

She searched the main building, then crossed the outer ward under the red evening sky to search through the stables.

Gert startled visibly when she entered, put away a knife. He was saddling his horse. He pulled the girth tight in the twilight.

'What are you doing?' she asked worriedly.

'Sanderine.' He took a deep breath.

'I found out something terrible: Father has started to hate humanity.'

His eyes were large and black. Pelle, his gelding, nervously stepped sideways.

'Deadly games are being played. One of my friends was arrested. I can't bear the thought of what they might be doing to him.'

He grabbed her by the shoulders. 'You must escape. You are the lawful successor of Asega Alisha. It is your responsibility as Patroness of Justice to demand an explanation from Father.

But he is not going to risk that. He will send people over to hurt you! What happened to my friend will happen to your girlfriends. Escape across the border!' He let go of her and led Pelle toward the exit.

She came after him. 'Where are you going?'

'I'm not going to tell you. Be quiet as a mouse outside, do you hear me?'

Distraught, she followed him to a small

unguarded gate. He removed the cross-beam and opened the heavy door. 'Leave the beam where it is and go back to the party. Make sure that nobody sees you.' He led Pelle through the gate, mounted and disappeared into the growing darkness below. She rushed to pull the wood door shut, then waited for him to return. It was still possible. The sky was still red. It turned dark. She heard voices near the main gate. A cart-wheel rattled over the cobblestones – the feast was coming to an end. She felt a strong urge to tell Bern about Gert's departure, but the gate wasn't locked and Gert could still change his mind. She didn't want to get him into trouble unnecessarily.

