand beside him, even help lift him up when he might otherwise perish, and Si'Wren believed in the promise of the proverb that a faithful woman who served well might hope to find such a man, together with riches, happiness, and a houseful of many offspring.

Abruptly, as she worked, there came the crack of whips and the sound of curses, and Si'Wren looked up in momentary astonishment as a team of two big oxen straining against their yokes plodded slowly past the open end flap of her tent accompanied by several dirty-looking boys and driven by two brawny slaves who pres-

ently followed the beasts into view. Truly, Si'Wren observed meekly, a woman's place was under a man's protection, for what woman could match such men in the daily toil of such backbreaking labors as this?

The oxen were dragging a stone boat. A stone boat was no boat at all, but actually a great, wheelless, wooden sled or sledge used to transport big building stones from the rock quarry, or round stones from the harvest fields where they were unearthed by the plow, to be dragged as deadweight upon a platform made with two wooden skids, and transported across the dry land to the construction site for use in the making of more stone walls and buildings.

The young slave boys walked alongside the grating and squealing runners of the stone boat with goat skin bags, ready to provide grease or water to make sludge or mud under the runners, when the sled ground to a halt sometimes and must have something extra added to unstick it. The boys also carried straw brooms for the same purpose, as well as staffs to load and unload the sledge.

One of the young boys had suffered a massively crippled hand from the carelessness of his overseers when he was ordered to apply the grease and water and insert the end of a broom more closely beneath the runners. Such boys must reach in and work the water and grease and dirt together with their brooms and fingertips, because sometimes what was poured on would merely run off as quickly again without sinking in.

The older or more experienced boys could also employ the ends of their staffs for this purpose, but when a boy was especially young or new to the job and had never seen a stone boat before, it sometimes pleased the others who had the charge of such a green and inexperienced youth, to order him into the worst labors possible, and few other boys would give the temporary loan of their sticks and staffs, lest one of them suffer a similar ghastly fate. Si'Wren had once heard an agonizing episode of high-pitched screams that began so suddenly as to jolt her right down to the very pit of her stomach. The pitiful childish screams had gradually subsided into long dismaying moans that had continued long into the night, and thus had she known that something of the sort had happened, and

she spent the night praying desperately on her bed for the sufferings of the hapless young victim.

The stones comprising this particular load, broken by the stone masons into crude blocks of two and three times the weight of a man, were for the Master's garden wall, which Si'Wren must pass by every day on her way to and from the spice tent. As the two sweating drivers were helped along by the boys, many looked on disinterestedly and more than a few openly laughed and mocked at the slowness of their progress.

One onlooker shouted gleeful insults, bringing on the inevitable vile curses from the aggravated drivers.

The men kept the oxen at their yokes with cursings and whippings, as they dragged the stone boat screeching over the exposed surfaces of rocks and stones in the ground and the wooden runners scraped over them with ear-splitting squealings. Si'Wren watched also as the team made their way slowly past the spice tent and beyond, to where the stone masons labored to build the new garden wall.

Si'Wren bowed her head a little, and shut her eyes gently as she softly sang a prayer for the physical safety of the young boys. She often sang prayers during her work, swaying gently to the rhythm of her own soft sweetly-uttered syllables. It was not merely a prayer she sang always, but sometimes rather, a long-favored tribal song, a song of old which kept alive the promise about the Garden of Heaven to which all good souls must surely one day go.

The day was warm and pleasant. It was the kind of day to lull one into a drifting somnambulance, inviting weary slaves to seize upon the unwatched moment now and then to pause, and wander freely with their eyes across the inner mind and the far skies, in spite of the ever-present risk of sudden discovery and displeasure by the Master.

Nelatha's sudden intake of air accompanied by a frightened gasp of startlement caused Si'Wren to cease abruptly from her labors and look up quickly.

Immediately Si'Wren shrank back in an involuntary motion as she beheld the terrifying sight of a hairy, muscled giant of a man,

easily twice the height of any normal individual. The giant had six great fingers, like stout wooden pegs, on each hairy, enormous hand. Because of his size he appeared to be walking with exaggerated slowness, although the long strides with which he covered the ground took him across the level courtyard and up the front steps of the House of Rababull in a surprisingly short time.

His size was truly staggering to behold, and Si'Wren counted it her good fortune that he was already moving away from the tent entrance in such a way that she was not so much as glimpsed by him.

Such men, if they be men, could be unpredictably violent, and who could withstand such a one when he should happen to suddenly lose his temper? Although they were too big to ride horses, they could run on their long legs almost as swiftly as any horse, especially in a short sprint when attacking in a burst of speed. When they did ride, they were fond of more fitting steeds, such as elephants.

"Was he not terrible to behold?" Nelatha barely breathed, her voice a terrified series of gasped utterances.

"Aye, he is possessed!" Si'Wren agreed readily.

Indeed, he looked every bit of that.

Demon-possessed men had abnormal strength. How much the more so, such a one as this human tree?

With trembling fingers, Si'Wren carefully finished filling another tiny bottle and stoppered it carefully, checking to ensure that it could not possibly leak if accidentally tipped over or upended within some traveler's pouch.

"There," she said softly, still shivering in fear. "Ten bottles."

"So soon?" asked Nelatha, looking over her shoulder and double-checking Si'Wren's finger-count swiftly.

Si'Wren nodded. "I do good, aye?"

Nelatha, sensing how frightened Si'Wren still was, smiled her approval, and leaned over to hug Si'Wren in a reassuring embrace.

"You keep up a good pace," Nelatha agreed with evident satisfaction. "I am proud of you, Si'Wren."

They were charged to labor without ceasing, but sometimes both girls would alike find themselves the free time to rest and watch others, for which neither girl was apt to criticize the other too unfairly.

Outsiders could not easily see into the tent, thereby to voice any complaint of idleness, for the veil screened the girls while they worked, keeping them safely out of view while they labored happily within it's shadowy confines.

Even so, the two girls did try to be faithful and willing servants who would scarce conscience the deliberate wasting of their Master's valuable time and resources, and whose household they rightly considered themselves to be a part of. To be sure, they counted themselves but inferior members of the House, and yet, if not heirs, nevertheless exceeding fortunate to be the property of so great a one as Master Rababull.

This, then, was their fate and fortune, and it was good in their sight.

Master Rababull had never deliberately mistreated either of them, although he was known to deal harshly enough with rightly deserving wrongdoers or habitual slackers if they pushed their luck too far.

He had more than enough of those to preoccupy his attentions. According to the elder slaves, times were never so evil as now. Si'Wren wondered at this, being too young to say for herself. But she was inclined to agree with them.

The giant came out again, and made equally short work of his brief walk across the wide courtyard to the foundry. To the tune of many hammers, a group of talented artificers was busy at their labors there as they worked diligently to create numberless idols of stone, brass, silver, pearl, ivory, gold, wood, bone, and sparkling, mystically colored gemstones and jewels.