

Polly cut off her hair in front of the mirror, feeling slightly guilty about not feeling very guilty about doing so. It was supposed to be her crowning glory, and everyone said it was beautiful, but she generally wore it in a net when she was working. She'd always told herself it was wasted on her. But she was careful to see that the long golden coils all landed on the small sheet spread out for the purpose.

If she would *admit* to any strong emotion at all at this time, it was sheer annoyance that a haircut was all she needed to pass for a young man. She didn't even need to bind up her bosom, which she'd heard was the normal practice. Nature had seen to it that she had barely any problems in this area.

The effect that the scissors had was . . . erratic, but it was no worse than other male haircuts here. It'd do. She did feel cold on the back of her neck, but that was only partly because of the loss of her long hair. It was also because of the Stare.

The Duchess watched her from above the bed.

It was a poor woodcut, hand-coloured mostly in blue and red. It was of a plain, middle-aged woman whose sagging chin and slightly bulging eyes gave the cynical the feeling that someone had put a large fish in a dress, but the artist had managed to capture something extra in that strange, blank expression. Some pictures had eyes that followed you around the room; this one looked right through you. It was a face you found in every home. In Borogravia, you grew up with the Duchess watching you.

Polly knew her parents had one of the pictures in their room, and knew also that when her mother was alive she used to curtsy to it every night. She reached up and turned this picture round so that it faced the wall. A thought in her head said *No*. It was overruled. She'd made up her mind.

Then she dressed herself in her brother's clothes, tipped the contents of the sheet into a small bag which went into the bottom of her pack along with the spare clothes, put the note on her bed, picked up the pack and climbed out of the window. At least, Polly climbed out of the window, but it was Oliver's feet that landed lightly on the ground.

Dawn was just turning the dark world into monochrome when she slipped across the inn's yard. The Duchess watched her from the inn sign, too. Her father had been a great loyalist, at least up to the death of her mother. The sign hadn't been repainted this year, and a random bird-dropping had given the Duchess a squint.

Polly checked that the recruiting sergeant's cart was still in front of the bar, its bright banners now drab and heavy with last night's rain. By the look of that big fat sergeant, it would be hours before it was on the road again. She had plenty of time. He looked like a slow breakfast.