

IN^{sight} flames

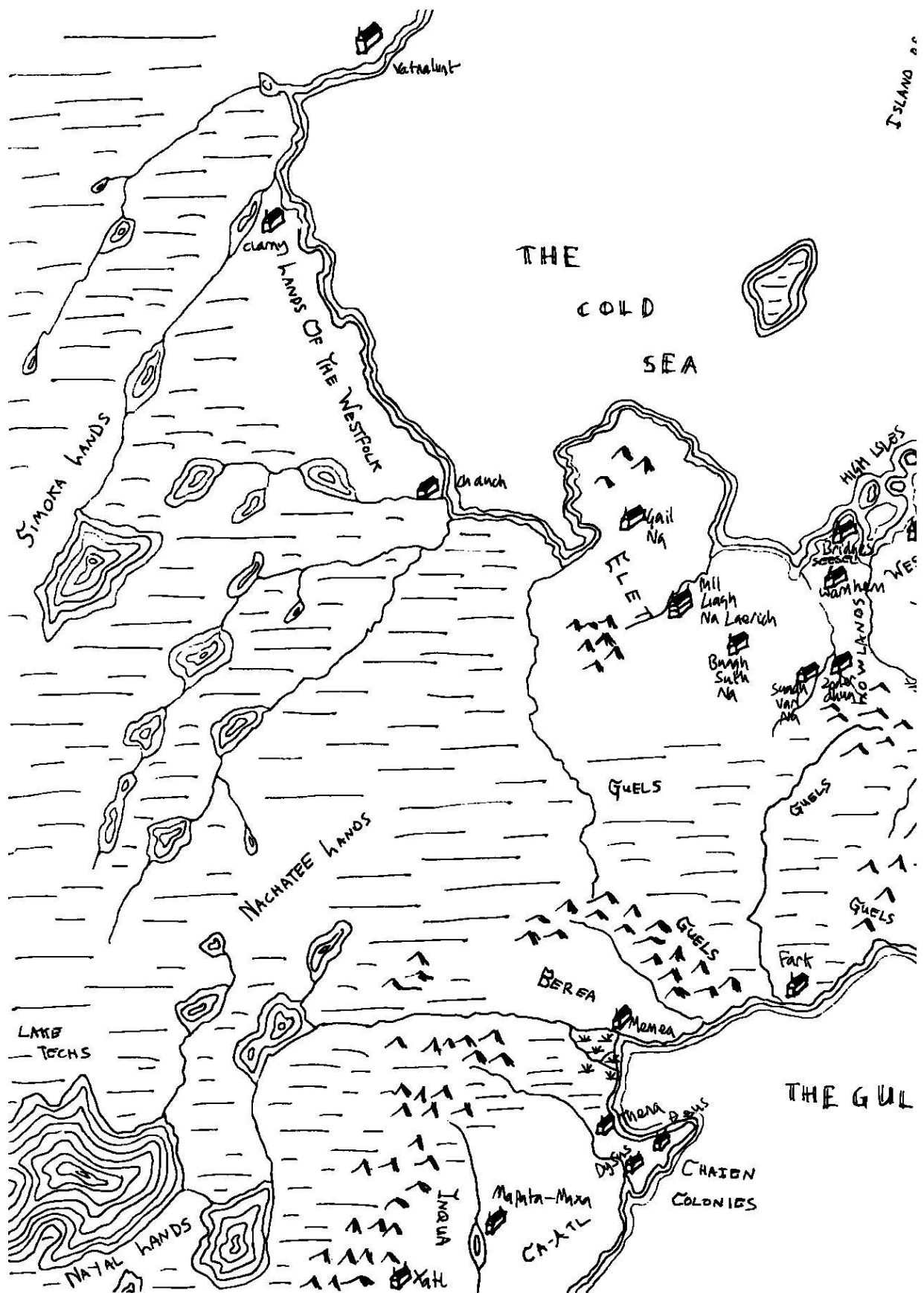
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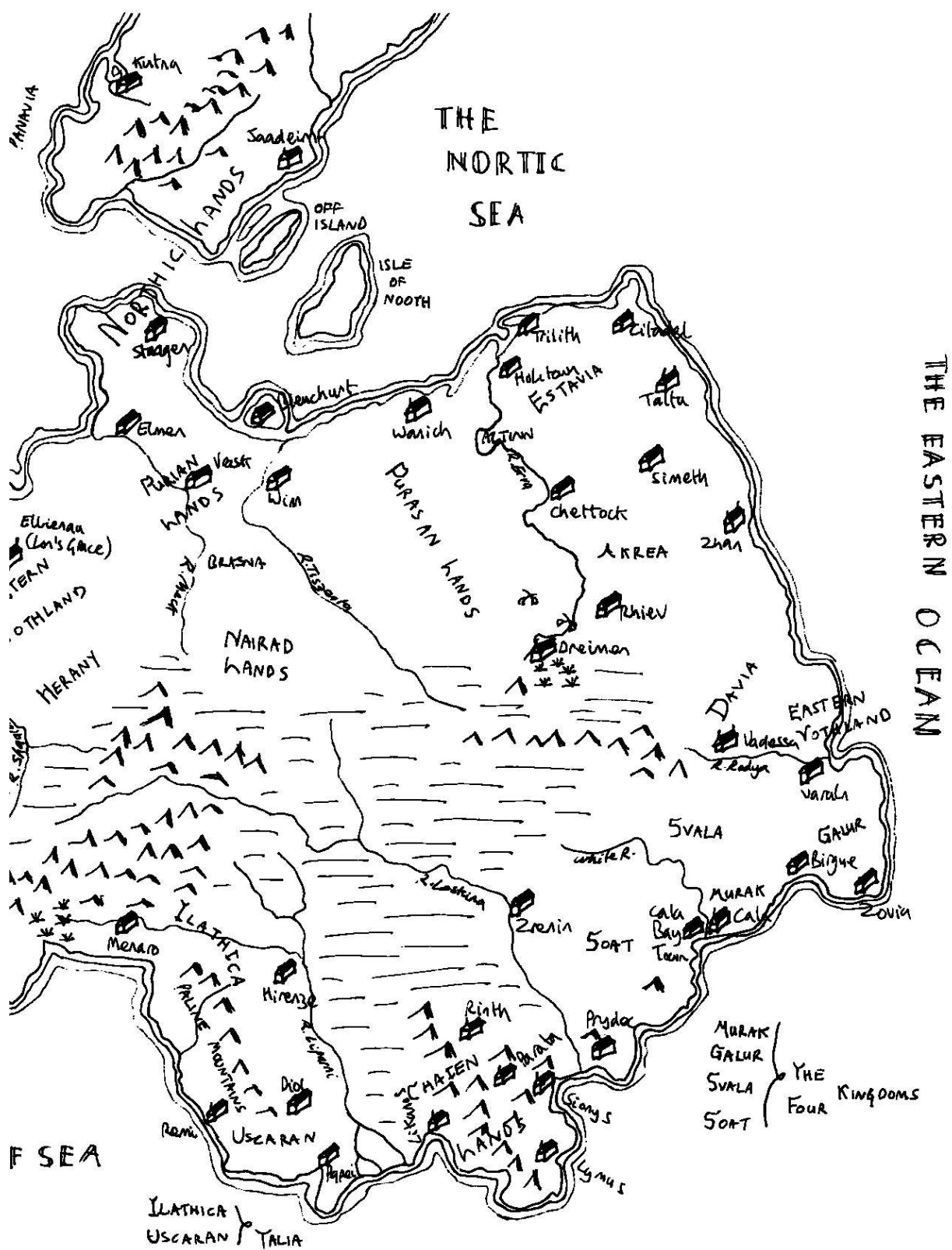
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Preface

Vast numbers of thanks are hereby presented to my alpha-testers, Gail Bartle and Roy Trubshaw, and to my beta-testers, Len Holgate, Clem Chambers, Ronan Flood, Trevor Martin, Bridgette Patrousky, Viktor Toth and Anne Wilson. Without their efforts, the rest of the book would read as badly as this preface does...

I would also like to thank Andrew Rolfe for creating the .pdf version of the manuscript that you are now reading.





Chapter 1

Magic was all about Roween, even here, and she hated it.

She'd been staying in the inn almost a week now, far from towns of any consequence, waiting, trying to keep dry. It rained forever on the northern borders, heavy rain, monotonous, an unending, dull, background strum that was always present, nagging at her, drumming, insisting that it be heard no matter what she did to try shut it out. *Rain, magic*. If only she could once again imagine silence...

She paid the barman, silver, took her coffee over to a table some way from the entrance. It was warmer, less damp there, and the distant, cloud-filtered light greyed everything to drabness, ghosted people, hid their faces; hid their eyes.

The bar was busying up. Locals mainly, the usual shifts of homeward-headed miners, loggers, potters; later, there'd maybe be some of the heavy labourers who kept the rivers banked, stopped the roads and bridges from washing away. Roween glanced around, tried to look bored, picked out the day's new outsiders: three of them — better-dressed sorts complaining to one another about their rooms, self-consciously avoiding mention of the weather. Likely they worked in sales or something; no-one she knew, anyway, no-one she was expecting.

Folk here never talked about the weather, ever. Climate control is smart enough magic for the areas where it's controlled; it's not so smart for wherever the bad stuff crashes instead. Last time there'd been more than a day of sun in the borderlands was maybe four or five years ago, and as for night-time... Roween recalled the perpetual streams that striated the sloped window of the garret she'd rented; she shuddered. When was the last time these people had seen a star?

Crack! The main door swung open wide, jarring against its stop with a juddering creak. A heartbeat passed, two, no-one entered, then just as a shout went up, "Keep out that wet!" a woman appeared, tall, young, dangerous. Throwing back the hood of a cloak as light and as dry as ashes, she paused in the doorway; her high-styled, painfully blonde hair almost gleamed as she looked about, minding for movement, eyes alert with a wincing intensity.

She was Someone, and she was making an Entrance.

Whispers began, low, fearful.

Roween heard a hushed voice nearby — "Who..?" — but she didn't reply, took a slow breath instead, deep, long, tried to stop her pulse from dancing stupid. *It's her, it is her, Conley of Malith.*

So it was starting.

A man grabbed Conley by the arm. "Nice cloak, lady," he sneered. "You're either very rich, or one big mage..."

"Both," she replied, glancing at his hand, "like you're both very drunk and one big empty-head." She walked across to the bar, the workman's grip slackened impotent by the nervous laughter of his peers.

The barkeep eyed her, face stone. "And what can I get you, *miss*?"

She smiled, turned to face the crowd. "I'm looking for someone, a girl: she's short, dark-haired, with quirky, crooked eyes. She came this way six, perhaps seven days ago."

The room went silent, dead but for the patient patter of the rain.

"I see..." Conley straightened, looked back to the barman. "*You'd* remember her, I think — she pays coin."

He met her eyes, seemed to freeze, his cheek twitching briefly.

"Well?"

A nod, short, towards the corner farthest from the door.

"Thank you," sweetly. "Now, let's see if co-operation is contagious..."

Stillness.

Languidly, Conley strode over, stopped before a table. Behind it was seated a small figure in a large, leather greatcoat, bobbed hair framing a thin face, attractive in a way, except...

Conley snorted, folded her arms. "Look at me."

Roween obeyed, betrayed herself.

"The librarian's daughter, yes..." Conley was half-smiling; she broke to a grin, then immediately frowned. "Outside — now."

"Inside."

Glared, "Outside!"

"*Inside.*"

For an instant, Conley looked like she might pick Roween up by the hair and drag her into the rain, but she collected in time, calmed herself, iced. "Fine. Inside then. It's *your* secret..."

Roween glanced away. She'd mind-run this encounter a hundred times, felt she ought to be able to cover whatever approach Conley took. *And yet...* She bit her bottom lip.

Conley was pulling up a chair. Behind her, the locals wavered between staying to watch events and getting the life out while they still could. Conley paid them no heed at all, staring only at Roween, forcefully, determined.

The smaller woman took another sip of coffee, leisurely faced her destroyer.

"I want to know," Conley began, then faltered. "Look, I just want to know how you fixed those books."

Roween nodded, slowly, the relief welling inside her. *Conciliatory, managing her arrogance.* She glanced down, thumbing the handle of her mug. "Fixed in what manner?"

Someone was finally closing the door. Conley heard, fluttered her hand to sanction it but didn't turn, remained focused on Roween. "Fixed in whatever manner it takes to clear the magic off every one of them!"

Roween looked up, registered the anxiousness in Conley's face. *Perhaps aloofness is the wrong way to deal with her?* She cleared her throat, spoke. "I know about books," swallowed, "grew up with them. Until about ten years ago, anything real sensitive they used to seal direct, half a day of gestures over each one. Took another half a day to unseal them when you wanted a read. Some special thirty-gesture segment wound in near the end, stopped you getting in unless you knew it. These days, they just slap on a Magicorp binder and it responds to a spoken password. Current opinion is, there's no way to crack either type of seal open. Makes sense: people keep a lot more than just books behind Magicorp binders."

Conley was tapping on the table with a fingernail, agitated, hurried. "Well current opinion is wrong, and wrong in a big way. Those books weren't just opened, the seals were completely *wiped*. Their binders are nothing more than polished copper discs with the Magicorp logo stamped on the front, there's not a buzz of magic inside — it's as if they're blank. As for the older books, it would have taken twenty years to undo all of those, even if the wound-in sequence of every one was recorded, which it wasn't."

People were beginning to sneak away, fearful, edgy. Another ten, fifteen minutes, then the law-and-order mages would be here.

Roween continued. "And you think I know something about it? A lowlife bookfetch like me? *You're* the doctor of magic, *you* figure it out."

Conley's eyes were diamond. "Listen, Roween, I'm trying to be patient, but I *don't* like the way you're throwing walls! I've travelled some considerable distance to find you, and now I'm here I'd greatly appreciate it if you didn't play dumb. You know *exactly* what happened in that room, and you know its implications on the whole of science." She gripped the edge of the table. "Stop pretending you don't! I could easily... Tell me, I must — " her voice shook as she retained control. "Just tell me what happened!"

"Uncross my eyes."

Conley was caught off-balance. She opened her mouth to speak, didn't seem to find words.

"I've had this squint all my life. They can do fancy cosmetic magic these days, some of the city clinics. People go in, come out you don't recognise them. So uncross my eyes, should be simple enough for you."

There were audible mutterings in from those who had chosen to stay.

Conley smiled, unsure. "Is — is *that* all you want? If I give you normal eyes, you'll tell me what happened to those books?"

"I'll show you."

She shrugged, pulled up her right sleeve. "Fine, well, let's see, I don't know the sequence for a permanent fix off-hand, but I can do you a temporary to be going on with. Only illusory, of course, your vision won't change, but your looks certainly will. Can you make a focus?"

Roween obliged, holding her hand fixedly, fingers touching, pointing inwards, thumb on the second joint of her forefinger. She made mental note as the young mage began her gestures: wrist, palm, fingers, fingers — *hot, she's fast* — wrist, point, fist — *yes, she's starting a minor illusion* — palm, point, fingers — *so she's honest, anyway, could have tried a one-line charm or something*.

Conley slid into the gestures with graceful speed, locking each one just long enough for it to take before she went on to the next. She watched what she was doing, but inattentively; her hand seemed almost animated, independent of her will. Roween could only gaze and admire.

"Not long now," Conley murmured, "nearly finished, just one more repeat of that segment and — there!" She looked up, into Roween's still misaligned eyes. "I — ?"

Roween stood, swiftly. "Follow me!"

Not-quite-so-fair hair came tumbling down about Conley's face as she stared at her hand in dizzy astonishment; her cloak buckle dropped, hit the table, bounced, rolled. "I made the right spell, I'm sure of it, I could flick out a minor illusion half asleep, I — "

Behind her, there was uproar. The innkeeper was clutching at the stump of his left arm, blood showering the counter. Some kind of foreman had collapsed unconscious, and there were people shouting and knocking things over. Conley stared around dazedly, like everything looked fuzzy. She felt Roween snatch at her arm.

"Out, now, to your horse! Before they turn on us!"

Mute with confusion, Conley stumbled after her.

* * *

They'd stopped just beyond a bridge spanning one of the main drainage channels that

funnelled water down to irrigate the sun-regulated valleys below. There were trees here, broad-leaved: good for shelter, good for cover. Conley hadn't spoken since they'd left the inn, and all Roween had said was, "Conley! South."

Conley missed her waterproof cloak. It was made of powdered bone for lightness, webbed together with a proprietary East/Trad flux spell. Four hundred clicks it'd cost her, from Hease and Eller's, and yet the instant she'd loosed her illusion the flux had just winked out; she'd been left sitting in a slowly falling cloud of bone dust. Roween clearly had something that flattened magic.

Conley watched the girl trying to throw a spark onto her tinder. *Fire, that would take, what, three-fifty gestures to create? Why waste time with flint? Does her antimagic have permanent effects?* She looked over to the horses. *Blurred.* So her lenses must still be gone; that meant she most likely had blue eyes again, too — the grey had been an indulgent present from her father a couple of new years ago.

She remembered the innkeeper, desperately trying to stem the flow of blood from an arm missing from the elbow down. *Probably a prosthetic*, a piece of meat or something — maybe even the original — cooked up to look, feel and function like a plus-strength normal arm; two days of solid work to build — the surgeons even needed people around to cast wakers at them while they gestured. *Hot, whatever she's using, it can blow away a damned prosthetic!* She wondered fleetingly where an innkeeper might get that kind of free money.

Roween had lit the fire, was walking over to her.

"I hit your cloak, your face colours, probably your click-well, your hair twice, I think the ring changed, anything I've missed?"

Conley resigned herself to the loss of her click-well: there was maybe two thousand of company money in it, all gone. The spare on her horse had around seven hundred, if that hadn't been blanked as well. Good enough to last her, but *damn*, two thousand down, just like that!

She remembered Roween had asked a question. "Er, my eyes, I'm short-sighted. Things start to blur out after a couple of paces."

"Why didn't you have them fixed physically? Oh, the colour, you must've used those MedSpell lenses. Change hue at will, right?"

"I kept them at grey, used them mainly for night sight and flash-protection. In my line of work, you catch a lot of flashes..." She paused a moment. "My leg's fine?"

A semi-shrug. "Shouldn't it be?"

Conley glanced towards the fire, fingered the side of her nose. "When I was fourteen, I fell from a window, smashed my leg up really bad. I was in surgery for almost a week, three medics working on me in eight-hour shifts. Once they'd pulled back the muscle and bound the splinters together with white gel, I was still in soft support for six months before I could walk again unaided."

"You healed naturally. Impossible without the magic to set it on course, but once everything had been put back where it ought to go, nature could take over. That barman's prosthetic worried you?" Conley nodded. "Well forget it. He's been running happy shots for years — only way some of the folk round here can tolerate the constant rain, it can sort of get to them."

Conley was guarded. "So what's wrong with happy shots? They're legal..."

Roween paused, frowned. "A lot's wrong with happy shots. What in particular was wrong with these happy shots is they came from a black-fac in Cala Bay Town. Maybe two percent were very *unhappy* shots, like people had to keep taking more happies just to stay unsuicidal. He kept thirty-plus hooked that way, but maybe ten more spiked themselves, couldn't afford supplies." She put her hands in her pockets. "Look, we going to stand here all

evening? That's the last of my kindling there."

The two walked to the fire. Roween flopped down and crossed her legs, the greatcoat engulfing her even more spectacularly than it had at the inn. Conley hesitated; she still wasn't quite as wet as the grass.

"Take the leather mantle off my horse?" suggested Roween. Conley shrugged acceptance, turned to go. "Oh, and fix your eyes while you're over there."

The mage looked back, askance over her shoulder. "So this system you have of countering magic, it won't completely stop me from forming spells?"

"Not baby ones cast on yourself, if they're harmless enough, no. You can think of the effect as being like a sudden flash of intense light: close up, it'd blind anyone, but further away it would depend on the individual, and at some distance everyone would be far enough away to be safe from instant sight loss — even if it did still hurt their eyes some awhile. For me, sensitivity to magic is dependent on the nature of whatever spells are involved: the more powerful they are, and the greater their effect, the more they're all at risk. You should be perfectly able to do your eye stuff."

Conley smiled, made her way to the horses.

* * *

When Conley returned, Roween was cooking some kind of squirrely meat skewered on the end of a dagger. The wrap-pouch was burning on the fire; Conley couldn't read the label.

Roween didn't look up. "Took a while — did you use a Chewt-Farmer sequence or did you go straight for a hardener?"

Conley squatted down on the horse cloak and smiled, widely. "Well, I tried a variation of Chewt-Farmer: I spliced in the light-bending segment from one of Farmer's localised illusions — it takes less time to gesture than the full sequence, and it's more flexible when you initialise the focus. It won't give you magnification, but then you don't want that for eyes unless you can take the headaches. I spent the rest of the time on a few other small enchantments."

Roween looked across at her. "Nice hair," she sighed, returned to roasting the sinewy chunks. "So, how did you come to fall out a window?"

"I don't really remember," she warmed her hands, "it was several years ago."

"Eight or nine, yes, guess that's time enough to forget."

"You seem to know a lot about me."

"I do?" She took a bite of meat.

"Well, you know my name, my age, what I do..."

Roween chewed as she spoke. "You're Dr Conley of Malith. You're a year younger than I am. You're the brightest light in the research group at Porett Technologies. Prior to that, you were at the Academy, putting in the best postgraduate thesis for at least a decade, working under the supervision of your father, the Academy's chancellor." She swallowed. "Yes, I suppose I know something about you; what do *you* know about *me*?"

"I hadn't thought you were my elder, that's surprising. You even look like you're in your teens." Her voice was approving. "Well, let me see, I know your name is Roween, and you're sometimes called Roween Sage because your father is senior librarian at the Academy. Your mother died when you were, what, six? I'd figured it was when you were a toddler. Your father brought you up alone, his career suffering as a result. You left home around four years ago, abruptly, after the book episode. The next anyone hears of you is this Spring. It's taken

me four months to track you down."

"Four months' searching... And what have you found?"

Conley considered. "I've found something I don't understand. I wouldn't have believed what happened in the inn if I hadn't," she stared deep into the flames, "hadn't seen it myself."

"I knew as much, that's why I had to show you. Complete negation of magic, it's, well, hard to accept. People can rationalise it for one-off surprises such as the books; after all, spells can wear off with time, so maybe seals just don't last as long as we thought? Perhaps they're reaching their limit now, they were invented fifty-odd years ago. Yes, that would square why the older books were clean of magic. As for the binders, well you could hypothesise that there must be some simple-yet-secret way to deactivate them, which someone — me — had bumped across by accident."

Conley nodded. "I reasoned something like that, yes."

"So if you could verify the facts, and make your findings public, all confidence in Magicorp binders would disappear. The company's stock would plummet, no-one would touch their other products, and they'd be tangled in lawsuits for years..."

"...leaving the field clear for Porett Technologies." She smiled. "You're smart! That's a fair summary of how I analysed it in the research proposal — when I applied for funding to mount this trip — but Porett and I both knew it was far more complicated than that. Some of the spell-sealed books had been done as controls when Magicorp first brought out their binders, so they were ten or eleven years old, max. Pre-war dusties failing I could believe, but not at the same time as the new stuff."

Roween offered her a piece of charred meat. "It's alright, take it, I lost three wrap-pouches when the magic fell out of them, we get to eat it all."

Conley pulled the chunk from Roween's knife, dropped it on her lap to cool. She nodded. "Well, as for what happened to the binders, that really puzzled me. They weren't just turned off, they were dead. Even with access to Magicorp's sequence patents, no-one could do that. I read a dozen recent papers from a conference on cancelling; only the philosophers have even touched the subject so far, and none have produced a workable theory of how it could happen. The central issue wasn't how to do it, but whether it was possible at all! Yet these binders, they were lifeless..." She shook her head, slowly.

Roween watched her absently pop the meat into her mouth, lost in reflection, oblivious to the sound of unending rain cascading on the trees. The intensity was still in her eyes, despite the shock she'd had. "You were basically right, of course — you know that now. But it's not an artefact, I don't wear a special pendant or anything. It's me, something I just *do*, when spells are cast at me. Can't help it, can't control it, it just happens. But I've figured all about it: why I can do it, when, how it works..."

"I need to know," said Conley, softly, still gazing into the fire.

"You need to be *educated*..." Roween answered, earnestly. She paused a moment, then suddenly clapped her hands. "So, first, we have to make a trip someplace!"

Conley abandoned her thoughts to reality. "Out of this wet?"

"Well out. Cala Bay Town."

Chapter 2

The chancellor's study was, of course, large. Unlike the rooms of the other senior staff, however, it was also oak-panelled, though barely-noticeably; twenty-two years in academia had necessitated his gradual accumulation of some fifteen floor-to-ceiling, glass-fronted, integral-binder bookcases, which lined every section of wall except for where they'd obscure either the window, the door or the (outdated) blackboard.

Ansle sat at the larger of his desks. He deliberately didn't look up as the dullness that was Chewt entered, seated herself opposite. She waited, silently, for him to speak.

He let her. The other members of staff charitably attributed her permanent air of polite boredom to the supposition that she'd much rather be spending her time considering important matters of fundamental research. Alone among them, however, Ansle knew her from the early days, when neither of them had been professors, had had authority. He'd determined then that the reason she always seemed so bored was because she *herself* was so boring; it simply reflected back on her, so those she bored, in turn, bored her.

He deferred a moment longer, then leaned away, began. "Now, Chewt, it's about this year's prospectus..." He locked his fingers. "I notice that in your draft you've lengthened the entry for the Department of Illusion to nine pages."

She hesitated, unemotional, eyes still. "Chancellor: since the publication of my sequence in the second half of last year, people have become correspondingly more interested in the subject."

Ansle shook his head. "People who were *already* interested have perhaps become more so, yes, but they'd almost certainly have applied to study *something* here anyway. The purpose of the prospectus is to persuade gifted young people to choose *magic* as a career instead of, say, engineering or architecture. Who's going to switch to magic because illusion suddenly appeals to them? Are we trying to attract," disdainfully, "*artists*?"

"Engineers and architects do use magic."

Ansle glared.

"I'll cut the entry back down to seven pages."

He continued, sneering. "And as for its being *your* sequence — I would like to point out that it was Farmer who did all the work. Your only contribution was to publish prematurely and have East/Trad lure him away the instant he'd completed his thesis!"

Chewt closed her eyes a moment, slowly. "I am well apprised of your views on that subject, Chancellor. Will that be all?" She began to rise.

"Be seated. You expanded the introduction, too: what's all this 'recent times' nonsense?"

She sat again, wearily, patient. "The other major colleges invariably boast about their history. The Academy is not as old as they, but our influence on society has been more profound than ever theirs was. People in the process of selecting a career should be made aware of the fact explicitly."

Ansle frowned, snorted. "*This* explicitly?" He reached for the copy on his desk, turned to the bookmarked page. "I quote: 'The Academy of Magical Sciences is not primarily concerned with academic excellence, nor has it ever been. Its main function is power broking.' *Power broking*? I can't believe this! Are you completely *mad*?" He snapped the folder shut, slammed it down. "You can't put *that* sort of thing in a prospectus!"

She nodded, ran a hand through the slate of her hair. "In the first few years, when the potential of magic was only beginning to be recognised, different factions hoped to gain control of the Academy; they wished to use its resources to — "

"Do you *have* to live in Lecture Land *all* the time? Everyone *knows* what happened — but that's not the *point*. You just can't say straight out in a *prospectus* that the Academy isn't concerned with academic excellence! It's the very justification for our existence!"

"Once, yes, but no longer. The Academy resisted domination by becoming a faction itself; its priorities now are to influence, not to educate." She smiled. "I find the concept simple enough..."

He was about to shout, checked himself, strummed on the desk. "And telling people this outright will make them want to come here?" He shook his head. "It's meant to be a prospectus, to convey information concerning the courses we'll be offering; it's not a first-year social psychology essay." He felt her eyes on him, heavy with pride, sighed. "Look, Chewt, I do agree that, by way of introduction, we ought to describe the Academy's place in society to *some* extent, and I can see how it might be productive to *remind* people that, say, it was we who orchestrated the final coup which cemented four-country unification; but this cold-blooded admittance of our wider influence doesn't make for good relations with the remaining 'factions', as you call them."

"On the contrary, I think it does." She was looking him in the beard, now, rather than the eye; he *hated* it when she did that. "By formalising our status, we — "

"Enough!" She fell quiet, seemed mildly melancholic. "It is for *me* to determine such matters, not for you. If you wish to make suggestions, then you are, of course, free to do so; do *not*, however, attempt to pursue new policies independently. *I* am chancellor: you are merely my deputy. I am your master in all matters."

She looked beyond him, out through the window. "Even by your own admission, I supervised Farmer; because of me, his was the most original — "

"And *I* supervised my daughter! Without *her* work, you wouldn't have even been able to *prove* Farmer's sequence!"

"You're over-stating — "

"*What?!*" His face was red. "Listen, Chewt: ten years ago, the maximum length of spells was around twenty-five K. Remember then? Many more gestures, and the number of potential interactions caused the proofs always to show failure even for spells that were demonstrably safe. *Farmer's* sequence would have trashed out in five minutes if we still had to use the old tests. It was only after Conley published her first report four years ago — under *my* supervision — that the whole field opened up. The Department of Military Science had a *three hundred* K wallshaker written and proven within months! And Conley herself developed the induction for proving light flashes *any* prime number of gestures long from seventeen onwards. We'll be seeing megagesture *commercial* products soon! And you have the *audacity* to throw Farmer at me as some kind of evidence of academic superiority? Farmer's optical meddlings don't even *compare* with the magnitude of a breakthrough like Conley's! So if you're implying that I'm somehow your *junior* in supervisory excellence, you're hopelessly mistaken."

She stared back, didn't say anything.

Ansle breathed deeply. "Well," he picked up the report, straightened his sleeve. "Now that's understood, I trust that we can resume our original discussion..." He turned a page, faked like he was reading. "Yes, yes... I suppose you can retain *most* of what you've added to the introduction; I expect Justan — The King, rather — will be modestly pleased to learn that he 'out-manoeuvred' my predecessor 'in a totally humiliating fashion' and only 'shortly after ascending the throne'... I'm relieved to see your loyalties have finally moved with the times." He paused. "In fact, by using this opportunity to accept publicly that the Academy's ambitious regional power proposals of ten years ago *were* premature — or, rather, ahead of their time — it places us well to the fore now that The King is finally advocating a similar approach himself. Yes," he put down the folder, pushed it toward her. "Any questions?"

"I'll pad the extra pages back in by expanding the biographies." She stood, tiredly.

* * *

After lunch, Ansle was rubbing a chalky note from his blackboard when he realised he was bathing in the green glow of the comsphere on the desk behind him. He turned, tapped it. The green misted out; Chewt's face appeared.

"Chancellor, I have news from Lord Sennary." She looked even less happy than usual.

"He's lost track of Conley's ring?"

"Yes, she must have removed it. He went in anyway, but was too far behind: by then, she had gone."

"Tell him to return here." He reached for the sphere again.

"There's more: she struck an inn with some kind of devastation magic. She left with — "

" — with a girlish-looking woman blighted by over-focused eyes." He tapped out the image, Chewt's comparatively astonished expression fading to clear glass.

Ansle half-sat on the desk. When he'd lost his private tag on his daughter's lenses, he'd known immediately what had been the cause. Of course Chewt, tracking the figment-diamond ring, would merely assume that Conley had slipped it off, even though both she and Conley knew it would revert to quartz if the gold ever left flesh. Chewt, though, was not the kind of woman who understood vanities...

The important thing was that Conley had actually *found* the girl, the librarian's daughter. Ansle gazed at the lines of books packing the shelves, covering the wall. He should have accepted her offer when she first came. Instead, he hadn't accorded her story credence — but surely that was forgivable? Her theory was, after all, incredible! Suspicion of its veracity had welled only gradually — it had taken almost a year before it piqued him into sending Sennary and his men for her that night. Only *then* was it that belief came, sudden, undeniable; *then* that he'd learned her magic really was of a different order...

And from today's events, it was clear that she was *still* way ahead technically. No more lenses, no more ring, no more tags...

What new lessons could she teach? Or be *prevented* from teaching?

Chapter 3

The comsphere-3 on Porett's desk was glowing red. He stopped writing, tapped in. The colour cut out, to be replaced by the bearded features of a man. Mid-thirties, thinning hair swept back in a pony tail: this was also Porett.

The comsphere image spoke first. "I monitored Chewt calling Ansle. There's been some development with Conley, Sennary's lost track of her, some mention of devastation magic."

The real-world Porett considered. "So I should buzz the click-well."

"It'd help, just to make sure it all checks out."

He began the gestures. He'd been looking over a contract to trade grain for timber with an up-coming Northic concern that was hoping to break into their local food production industry. His separate consciousness in the comsphere-3 had, last time they'd merged, taken on the task of calling a few contacts in Estavia, find out what they knew about the Northic boys. Busting into bread wasn't an obvious expansion route for a company primarily into logging.

His hand flowed smoothly through the sequence. Whatever had caused his other self to abandon prematurely the Estavian calls and focus on Ansle's line must have been important. Well, the red priority glow had told him that, of course. *He must be pretty damned sure about this...*

He finished the gestures.

"Nothing?" enquired the comsphere Porett.

He nodded. "It's like it isn't there, I'll try pick up the click-control magic, see if that's detectable."

"Don't bother, it won't be. Try the second well."

He obliged. What could his co-self have discovered? He'd know soon enough, but those Estavian contacts should have taken at least three hours to deal with, why had he ... *No, be patient.*

He finished gesturing, felt a piece of knowledge appear in his mind, like he'd always known it. "The second click-well is still operating, we could link to it but it's not on Conley, maybe on her horse, maybe someone else, maybe lost."

"Well, that's something, anyway. I think we need to discuss this."

"What made you give up on talking to the Estavians? Something they said? Something they didn't say? Or did you just have a wild idea to snoop on Ansle?" He knew that wouldn't have been the case, liked to tease himself, show who was alive.

"Hell, no, I was trying to rouse Thidlic when suddenly I felt it."

Silence. Porett knew that while in the comsphere he shouldn't be able to feel anything — zero whatsoever. He could see and hear through other comspheres that he'd called, or that'd called him. He could see and hear people in the same room as the comsphere-3, like he was an incoming call. Damned if there was any way he could ever *feel* anything, though.

"What was it you felt?"

"Pain, ghastly, like I was bleeding, dying. I think we'd better merge..."

"I'm already making the gestures."

Chapter 4

Conley surveyed the scene from their vantage point, a hillock near the riverside road where they'd stopped at a stall for a munch-pack. Roween had paid, gold. Conley didn't know whether to believe her excuse that it was weight she'd rather be without when they hit CBT; she had more than a hunch that if Roween was around when someone used a click-well, the traders would go red-eyed crazy...

Before them lay the expanse of Cala Bay Town. The White River was still visible way to the north, and beyond it the spires and towers of Cala, place of her birth. *Cala*. Murak's great coastal port, with its palaces, its docks, its markets, its warehouses, its sprawling cosmopolitan vitality; she smiled to herself. What city was there in Soat to match its majesty? Or in Svala, or Galur? *None!* Only Cala was fit to be the capital of Justan's four-nation kingdom. A sense of pride rose within her.

Yet between her and home lay Cala Bay Town. It was curious, she thought, that she'd lived so close to this place for so long, yet never visited it — despite temptation enough. A ferry-ride away but a world apart, it looked so completely different from its namesake. The streets were narrow, the buildings either old and ramshackle or new and even worse. Smoke poured from a thousand factory chimneys, to hang over the houses, lend an oppressive, grimy half-light to the twisting roads and unending alleyways.

She'd heard of the town — who hadn't? Never favourably. Where Cala had large, domed halls of commerce, Cala Bay Town had dingy, stench-filled taverns. Cala's modern schools were Bay Town's cramped prisons. Where on the left bank might be a surgery or hospital, on the right would be a tiny garret in a decaying tenement. Cala Bay Town had a diseased reputation; even from here, it looked deserved.

"We'll have to be very careful when we reach the centre," said Roween, her voice thin. "It can be dangerous..." Conley looked over to her. Roween had turned to face away.

"You've been there before?"

"It's where I went when I left home. Awful place. Awful. 'Specially for anyone like me." She drew her greatcoat tight about her.

"And we're meeting someone called Medreph? So what's he look like?"

Roween gazed steadily towards the bay. "Tall, fair-skinned, ginger hair, he's losing it, about fifty. He's from Elet."

"Elet?" Conley was a little surprised. "What's someone from Elet doing this far East?"

"Collecting books, taking them back with him." Roween shrugged.

"What do barbarians need with books? I thought the Elets were wild? Disorganised savages..."

"Elet is strange. The people are not wild, they are free." Roween's voice faltered. "They have the biggest library in the world. Bigger even than the Academy's. Medreph procures books from Murak, fixes up a caravan every couple of years to take them back." She pressed a finger against her bottom lip.

"This library, it contains sealed books?"

Roween nodded.

Conley paused a moment, phrasing her final question. "And Medreph, he wouldn't also smuggle passengers to Elet with him if he thought their lives were in danger, would he?"

Roween turned her head and looked towards Conley. Her attempts to hold back tears had almost been successful. "On occasion," she said, quietly.

* * *

By the time they reached the outskirts of Cala Bay Town, Roween was no longer visibly upset, but she did look worried. Already, the sky was shadowcast with smoke — dark smoke, fuming perpetually from the foundries and smithies that massed near the river, writhing southwards carried by the magically prevailing winds. Conley could feel despair and fear all about her, the grey-black, soot-ingrained walls of nearby houses howling with the echo of horsehooves passing by.

"These are the poorer areas, Medreph will be in the uptown. It's normally real dangerous here, but they'll peg you as an expert and won't bother us, maybe just chuck a stone or two. Uptown, there'll be magic."

"So what happens if anyone *uses* spells on us?"

Roween clicked her teeth, grimly.

* * *

They'd dismounted, were leading their horses. It was evening, mist-black. The uptown streets were teeming with people, animals, barrows. Customers in pavement cafés chatted, bickered, watched as others spilled out into the throng. Carts were hauled slowly along busy, swarming roads, crowds milled around stalls. Conley had never seen such a vibrant mass of disparate individuals. Everyone was moving, hurrying, calling. In a shadowed passage, a man was arguing with an elderly woman all in velvet. Three sailors were peering through the window of a brightly-lit tavern. She heard the smack of a hand across a boy's head, saw him drop the apple he'd stolen from a fruitmonger's basket. This place was so — so alive! She glanced at Roween, seeking to share her wonder with her.

Roween looked to be in pain, one eye closed, face bracing like she was listening to something so loud it would burst her head. She signalled to Conley, *head for that alley*.

When they reached it, Roween slumped against the wall, breathed out, deeply, relief written into her every motion. She smiled, weakly, at Conley. "There's a lot of magic out there, lot more than there used to be. Maybe one in four have some kind of zip on them. Weapons, cosmetics, shots, even prosthetics. Hot, I can't take much more of this, it's making me ill."

"How far do we have to go?" asked Conley.

"Medreph will be either at his place, or at The Essence, it's a club, he knows the owner." She gulped back air. "Give me a moment, you mind?"

"No, it's clear by me, nobody seems to be paying us much attention." *Maybe people collapse in alleyways all the time hereabouts...* She studied Roween closely. Her face was flushed red, she was sweating heavily, maybe the greatcoat? No, she looked exhausted, like she'd been running up steps, even a little feverish.

"What is this? What's happening? Should I try find a doctor?"

Roween shook her head. "I'll be fine, fine. It's just this smell, the magic, I have to hold back, can't let it get to me out here, too many people..."

"You're saying you have some kind of allergy to magic?"

Again, Roween shook her head, her hair matting to her cheek in wet strands. "No, not an allergy, more of a, a dislike, like you mightn't like the taste of fish, the smell of sulphur. Not all magic, some of it feels good, but the mixture here, it's so sickly..."

"Why can't I feel it? Why isn't it doing this to me?"

"You will feel it, yes; I have to teach you. Not yet, there're other things to learn first." She rose to her feet, unsteadily, still the colour of cherries but breathing better. "I'm good enough, now, we'll make for The Essence. It's maybe fifteen minutes from here, but we have to pass through some territory."

"You said 'territory' like it meant something special."

Roween smiled again, her ironic smile. "It's special to some folk, yes. Most of CBT, it's run by gangs. The ones who deal with the outskirts, they're mean, you cross them and they rip your arm off. The ones who handle the uptown, they're *real* mean, you cross them and they make you rip your *own* arm off. Territory is where one group pulls complete control, you better be real clean if they catch you violating their space."

"In the middle of town? You can't walk from one area to another?"

Roween was straightening up her greatcoat, unconcerned by its conspicuousness in the sticky heat of the evening. "Course you can, just don't look like you mean trouble, that's all."

"So it's safe?" Not that she believed it was.

Roween laughed. "Conley, these are not nice people. Someone with your looks, they'd think nothing of husking you up and slamming you in a brothel for the next fifteen years. Hot, nothing is ever truly *safe* here, despite their efforts! You can keep — " She stopped as a youth turned into the alley, slid between their horses, strode off arrogantly towards the darkness.

"What do you mean, husking me up?"

"Like the shell spell they use in Cala." Roween was still following the youth with her eyes, or one of them, watching until he was out of sight. "Someone makes a focus, you hit them with a shell. Personality, willpower, all gone until it wears off next day. Except before the next day, you have them make a focus again and loose another shell, and so on, long as you like."

"But that's only meant to be used as a replacement to the death penalty, isn't it? More humane, and reversible. Only the courts can order it."

"Maybe in Cala, yes, but here it has other uses. People who've been done that way, they're husks. Do anything anyone tells them, long as it's simple enough they don't need to think. Prettiest are had for sex, but the main use is in factories. Old or injured are used for surgicals or spell tests. None can cast spells themselves, though, wonder why?" She grinned.

Conley was aghast. "That's just deplorable! Don't they have any laws at all here?" She realised immediately the plain stupidity of the remark.

"They have laws, yes, but it's the ones who make the laws that are the ones who make the husks." She grunted. "Come on, we better go."

They stepped back into the bustle of the night. Roween led them down worming streets, lit by the candles and light-sets of the shops and houses that lined the way. There were people everywhere, strange faces with furtive looks, confident sneers. A man walked past wearing a spangled robe straight out of Hease and Eller's. Two others were touching comspheres in a doorway. Where did they all live? What did they all do? Conley could feel the energy of the place, almost tangible, but always tainted, curdled with an omnipresent menace.

Roween paused at a T-junction, under a glitzy blue Magicorp advertising display. "I think it's this way," she pointed, "haven't been here awhile. There's a black-fac we pass, makes unsound cleanser, sells it to others to put in soap, shampoo, detergent, that kind of stuff. Can burn blondes."

"Should we ride? Or would that make us noticeable?"

Roween didn't answer. She set off walking left, then stopped. The blue glare from the hoarding washed her face undead. "Conley, for how long can you hold a gesture? Say a wrist?"

Conley frowned, puzzled. "How *long*? Normally I'm asked how *short*. I don't know, I

guess maybe five, ten minutes for a wrist, it doesn't ache too much with repetition." She stepped aside as a pair of hollow-eyed adolescents pushed past.

"Good, a wrist will look less odd. If we do meet trouble, chances are it'll be toting magic. Best thing if that happens is for you to hit me with a spell, that'll likely kill half of them when their prosthetics revert. Only if I give the word, though — it's not everyone who'll be trying to do us."

Conley wasn't sure. "You mean I run the gestures for a spell now, and hold the penultimate one. Then, if we're jumped, I finish it?" She scoffed. "That'll never work!"

"It will, try it, give the first twenty-two gestures of a 23 light-prime, see if you can hold it. Long as you don't use it on me, it should spark."

Conley deftly completed the necessary movements in under five seconds. Roween still found her speed and fluidity breathtaking. The best prosthetic hands would be pushed to match that rate, and she wasn't even trying any.

Conley held the final wrist while they crossed the road to a dimly-lit office doorway out of the way. "Gestures can't influence a matrix this long, it's been tried, I'm sure. The effect is like clapping out, kills the spell, total." She regarded her hand warily. "Or does it cause a backfire?"

"It's a new technique, but there's no problem, believe me, just — just believe me."

"I guess you'd just snuff any feedback bang anyway, right?" The window next to the door was dark, the office empty.

"It's only going to be a 23, and *that* won't kick me." She smiled. "Go on, then, do it!"

Conley threw the final palm; there was an immediate flash of light. She blinked. A green after-image danced wherever her eyes rested. Should have closed them, had forgotten she didn't have her lenses now.

"We better make a move, people are giving us looks," Roween placed her hand on Conley's back. "Start a pain sequence, short one, if you keep it at the itch level I shouldn't have to make a focus. Second-last is a wrist."

Conley glared at her as she flicked out the gestures. The green spot danced on converging eyes.

* * *

The vigorous, dynamic street-life they'd seen earlier was absent here, at least on the surface. There were far fewer people, but they were better dressed, richer. Roween knew this area, why it was territory. CBT Investments controlled it, a holding company fronting for Magicorp. They provided "secure accommodation" for corporate personnel. The looming apartment blocks were occupied by Magicorp's black-fac people, cold types, high-fliers who spent their days styling spell plans, their nights shotted out. Some employees would prove and manufacture, but the real gold, those who Magicorp cared enough about to pay for this protection, were the designers: risk-takers, the cutting edge of the magic business, here in CBT because its bureaucratic safety and misuse regulations were unenforceable, meant toss. Roween felt uncomfortable. She found herself wondering if, had Conley been here alone, she'd have been able to take one of the production casters, face-to-face. She thought back to Conley's light-prime, smiled to herself. *Hot, she could roast anyone at that speed!*

The narrow street was deserted, and little light filtered down; Conley was probably missing her lenses again. Her right hand was motionless, fixed in the four hundred and thirteenth gesture of an itcher. Roween tried not to look at it, fearing she'd make Conley nervous. *No, it's because I'm edgy myself.* She glanced at her companion. No worry, Conley was

living this, her eyes raking with fire. She had power, concealed, hidden, just waiting to be freed. Roween could sense her bridled excitement, waiting — hoping?

There were four of them, three male, one female, emerging from the shadows as if they were formed from them. All wore a basic leather uniform, add-ons idiosyncratic and personal. *Professionals*. The man who twinkled on the light-set was in charge.

"Nice horses," he said. "They've been ridden a long way."

"We're meeting someone at The Essence," Roween stated. "What do you want?"

"Horses like that, they need money to keep them, you got money?"

"So, what do you want?" repeated Roween.

The leader was about to answer when the woman beside him whispered in his ear. He nodded, smiled, and pointed at Conley.

"The lady here, she got a click-well?"

"Sure, I have a click-well," replied Conley, pulling it out. "You want it? Go fetch!" She hurled it over her shoulder, shelling it against a wall, into the dirt.

Roween was horrified, stared at her in hazed disbelief. Conley's reply was to afford her a glance of such contempt she could only interpret it as *wimp!*

The man looked at his colleagues, hooked his thumbs into his belt. "That wasn't very bright, lady." He nodded in her direction, and the other three walked forward, slowly, self-assured.

"Neither was that!" Conley's right hand whipped up, pointed at Roween, and dropped.

Three of them were on the floor, screaming, moaning, spurting blood. Binders fell from doors either side, half-light returned. She jeered at the remaining assailant. He snatched a comsphere-2 from his jacket pocket, tapped it, nothing happened. Angrily, he threw it at Conley, wide. Turning, he leapt down a side-alley, his running footsteps echoing as he made his escape.

Roween called after Conley as she raced for her click-well. "You damned fool, they only wanted ten clicks to let us through, why'd you have to do that?" Conley ignored her. "You idiot, idiot! You killed three people!" She looked down. Crawling along the rutted cobbles towards her was the woman, eyes missing, right hand gone, agony carved into her face. Roween froze a moment: *life, what have I done?* She twisted, fell to her knees, threw up.

Conley was astride her mount, ashen hair falling about her shoulders. "He'll be back with reinforcements — we ride?"

Roween stood, pulled herself into her saddle. She was shaking — rage, fear, nauseousness. She kicked the horse into motion, leaning forward as it sped off. Conley followed the blur.

* * *

The Essence was brick-built and damp-coursed, one of the few buildings in Cala Bay Town that didn't look to be crumbling to rubble. Conley was surprised by the club's facilities — there was even an ostler to stable the horses. Roween had tipped him a coin, walked to the revolving door. Conley herself hadn't much experience of tipping as a custom, disagreed with it anyhow — was why she'd confronted those tollsters, she told herself. She followed Roween into the lobby; Roween had probably given enough for two...

Inside, The Essence was classy, even by Cala standards. Conley soon found it to her

taste. She felt out of place herself some, but more so for Roween in her oversized coat. She decided Roween was probably used to stares, though, having those skewy eyes of hers. At the moment, she was talking to a thin-faced man at the desk. He was looking through a large, flat book, running his finger down the left side of the page. Roween pointed at an entry. He stopped, consulted a panel to one side, and tapped at it. Roween slid him something, probably more money, and returned to Conley.

"Medreph is in his room, I've had the receptionist call him."

"What's he got there, a bank of comspheres? Must have cost a megaclick..."

"Not quite, those are rejects from a black factory, one that specialises in lookalikes, even engraves the Porett logo on the base. They had some problem upgrading to a comsphere-2, the new sort with the priority lights on calls and stuff. These glow, but don't fade out, you can't see who you're talking to. Manager got them as a job lot."

"Roween! So it is you!" A man's voice, his accent unusual to Conley's ears.

The tall, slightly overweight figure descending the staircase was grinning widely. Roween span round, her face a sudden picture of unqualified joy. She'd reached Medreph before he'd taken another two steps, hugging him, laughing, like a small girl greeting her grandfather. Conley supposed that perhaps, in a way, the simile wasn't far from the truth.

"Medreph, you have to come and meet my friend." Roween was alive with excitement, her guilt and anger temporarily forgotten. She walked coyly to Conley, leading Medreph by the wrist. "Medreph, meet Dr Conley of Malith."

Conley shook his other hand. "Pleased to meet you," she said. It seemed appropriate.

Medreph smiled, kissed her middle finger, and then, without changing his expression, said, "Ro, I don't *have* to do *anything*."

* * *

Conley was bored. Medreph had taken 'Ro' up to his room, so she was left on her own in the lobby. Private conversations, not for an outsider... What was it Roween had come all this way for, anyway? A fat, balding bookbuyer — what did he know?

She wandered around. Nice place, well fitted out — maybe she should go for a stroll in the grounds? She sighed. Maybe she should stay where she wouldn't have to kill anyone. Roween was right, she had been stupid. Too keyed up. The regret was beginning to gnaw her. She'd deliberately provoked four people just so she could blow them away. How could she have *done* that? She became aware that she'd drifted into the bar, and remembered the click-well in her pocket. No use to her with 'Ro' around, she may as well spend some of it while she had the chance.

There was a good selection of shots on view. Conley went for the Evergreen Lites, not as strong as her old brand, but well able to happy her up, take her mind off things. The barman handed her a pack of six, enough for a couple of days, taken singly; only the foolish or the lost doubled them up. She passed him her click-well. The till's was chained to the underside of the bar; he pulled it out, and locked the pointed, conical end of hers into the funnel end of his. Conley always found that mildly erotic at times like this, though she'd seen the action thousands of times. He turned ... *click, click, click, click, click, click, click*. Only seven clicks for a pack of happies? Half the price of the ones in Cala. She began to doubt the authenticity of the MedSpell insignia stamped on the packet side.

Click-well and happy shots in hand, Conley left the barstool and looked around the room. There were only a few people, mostly paired up, some alone with a drink or their own shots. She chose the seat furthest from the door, no table, room to sprawl. The pack flipped open in her hand, a motion still easily familiar even after all this time. A tear formed in each

eye. Three people, bleeding to death, her fault, and she'd *enjoyed* it. What kind of monster *was* she? She pulled out a shot. Why did she get that way? How come she couldn't control it, didn't realise she was like it? Why did it have to happen again? A tear rolled. She slapped the shot to her temple.

Bliss!

* * *

"How many has she used?" asked a voice.

"There are two left in the packet," answered another. That sounded like her friend, Roween. She opened her eyes, dreamily. She was so peaceful, so content, everything was just perfect. The palace was decorated pastel shades of pink and blue and lemon, and she could smell fresh-cut flowers. She was so *happy*.

"If she wants to get that way, it's her own affair."

"I can't leave her like this, she's almost vacant."

"Let me have a look at those shots."

Another wave of euphoria washed over. She drank it, arching her back, stretching, letting it flow through every nerve. It felt so good, so good, was she naked? She didn't care.

"They look genuine to me, you think she'd fix four at once?"

"I don't know, I don't know why she did it, oh life, what's that? This is her second packet!"

Second packet? She didn't remember, she didn't remember anything, why remember when you have rapture surging through your veins? What memories could outshine such total joy? Who was the girl with the crossy eyes?

"I've seen people get shot up like this before; ten at once, it's bad. They can stay that way, permanently. Mindless with ecstasy, soulless."

"Well help me move her to your room. Hot, we can't afford that to happen, too much depends on her, our plans..."

"Your plans, not mine. If she wants to go that way, let her."

"She doesn't, I mean, she can't, this isn't deliberate, oh please no, she's fading..."

Floating, floating in a cool fire of delight, caressing her, sensuously, licking her body with tongues of tingling flame. This was so delicious, satisfying, balmy...

"For my sake, Medreph, please, she's my friend, I can't watch her burn away like this."

"You'd do it here? Yes, yes, I believe you would... Very well, Ro, for you."

Hands gripped her.

There was a place, in her mind, did it exist? It sang to her. Her pleasure was everywhere, all about her now, enfolding her, it was everything. She heard voices, were those words? They had no meaning. Meaningless in her secret world, her secret self. Alone, safe. Happiness, blissful happiness...

"Take the click-well, the comsphere, anything else in here that's zipped."

"What will you use for a trigger? Oh an Evergreen, of course! Apt."

"Hold tight, Conley, this is going to hurt..."

Loss!

All gone, everything, fallen away, pity me, what did I do? Emptiness, no, no, please, I want it back... I couldn't have done it, not to her...

* * *

Roween held Conley's head against her breast, gently rocking as she listened to the uncontrollable sobs. Medreph stayed outside; no Elet would want to witness this. Conley was in torment, total, all-encompassing, suffering the misery of memory. She wept, repeating but one word over and over in her blabberings: "Mother".

Chapter 5

Unlike most Svalans, Lord Sennary of Castle Whiting was tall. His height was due to his mother, an expatriate Davian Countess, and although it had often proved its value in the course of his work, occasionally he did find it awkward.

Right now was such a time: he was stooping his way down the narrow, low-beamed corridors of the Academy of Magical Sciences' main building, his sun-ashed hair periodically stroking the wizened spans. He'd checked his sword in on arrival, but it hardly mattered — there wasn't even the room to draw it, let alone use it. Besides, as the receptionist had pointed out, "Nobody's going to bother anyone with muscles like *those...*"

He reached a wider space, an atrium, half-lit through gloomy glass framed high in a vaulted ceiling; another legacy from the days when the entire block had comprised a monastery. He unhunched his shoulders, strolled across to Ansle's shadowy door; he knocked, opened it immediately, entered.

The chancellor was sitting at his desk, writing. Sennary approached, tsking as his scelero-quilted sleeve brushed against the elderly blackboard, picked up a blush of chalk.

"Ah, Lord Sennary," Ansle rushed, looking up, his eyes briefly flicking to the closed door. "I trust your journey was not tiresome?" The last word was louder than the rest.

"No, not tiresome," he dusted his arm, "merely unnecessary. Summoning me all this way... It'll be hard catching up with Conley again."

"Not *impossible*, though..." He smiled, falsely. "I'm sorry that I had to ask you to return, all the same, but I find it necessary that we discuss your new instructions privately."

"Comspheres are secure if you call direct, why not use Chewt's? It's sufficed up to now." He pulled up a chair, seated himself to face Ansle.

"Secure?" A studied pause. "Recently, as an experiment, I arranged by mail for a certain Northic logging company — a director of which had need of gold — to contact a former colleague of mine now a consultant for East/Trad. Using my supplied script, they discussed at length over comspheres the drawing up of a substantial contract for grain enhancers — a bogus one, but persuasive enough for eavesdroppers. A week later, a representative of Porett Technologies' agricultural division sent a communication to the Northic loggers offering terms that significantly undercut those of East/Trad. Porett Technologies, I need hardly point out, manufactures comspheres."

Sennary reached into his pocket, shook his head. "More likely a listening plate hidden in East/Trad's sales office..." He produced his own comsphere-2, tapped it against Ansle's. "Call me on that next time you want to talk — if, of course, you've beaten your paranoia by then."

Ansle waved his hand, dismissive. "If I *am* cautious, Sennary, it's a trait I assuredly share with you. For instance, there can be few soldiers of fortune other than yourself who have taken out *life* insurance! The very *idea* is ridiculous — little wonder the premiums are so outrageous!"

A sigh. "I merely wish to ensure that my farm will have a solid future, whatever might happen to me personally. Where's the nonsense in that?" He put away the com-2.

"Are you *really* concerned that your brothers would be unable to run it at a profit if you died? They seem to manage it well enough on their own at present..."

Sennary lowered his head, looked at him askance. "If *I* were to die, the farm would lose business."

Ansle smirked. "Of *course*, now I understand! *You're* the one with all the earning power, aren't you? Courtesy of your father's archaic title — it's passed through the eldest child only, I presume?" He laughed. "Yes... Such a shame he couldn't leave you any money, though; still,

that's what comes of backing the wrong side in a civil war."

Sennary glared. "Assuming that you didn't invite me here simply to bait me with your spies' knowledge of my family history, might I suggest we start the debriefing?"

"It was *your* digression, Sennary..." He leaned back in his chair. "So, when you arrived at the inn, did you discover my daughter's ring?"

The glare left, reformed as a frown. "No, no I didn't, although I did have my men search. I don't believe she mislaid it anyway, and I doubt anyone could have stolen it; from what I saw, that's not why we lost the tag..."

Anslé flinched. "And what exactly *did* you see?"

He shrugged. "These old inns, they have primitive mechanical pumps which get to stiffen up. Takes a very strong arm to pull them. Didn't worry *this* innkeeper, though, not when he had a double-strength prosthetic..."

"Anything else?" voice steady.

"A shift-leader, been on wakers for the previous five days, handling some kind of flooding emergency. They say the sleep catches up with you when the wakers wear off."

He slumped a little. "Well, I suppose I must thank you for not mentioning any of this to Chewt; am I to infer that you kept it to yourself because you expected somehow to gain from it?"

Sennary groaned. "Anslé, when someone damn-near bleaches a wayside tavern clean of magic, you don't go telling people about it when she might still be in the vicinity. Who knows what else she's capable of?" He smiled, picked at some dead skin on the heel of his hand. "I had wondered why you hired *me* for this one..."

"I use tools appropriate for the job, that's all." He felt a scowl, relaxed it a little. "Well then, what do you think it is the girl uses? A device of some kind? A spell?"

"You say 'girl', and yet she can't be more than half a dozen years my junior — if that. Why — "

"She's a girl to someone *my* age..." He waited. "So? Spell or artefact?"

Sennary clacked his front teeth, thought. "The sensible assumption is that it's a spell; the locals say they saw her making a focus just before it happened. Conley may have been gesturing too, her back was to them."

"Good: I too think it's a spell. This is all very interesting. Have you told anyone else?"

He grinned, wagged a finger. "Something I'm always conscious of in this line of work is the need for personal security. Sometimes, you see, I stumble across things that other people don't want anyone to know, and if they thought that by killing me they could reassure secrecy..."

"Your thoroughness is admirable. Well from here onwards, your mission will require that you travel alone; you may find yourself well away from anyone with whom you might feel inclined to burden your discoveries, and if my suspicions concerning comspheres are correct then you ought not to risk that medium either." He leaned back again, clasped his hands behind his head. "Would such conditions *bother* you?"

Sennary raised a shoulder, drooped it. "Not particularly, no. My men need a holiday in any case; they'll welcome their being left behind in Cala for a while. Of course, were they to learn that anything questionable had suddenly befallen me, they might not remain *quite* so considerate..."

"You do have a *yen* for insurance..." A smile, brief. "Well, I guarantee that your men will have no worries."

"Then neither will you..." He moved to rest his hand on his sword, had to pocket it

instead. "So, what's this all about?"

Ansle sat up straight, paused, strummed on the desk. "Very well. What I am about to disclose to you is not to be repeated. You must tell *no-one* without my authority, understand?"

"Unless it's information I would have found out anyway."

"It isn't." He considered, looked at his fingernails. "You've indicated already that you *do* know precisely who it was my daughter met..."

Sennary nodded. "I recognised the injuries: one of the men I took to the library that night wore a proxy leg; another had an augmented pizzle; virtually everyone had dental fixes for broken teeth."

"Then it's as I expected: you know her identity. But what you *don't* know is why my daughter was *hunting* her."

He tapped his chin. "She found out about the spell?"

Ansle smiled. "In part. Conley is a very insecure young woman, Lord Sennary. She has always felt the need to substantiate her reputation — to me, yes, but more importantly to *herself*."

"Well she's surely succeeded there, hasn't she?" His brow was trenched in puzzlement. "Her work on proving — it was the greatest breakthrough in spell technology of the past twenty years. There can be no doubt in *anyone's* mind, let alone hers, that she's a phenomenally gifted mage."

"One would think so, indeed, but *she* believes that she needs to *build* on her success, in order to demonstrate that she's not a one-idea wonder. To that end, she fixed upon seeking out Roween Sage; undoubtedly, she thinks she can use antimagic as a basis for new research."

"And Roween will willingly show her the gestures?"

"My plans rather hinge on the assumption that you can reach them both *before* that happens: I want you to bring Roween back here as soon as is workably possible."

"Not Conley?"

Ansle wafted with his hand, the movement shimmying his gown. "Conley can do what she pleases. Now that she's found Roween, the important thing to ensure is that the girl and her spell are contained."

Sennary looked down at him, darkly. "You're telling me that the whole point of my trailing Conley was in order to locate Roween?"

"I should have *thought* that was obvious," disdainful.

"Only if you couldn't have found her yourself. Yet you have spies, you have contacts, whereas Conley..."

He shuffled in his chair, glanced away from Sennary's eyes. "Roween apparently went abroad. She must have recently returned, and my daughter — "

"No, I think she *let* herself be found — as, in fact, you foresaw she would. She *wanted* Conley to make contact! Now why would that be?"

"You're becoming irritating, Sennary," snapped. "The reasons are no concern of yours: all *you* need to know is that I want the girl Sage back here before she tells *a soul* anything of worth."

"*Back* here? So she's been here before, then?"

"It's just a phrase..." Annoyance.

"A phrase you've used twice in the past five minutes. There's too much about this you're not telling me..."

"Make a focus."

"What?"

"A focus, so I can put a classify on you."

"I *know* what you said! Listen, let's get this open right now: I don't make a focus for *anyone*, least of all a conniver like you. If *you* want to talk trust, *you* take the risk!"

"Perhaps I will, Lord Sennary." He dropped his hand below the desk. "However, you'll need to furnish me with more cause than you have up until now if — arhh!"

Sennary had sprung forward, grabbed the chancellor's forearm, brought it crashing upwards onto the wood. "What was *that* going to be? Some kind of air-spoiler? You wearing nasal filts?"

"I, I don't know what — let go of my arm! It was only a tag!"

"A tag'," Sennary mimicked, "be real!" His face was total contempt. "Do you think maybe a pulped hand is an appropriate response?" He bashed it hard on the underside of the desk. "No more magicking until it's sawn off and prossed back?" He slipped his grip to Ansle's wrist, squeezed tight.

"For love, you'll crack the bones!"

"That's right, I will."

"There's a binder on the door, you won't ... get ... out." He was trying to prise open Sennary's fingers with his other hand, failing.

"You think I can't kick my way through paltry oak planking?" He graunched the carpals together. "Look, I really don't *like* having to do this, but if my mere suspecting that you're hiding something is enough to warrant my death, I do rather think I'm justified..."

"Alright, I'll tell you! Just — "

Sennary loosened the hold, enough to stay the pain. "Well then? What else is it about Roween?"

He wavered, glanced at the powerful hand still entombing his wrist, swallowed. "*She* did all the work on spell proving, not Conley."

For a heartbeat, nothing.

Sennary's gaze was resolute, puncturing. He flickered it a little, then dropped it, opened his grip.

Ansle slipped back his hand with a yelp, rubbed it, held it to his chest. "You ape!" The words were trembled, dismay overriding anger.

"Your daughter knew of this?"

"I'll have your *skin*!" His wrist white, began flooding red.

"We both know you won't, so why the pretence? Now are you going to tell me the rest or not?"

"I'll," teeth tight together, "I'll have to reconstruct my plans. Come back this time tomorrow — no, the day after." He flexed his fist, his wrist, as he nursed it, spoke the word to unbind the door.

Sennary stepped back, straightened his tunic. "I don't understand you, Ansle. I *told* you what would happen if you did away with me, that my men would come after you, and yet you still tried. Sometimes, I wonder how you ever got to be head of this place..."

"All you need worry about is that I did. Now go."

Sennary nodded, pointed to Ansle's hand. "Call a medic if it still hurts in ten minutes." He turned, ambled out.

Chapter 6

"My life is the Message, Son of Lon and Lona," recited the supplicant.

"The Message is my life," answered the Messenger. "Be arisen, Giquis Spellworker. Tell me your news."

"Messenger," said Giquis, struggling to his feet, his eyes not straying from the marbled floor, "we have word from a follower of the Message in Murak. Their king has commissioned a report to assess the power hierarchy in Akrea and Estavia. No expense is to be spared, the document must be prepared as quickly as possible."

"Instruct this follower to obtain a copy. It is the will of the Messenger."

"It will be done." Giquis bowed low, his arms held wide apart. The Messenger watched the old man, distantly.

"Akrea and Estavia are democracies," the Messenger noted, his reedy voice almost lost in the huge chambers. "They have a rigid order to their government. A small number of individuals, selected by the populace, head a vast structure that manages the whole country. King Justan will think that by replacing the roots of the tree, he can command the branches." He clenched his fist, but his falsetto tone remained unaltered. "However, we, by enlightening the branches ... will regain the roots."

Giquis straightened again, although his head remained bowed. "Messenger, the armies of Akrea and Estavia are powerful. If the Muraki king gains them quickly and intact, he will use them against us before we can complete their subversion."

The Messenger absently stroked the toroidal medallion about his neck. "The religion of Estavia is weak, a handful of benign personalities. Akrea's is similar: only their god Tah makes any pretence at addressing life's ... evils. It will be easy to absorb their pantheons into that of The Message."

"But Messenger, it may be too late. Their armies will fall upon us as soon as Justan assumes control."

"There is truth in what you say, Giquis. These democracies have large forces because they ... are too stable. They fear that once their armies are defeated, the state can be taken whole, and run using existing chains of command. They do not see that the reverse is also true: King Justan will simply use cursed magic to remove the leaders, then impose his own governors and generals. He will defeat the state to control the armed forces. Perhaps he will be surprised if he attempts the same ... on the Messenger." He gave a short, shrill laugh. It echoed from the whitewashed walls.

"Our plans for Estavia and Akrea are already executing, Messenger. We have many people in place, and the number converting to The Message grows daily. Lying between our legions and the democracies are but a handful of Purasans; Justan and his horde must first face Voths and Davians. We should reach Akrea before he."

The Messenger wagged a finger at his adviser, as if unaware that it could barely be seen. "Do not underestimate the Purasans, Giquis, nor overestimate the Davians. The Voths of the East will fall within days; they are a poor people with no stomach for fighting. The Davians are strong, but have a weak king, Breska; his sister Mitya is ... sympathetic to King Justan. If King Justan is gathering intelligence for an assault on Akrea, his plans for Davian lands will be well ... advanced."

Of all the Messenger's bewildering affectations, it was the ill-placed pauses in his speech that annoyed Giquis the most. Sometimes, he was grateful that protocol did not permit him to look the demigod in the eye; it would mean death were his irritation to show.

"The Purasans are a proud people," the Messenger continued, "and their faith is hard to assimilate into The Message. They have many free spirits, and a cycle of well-developed myths

and ... sagas. It may take our armies longer to subdue them than we ... would wish."

"We will need the battalions of Akrea and Estavia with us if we are swiftly to defeat Justan's sorcery, Messenger. It is true, The Message has a certain inviting attraction to the magic-oriented mind, but we have little time to organise any large-scale conversion. If Justan takes the democracies without using force of arms, we will be unable to prevent their use against us. We must secure them before he can strike."

"You speak wise words, Giquis. It is settled, then. Pass word to our followers in Estavia and Akrea: they are to begin. Three months from now, the new governments will welcome our troops with showers ... of carnations." He rose from his throne, his voice smiling serenely.

Giquis bowed to leave. The Son of Lon and Lona stopped, as if perplexed, then pointed, forcefully, towards the unguarded door. "Do it, Giquis," he ordered, "it is the will ... of the Messenger."

Chapter 7

"You brought none of your men?" Ansle actually looked surprised.

Sennary raised an eyebrow. "Some mercenary *I'd* be if I couldn't take an unarmed mage!" He closed the door.

"But I *might* have arranged assistance..."

"You'd certainly have died well before me, if you'd tried!" He laughed, untuned the tension. "Look, Ansle, we're both professional enough to appreciate why you did what you did, and why I did what I did. No sense either of us grudging up about it, it's inconvenient and impractical."

"I concluded the same myself: the matter is now closed. Please be seated." He fluttered his overtly-bandaged hand, unspecific, waited for Sennary to oblige.

"So you'll tell me the rest, then." He sat; the chair was as he'd left it.

Ansle leaned back, interlocked his fingers. "Although I would much rather that you didn't know *any* of this at all, nevertheless, given that you are aware of the basics, I have concluded that it might help you in your *revised* task were you to be apprised fully."

"I just hope it's worth more than the extra days they've gained..."

"Days that wouldn't have been lost at all if you hadn't been so unprofessionally inquisitive... Now I've a lot to say, so I'll begin forthwith." He pursed his lips. "When last we met, somewhat under pressure I told you that this Roween girl had done *all* the work on proving, implying that my daughter had done none at all. Perhaps it would make matters clearer if I rephrased that remark: Conley *did* do everything herself, but it had already been accomplished by Roween some time beforehand."

"I see — Conley reproduced the work independently. But she had *some* knowledge of its origins?"

He shook his head. "None, at the time — I was very subtle. During her tutorials, I led her in certain perspicacious directions; I praised her when she made the right conceptual moves, suggested she abandon occasional tempting but inappropriate lines of reasoning, and generally made sure that she reached the desired conclusions without her ever having the slightest inkling that success was predetermined."

"So was any of the length formulation stuff your idea?"

Ansle's expression was one of incredulity. "Good *heavens* no — if any of it had been *mine* then I'd have published it myself. I assigned it to *Conley* because *that way* I could make its full details known without any danger of personal disgrace were its true heritage uncovered."

Sennary was grim.

"Every last shred of theory — apart from the light-prime component, which *was* Conley's own — came from our little friend with eyes askew, Roween Sage."

He snorted. "Fine. You snicked up your own daughter to 'invent' a revolutionary proof technique which, in reality, you had stolen."

"Yes," Ansle confirmed, calm.

He folded his arms. "I don't know why that bewilders me; I've been aware for some time that you have a huge hole where everyone else has morals..." He waited; the chancellor didn't react. "And Roween really did do it all herself? She didn't dig it out of some old book?"

Ansle smiled, patronising. "Ah, it seems that you have made the same mistake *now* as, initially, did I." He tilted back his head, regarded the beamed ceiling. "She came to my office one day, showed me her work, explained it, and asked to be admitted as a student to the

Academy. She was only a librarian's daughter; she had neither rank nor money, and, therefore, was completely unacceptable. I naturally supposed — as have you just now — that she *herself* had taken from some third party what she was claiming were her ideas."

"I didn't say *I* thought — "

He continued, inflexible. "I dismissed her, but retained the thesis, saying that I would read it when time permitted; in fact, I intended to keep it as evidence of her plagiarism for such a date as I discovered its true architect. Even a superficial read, however, demonstrated to me that there was clear merit in what was written. I scrutinised it further, and its arguments grew more and more plausible; eventually, I determined to put its contentions to the test — and at some personal risk, I might add, given what would have happened were Roween's assertions fallacious. Fortunately, her claims held true: I successfully cast for the first time a previously-unprovable magnet repolariser that I had written in my own undergraduate days. Well, at that point it became obvious to me that all this was *highly* innovatory, and would, literally, *transform* the way we verified spells. It would greatly increase the lengths for which proofs would be available, and thereby, inevitably, increase the power of those aware of its precepts."

"Yet you still didn't accept it was hers?"

He inflated his cheeks, blew. "It was hard for me to imagine *anyone* who could have produced it. I'm familiar with the research themes of all the great magicians, but no-one has even *touched* on this area for over a decade; it was considered a dead-end. Indeed, few people would have been capable of making the eventual findings even if they *had* pursued it. It wasn't anything that might have grown readily as a side-shoot from existing work; I knew, therefore, that the author had to be a highly gifted individual working alone. As to who that might have *been*, though..."

"But surely, to undertake that level of study requires access to a library? You should have realised — "

"That *seems* obvious now," sharp, cut in, "but *at the time* it was not immediately apparent, I do assure you."

"So why didn't you simply profess it as your own? No-one would have believed Roween had she challenged you." His eyes were narrowed.

"There was still the *possibility* that she'd procured it from another source, or could have proven in a court somehow that it *was* hers. No: better that I act indirectly."

"Did you consider keeping it wrapped, then — just using its conclusions to develop spells no-one else could have attempted?"

"Well..." He wrinkled his nose. "I *was* concerned that Roween might have attempted to sell her theories to someone in the commercial sector, and then *they'd* have garnered the first-use rewards. I judged it preferable to publish it all openly, for the benefit of everyone, rather than put such power into the custody of any single company. I am, after all, an *academic* at heart..."

"I follow: you chose to promote the Academy's repute, increase your sway like that. Makes sense." He sounded almost complimentary. "But while you were nurturing Conley's research, Roween could still have gone public at — " He smiled, nodded. "That's when you first engaged me."

"Correct. I *had* hoped that you would have been able to arrest her cleanly at the library, but sadly neither of us knew then of her most recent technological advance... However, at least you *did* succeed in causing her to flee the country, which gave me the time I needed to till my daughter."

"What would you have done if I *had* detained her?"

Silence.

He closed his eyes. "That's what I figured," resigned. "Ho hum."

"Well!" Ansle clapped. "You know the rest."

Sennary laid an elbow on the desk, fingers stroking a bunch of papers. "Yes, I know it — although I defer judgement on the truth of what you've just told me *preceded* it. I don't doubt that you really are cold-hearted enough to engineer your own daughter's actions in that manner, but I'm as yet unsatisfied by your comparative altruism in not keeping the information to yourself..."

"And my assertion that our little freak is an intellectual?"

He opened his mouth wide, faltered a little. "I hadn't thought of her *that* way before..." The '*that*' was spat.

"It's of slender consequence. So! Now, perhaps, it is time for me to explain how this history can *aid* you." He scratched the side of his nose, frowned at his desk. "As I commented yesterday — "

"No, hold a moment. I still don't know why Roween allowed Conley to find her."

"Revenge — isn't it obvious? Now if you'll *just* grant me leave to continue..." He cleared his throat. "Yesterday, I commented that my daughter is an insecure young woman. However, she is *not* stupid. She realises *now* that perhaps she was spoon-fed just a little *too* much while studying for her dissertation, and she has therefore concluded that *I*, in fact, am the true architect of 'her' theories. Naturally, I have denied it, but she is convinced nonetheless. She never really settled in well at Porett Technologies — she felt she was there under false pretences. I understand also that she was the subject of pernicious gossip among her peers concerning the very fact that she had thought her chosen subject a worthwhile topic for research at all. This all eroded her self-belief, until eventually she sought an opportunity to prove — to *herself* — that she really did deserve her formidable reputation as a theoretician."

"Yes, yes, so somehow she found out about this spell of Roween's, and decided to tackle her. But she won't simply copy the sequence, that wouldn't replenish her self-esteem any."

"That's true." He coiled a lock of beard round a finger. "What I *guess* she's planning to do is to take the crude, basic version of Roween's spell, refine it into a short segment, and splice the result into other spells. She really *does* have a gift for doing that, and she can perform quite complex proofs in her head. I almost feel guilty about selecting her as my vehicle for demonstrating Roween's techniques to a wider audience; Conley could probably have turned in an excellent thesis of her own."

"We'll never know, though, will we?" Sennary allowed a little venom to his tone.

Ignored. "Her new goals are noble, yes — and a portable segment that could be patched into spells to cancel others, or self-cancel, would be very useful, perhaps *itself* well deserving of a doctorate. I think she may be harbouring the further intention, however, of attempting the formal deduction, from such a cut-down magic-negating segment, of a second, inverse sequence, which would achieve the precise opposite: making spells' effects pertain forever. Their present life-span *is* usually rather limited."

Sennary stared out of the window. "Indefinitely long spells..." He paused, absorbing the suggestion. "If she *could* deliver, it would be a stupendous advance!" His eyes flashed back to Ansle. "You think she can?"

"Unhindered, yes, I do, but *you're* going to stop her."

He raised his cheeks slightly. "And why's that?"

"Because I'm paying you to do so."

"Not a good enough reason," jaw forward.

"On the contrary, it is *perfectly* sufficient. You will relocate Conley and Roween, establish whether Conley knows the basic antimagic spell, and, if so, persuade her to return here. You are then to kill Roween."

He gaped. "*Kill* her? Me? I'm a mercenary, not an assassin — I kill soldiers, not civilians!" He shook his head, emphatic. "Forget it. I'll bring her in for you, but I won't be her murderer."

"All the full-time *assassins* I can call on use magic as their weapon. Can you imagine how far they would get against someone who can switch that magic off, just like that?" He snapped his fingers.

"Kenrith is no mage: he uses steel to — "

"Kenrith is just the name we give to what is now precious more than a collection of prosthetics. There's very little of the original Kenrith left. If I sent *him* at Roween, they'd have to mop — "

Sennary raised his hand. "Spare me your imagery... So I'm the nearest thing to an assassin available. Great. But suppose Conley doesn't *want* to come back?"

"Oh she *will*, Sennary; that's the whole *reason* that I've told you of Roween's involvement in her life. Without knowledge of this earlier saga, it's very unlikely that you could ever coax Conley to return willingly; *physically* forcing her would be madness, too — her unbounded rage would act as an immutable gag, she'd tell me nothing. That's why my *initial* plan called for the recovery of Roween — I could make *her* talk, I'm sure, though it would take several months to find out everything. Now, however, you *do* have the means to bring back Conley in an amenable mood, and Roween's capture is therefore no longer a necessity. Furthermore, Conley is likelier than I to extract a complete and truthful version of the details that I require, and, what's more, to do so comparatively quickly — Roween *wants* to speak to her, remember."

"And if you have Roween offed once she's outed the gestures, that also ends all chance that she could murk you as the thief of her proof theories..." He clicked his tongue. "So how do you suggest I work on Conley?"

Anslé affected his smuggest voice. "Conley knows that Roween has a skill with counter-magic, but she hasn't the slightest clue that it was also Roween who first formulated the foundations of what became her thesis. If she *won't* return at your behest, you merely have to inform her who *really* deserves the accolades for her work, that it's the *same* person she's been using as the inspiration for her new ideas, and she'll come to pieces. She'll envisage the whole cycle repeating itself, and she'll decide to find some other way to redeem her self-confidence. I *know* her: once she accepts that her second world-shattering idea has the same root as her first world-shattering idea, she'll be too proud, too principled, to continue with *any* of it. *You* merely have to follow her until you're certain that she's learned the necessary gestures from Roween, then tell her all of this and she'll *want* to come home."

Sennary pulled an earlobe, thoughtful. "If she's as emotionally fragile as you say, might this not make her a little unstable? I don't want to have to deal with a magic-wielding crazy woman."

Anslé picked up a pack from the desk, tossed him it. He caught it one-handed, read the label: 'Evergreen Deeps'.

Chapter 8

When Conley awoke, she didn't recognise the room. Sunlight was angling through a gap in the shutters, falling on the end of her neat, little bed. Her clothes were folded in a tidy pile on a chair over to the right, beside the small fireplace. A short distance to the left was the door, old, wooden, deeply varnished. She was alone. She was also very, very hungry.

On her left arm was a small patch of linen, stuck there with some kind of gum. She peeled it off and examined it. Looked like a happy shot, only bigger, and with no markings. She threw it into the fireplace. Where was she? Surely not CBT, the sun would never be this bright in that hole. How long had she been asleep? She was ravenous.

She swung herself out of bed, picked up her clothes. They'd been washed, ironed, aired. That sticker on her arm must have been some kind of black-fac sleep shot, something to keep her out for a few days. Sleep shots weren't perfected yet, leastwise no reputable company sold them. She wondered what the side-effects of this particular illicit brand might be.

Dressed, she wandered to the window and peered between the shutters. Her room overlooked a small courtyard from one floor up. Geese chased a young goat into a stable, cats lazed on an elderly, decrepit, upturned cart. It was around mid-day. There was no-one about. *Lunchtime?* Another pang reminded her of the emptiness in her stomach. She'd do her hair and face later. Strange, she didn't feel thirsty.

She walked to the door, turned the handle. *Open.* She wasn't a prisoner, then. Downstairs, she could hear voices. Should she stay here in her room, or go down and find what all this was about? A rumble in her belly made the decision for her.

The steps were old, well-maintained, but creaky. She heard the voices stop a moment, then start up again. A chair scraped back from beneath a table. She descended into a cheery, country kitchen. Pots and pans and used plates were stacked by a sink, but her attention was seized by a batch of newly-baked bread rolls, cooling by the window. The smell was deliriously enticing. Eagerly, she picked one up, and tore off a chunk with her teeth. *Mmm*, warm, tasty, so real. She closed her eyes, inhaled deeply.

The door behind her opened; she span round, guiltily. Roween was standing there, beaming a smile. "Conley! How do you feel?"

Hastily, Conley swallowed her mouthful of bread. "Hungry," she announced, and took another.

Roween chuckled. "Well, eat as much as you like — you're the one paying for it!" She walked over, placed her hand on Conley's shoulder. "Seriously, though, are you alright?"

"I feel fine," she answered, still chewing. "Where and what is this place?"

"It's a farmhouse Medreph recommended. Quiet, about two days' ride from Cala Bay Town following the White River. They take in occasional guests to make a few extra clicks."

"Is Medreph here?" She picked up another roll; they tasted so amazingly good!

"No, he has some last-minute things to do in Cala Bay Town, then he's leaving for Elet across the wilderness."

She paused between chews. "The wilderness? That's going to be tough — I've heard stories, there are people-eaters in there. I don't believe that stuff about having snakes for fingers, but still, I'm not sure that *personally* I don't prefer the idea of walking through a war..."

"He's made the trip before, but yes, it's dangerous. He doesn't have much choice this time, though, not if he's taking wagons. At least the wilderness route is the quicker, anyway. Do you want butter on that bread, or is it fine as it is?" She pushed the dish; Conley eagerly cut a dollop, pasted it into a roll to melt.

"Who was that you were talking with just now?"

"Ah, that's the farmer and his family, we'd just finished lunch. Want to meet them?"

"How long have we been here?"

Roween blushed, turned her head. Conley couldn't tell whether she was still looking at her or staring out of the window at the geese. "About ten days."

Her eyes widened. "Ten *days*? And two days to get here? I've been asleep almost a fortnight!"

"And another day in CBT. Medreph had to sedate you, you were coming apart. He got his hands on some prototype sleep shots a black-fac spits for MedSpell, they're safe but you can't tell how long they'll last."

"Two weeks, no wonder I'm so hungry!" *And so stiff, sore, skinny...*

"We've been funnelling soup and water into you every day, waiting for it to wear off. I thought we'd better leave Bay Town and go someplace it was safe until you awoke. We could have taken the shot off, course, but we figured the longer you slept, the better your chances of waking up sane."

"If I ever was." Down went the last of her buttered roll. "So, I suppose I should go and meet our hosts. But afterwards, we must talk..."

* * *

Eltreth was the farmer, Luseen his wife. The children all had names, but wouldn't stay still enough for Conley to identify which was which when Luseen pointed them out. They were a merry family, laughing, smiling, different from the people Conley was used to; perhaps that's why she felt a little awkward in their presence. Their openness, honesty and friendliness were a revelation, but in a way she preferred the reservedness more usually found in the sort of wayside accommodation she chose to occupy.

Roween got on with them very well, but then she was more their level. She played continually with the youngest child while Conley listened as attentively as she could to riveting conversation about cattle diseases, the price of feed, Winter floods, drunk farm-hands, over-charging blacksmiths and preparations for market. Although she did have one gossip session with Luseen concerning the merits of 'what people are wearing in Cala this Summer', she nevertheless felt that, on the whole, she'd rather have remained asleep.

Wistfully, Roween allowed the youngster to run off and join his brothers and sisters. She winked, Conley assumed it was at her and not the wall, apologised for taking up so much of the family's time, but she and Conley would go upstairs now out of the way. Naturally, Eltreth and Luseen thought her sincere. *What a nice young woman.*

* * *

Conley sat on the edge of the bed, Roween was slumped in the chair, anxious, thinking. Conley was going to have to face things eventually. *Best now, get it over with before she regresses.* "So why did you do it, Con?"

Conley lay back on the bed. "Do what? Murder three hoods or try to murder myself?"

"Murder your mother."

Conley lay still, stared at the ceiling. Slowly, she brought up her arm, rubbed the temple

where she'd slapped all the happies. She closed her eyes.

Roween was panicking inside. It had just slipped out, so easily, she couldn't help it. She'd had it all planned, she'd push Conley just a little at a time, try talk about her childhood, bring in her mother, manoeuvre her into confessing, try find out why she'd done it. *Simple*. But first answer Conley gives, and she can't resist blurting a dumb smart reply. *Hot, she's awful quiet now*.

"Roween," asked Conley, at length, "do you know what a breaking rod is?"

Roween was almost too relieved at hearing her speak to reply. "A breaking rod, yes, breaking rods, Agritech make them: it's a stick they use for training horses."

"Horses and other spirited animals... They're expensive, though, they need good workmanship or they snap. You tap an animal with it, the animal hurts. Some kind of modified Mell segment, like in that itcher I pulled for you. If you hit them hard, it hurts really badly. Hit someone hard as you can, it's agony."

Roween knew the rest now, just a case of letting Conley tell it her way.

"My father, he only married my mother for her title. Gave him a foothold on the ladder. She married him solely for his money. Neither of them felt anything for the other, never gave much attention. When I was born, it was to give them an heir, that's the only reason. Maybe to give mother something to do all day instead of getting drunk. Certainly did that..." She laughed, bitterly.

"Anyway," she continued, "my father, he liked me, he really did, still does, he adores me, used to take me to the Academy, show me off, all proud. Mother hated me, maybe just because he didn't. One day she came back from town with a breaking rod. Used it on me." Her tears began. "Can you imagine what it's like to be beaten with one of those things?" She choked a sob. "By your own mother?" Another sob. "Who could I run to? Did she want me to go to *her* for comfort?"

"Why didn't you tell your father?"

"I was scared, so scared. And that was what she wanted me to do, she was taking out on me all the anger, frustration, resentment, everything she hated about my father. And she wanted him to *know*, because that way she would be hurting him the deepest she ever could. I wouldn't let her succeed in that, never."

"Was that why you started on the happy shots?"

She drooped her head. "I guess so, yes. Once she hit me so hard the rod itself made marks, that was just too much for me. I needed something, something just to keep me *alive*." She cried. Roween moved closer, onto the bed.

"I worked my way to bigger and bigger shots, in the end I could double up deeps and still feel no better. There was no way out, the beatings, they were killing me."

"And you couldn't fight back?"

"I was fourteen, she was my mother, I loved her, she had the rod, what could I do? Then, one day, I went to a store downtown that I'd never visited before, shady place, I thought they might sell stronger shots. That's where I saw it, the breaking rod, the CBT copy of a Magicorp rod, the reject. You hit something with *this* rod, it's *you* who gets the buzz. I bought it. Cost me all I'd saved from my allowance, but I bought it. Swapped it with my mother's rod. That night, I provoked her. Told her what I thought of her, how after all these years she still hadn't broken me, told her how I felt, what she was. I never saw her get so angry before. Rage, it's not the word, she was like a maniac, breaking furniture, throwing anything she could reach. At the height of her fury, I let her trap me. She took the rod and hit me harder than she'd ever done before, harder than she'd even *contemplated* before. Tore my leg. Killed her outright. I knew it would." She ended the story with a voice as calm and steady as Roween had ever heard.

"So that's when you threw yourself out the window?"

Conley smiled, nodded. "Didn't think I could live with it. Maybe I was right?"

Roween's face was drained of blood, white as chalk. "Hell, Conley, you poor girl." She hadn't known. Did anyone else?

"Last night, last week or whenever it was, I did the same. I deliberately, calculatingly, lured those hire-guards to their death. I killed them, cold blood, took their lives. I don't know why, I just did, and I enjoyed it, the power. I guess if you try and forget things, they have a way of coming back all on their own." She sat up, face wet with tears, a mixture of anxiety, relief, faded torment. "Ro, what if I do it again? What if I kill her again, Ro?"

Roween hugged her. "You won't, not now, not now you've told me."

* * *

Next day, they left the farm and headed north. The White River earned its name from the fast-flowing rapids that scored its passage to the Eastern Ocean. No ferries plied it this high up, but there was a bridge they'd reach tomorrow. Conley figured Roween planned to cross there.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Davia," answered Roween. "Least, I am. You don't have to come or anything." *Oh, but you do!*

"I still don't know how you do that dispelling trick. I'll leave when you've told me." She spurred her grey, riding up alongside Roween. "That's assuming you ever do. Or am I wasting my time?"

Roween shyly granted her a sympathetic smile. "It'll take awhile, but yes, you'll pick it up. Before then, though, I have to school you in other ways."

Conley cocked her head, quizzically. "What 'other ways' are these? What is it I must learn?"

Roween paused a moment, then posed the question. "Does magic make people good or evil?"

"Neither." The track narrowed here, and she fell back behind Roween's mare. "People are what they are, magic is simply a way of making it easier for them to do what they would have tried to do anyway."

"So *you* see magic as a tool, to be used for better or worse by its wielder. You don't see it as something which encourages its exponents to take one direction rather than another?"

"No, I don't. Why are you asking this?"

"Well a sword is such a thing. Swords give people power over others. There are some worthy uses, but none of them would be necessary if it weren't for the unworthy ones."

Conley raised her voice so Roween could hear her in front. "But swords were *meant* to be weapons of war; magic was conceived as a means of healing."

"Yet now, our king proposes to make war using magic as his main weapon."

"Our country is about to be threatened by a cruel, religious tyrant. Justan would still have to make war even if all magic were disappear completely tomorrow."

"Would it be *such* a bad thing if that were to happen?"

Conley gaped, astounded. "Well yes of *course* it would be bad! Think of the ills we could no longer cure, of the prosperity of our land, the wellbeing of its people. We'd have no

medicine, no surgery, no long-distance communication, withered crops, death, poverty — magic is for the good of *everyone*."

"Idealist," accused Roween, over her shoulder. "Your educa-tion begins in Davia."

Chapter 9

Ansle poured himself a mug of tea from the urn in the senior common room. As always, the liquid defied analysis; it never remotely tasted of tea, but it was a recognisable tea-like brown, hotter than lukewarm, and free. The biscuits were nothing approaching palatable, and most looked even older than the furniture.

A dozen or so members of staff sat around, discussing, arguing, and writing on the infernal colourboard. As expected, Chewt was already seated, reading a paper on somatic illusions or some other damnfool idea, sipping at her over-milky coffee.

Ansle walked over to her and sat down opposite. She looked up. Anyone else, and she'd have looked straight back down again, but this was the chancellor, she was his deputy, and he was the one person in the Academy that she didn't outrank.

"Good morning, Professor," he opened, in as friendly a manner as he could muster.

"Good morning, Chancellor," she answered, crisply, but not with malice.

Ansle waited a moment, just long enough to worry her. "Last month, Chewt, I appointed you as the Academy's representative on The King's commission to look at the power structure in the democracies."

She nodded, slowly. "Two weeks of gathering data, one week assimilating it, another week to compile the report."

"It's finished, then?" He knew they'd finished four days ago.

"I suppose you want a copy?"

Of course he wanted a copy, stupid woman! "Well it would be rather *useful*, yes."

Wearily, she put down her cup and reached for her briefcase. From inside, she withdrew a neatly bound, newly-printed booklet. She passed it to Ansle. "I was going to bring you that this afternoon," she stated, in a matter-of-fact sort of way. "I knew you'd want to read it, security breach or not."

Always annoyingly efficient, Chewt. Indeed, always simply annoying.

"Many thanks, I'll have it back to you in a couple of hours." He stood up, gulped the rest of his tea so as to taste it as little as possible, and left for his office. Chewt watched his departure, then kicked off a shoe, pulled a leg up beneath herself, and returned to her paper.

* * *

The commission's report made interesting reading. They had managed a more in-depth study than Ansle had supposed, succeeding in identifying key figures in the government, army, civil service and in industry. There were about a thousand names. Remove that thousand people, substitute your own, and the country was yours, complete and intact. Nice idea; he wondered what a list for the magic-using states would look like...

By now, Justan would have read his own copy, and consulted the generals. If they were to eliminate all the individuals named on the list, they'd need magic. The magical support regiment was attached to the Academy, and Ansle was its (largely honorary) colonel-in-chief. The Academy also had the only legal research group for magically-based warfare, its Military Science Department. Through its Education Centre, the Academy recruited and trained spies, assassins, and other government agents.

He'd doubtless be hearing from Justan shortly...

A study of the democracies, however, meant The King already had well-developed plans for the Davians and the Voths. Ansle had personally arranged the gathering of intelligence concerning the Messenger's forces, and had drawn up a set of alternative scenarios for consideration. It was clear in all of them that if the Messenger could take control of Akrea's and Estavia's armies, then even with all the magic in the world Justan would be unable to stop him. That was why he was moving now, two years before his own war machinery would be fully ready, and why Ansle was prepared to back him. It was deeply worrying to Ansle, however, that he knew nothing of how The King intended to take Davia.

The hour bell rang. He'd best return the report now; a pity he hadn't had time to copy it. He was smitten by a sudden idea for a 2D replication device: you could use the ubiquitous Chewt-Farmer to scale down the image, and again to re-enlarge sections later when you wanted to read them, as they were doing in the new colourboards. The whole thing would fit in a couple of sheets of bound glass, using the left one for storing the shrunken copy, and the right for input and display. He smiled to himself, both surprised and pleased. Yes, it might well work! Why had no-one thought of it before? They had large market research programmes to assess what it was people wanted, surely this sort of thing would have been indicated? He'd mention it when he spoke to Porett later that afternoon.

* * *

Porett never seemed to be busy. Whenever Ansle called, there he was, right by his comsphere, always had time to answer, never in a meeting. Once, Ansle had deliberately tapped in when he knew Porett was due to be dining with an Estavian merchant, yet he'd still answered. What did he do all day, sit around waiting for his crystal ball to glow?

It came as something of a jolt, then, when Porett's face did not appear as the green incandescence hazed out. It was Elidia, his secretary. Young face, all severe contrast: dark eyes, hair, lips, pale skin.

"Elidia? Where's Porett?"

Elidia smiled that sweet, patronising smile she reserved for all powerful people who weren't perhaps quite as well-informed as she. "Dr Porett is using his comsphere, Chancellor Ansle, he's transferred incoming calls to me."

Ansle sighed. "Yet *another* irksome feature to which we'll all have to accustom ourselves when he finally puzzles out how to make another mark 3... Well have him call me back when he's finished, would you?"

"Of course, Chancellor. Goodbye." She tapped out, the mindless, sing-song voice she affected still grating on Ansle's nerves. She reminded him of a younger version of Chewt, but with about fifty times the ambition. She, too, would probably never marry.

* * *

When his comsphere radiated its emerald glimmer (well, that's how the blurb on the box had described it), he was standing at the blackboard. This copier idea really did have potential. That would be Porett now, he'd see whether Technologies were interested.

It wasn't Porett, it was Chewt. A very worried Chewt.

"Chancellor, it's missing — my copy of the report."

"Missing? But I returned it you about an hour ago."

"I know, but it's gone. I had it on my desk with some other things, and they've gone

too."

"I see. Have you remained in your office since I left?"

"Yes. I've already checked for an illusion, but everything is clear; the report has definitely gone."

"Very well, I *accept* that it's 'gone'... I'll come over."

* * *

Her office was, in its own way, almost as well-planned as his. Whereas he relied on old things of character to imbue the room with that certain mood he required, she preferred to make the whole place look like the lounge of a country hotel. Lots of well-padded chairs, even a sofa; low tables with high-brow magazines methodically arranged on them, respect-able books within easy reach, everything insufferably neat and tidy. The incongruous colourboard beside the window was always a vague source of amusement, though.

When he arrived, she was wringing her hands, pacing the floor. She looked relieved; an unusual show of emotion. "So where was it you left the booklet?"

"Over here, Chancellor." She indicated an empty place on her glass-topped desk.

"How did you come to notice it was missing?"

"I was reading a paper. I glanced up for some reason, and just realised that the report was gone. So was everything in the pile beneath it."

"Was there a binder on it?"

"No, I didn't get around to placing one. I was reading when you returned it, I thought I'd bind it later."

"You *did* move it, though; I remember putting it down somewhere over here."

She waved a hand. "Well it was in the wrong place, things to take home go over there."

"What else were you taking home?"

Chewt thought a moment. "Books," she said, "and some designs to mark..." She touched her forehead. "I had a Porett Technologies manual for my comsphere, some patches to upgrade it to a comsphere-2."

"Rather than mess about re-establishing connections, yes... When did you acquire this manual?"

"One of my old students dropped in this morning; he works for Porett, and left it behind for me. He unbound it, but that's all he did."

"And it was on the bottom of the pile?"

"Yes, I think so, I can't be sure but..."

"Very well, Chewt, I think I know what's happened. Let me clear it with The King, don't worry about it *any* more."

Chewt looked very appreciative. "That's especially good of you, Chancellor, I'm grateful." Of course, she still had to ask. "But how did it disappear, then?"

"Have you heard of Porett's Trans/Disc project?" She frowned, puzzled, which didn't surprise Ansle any. "Well," he continued, "it's a way of moving objects from one place to another."

She nodded. "You think Porett wanted to see the report and concealed such a Trans/Disc in the binder?"

"It's worth considering," he answered. "Leave it with me."

As he left, Ansle put on his 'understanding uncle' face, trusting that his worries weren't apparent to Chewt. A couple of days ago as he'd passed her office, he'd heard her speculating about the Trans/Disc project with one of her students. They'd correctly guessed the problem it addressed, since it was a continuance of basic research begun by Ansle's predecessor, but they'd completely underestimated the granularity of Porett's solution. 'Trans/Disc' meant "Transfer/Disconnect", the objects used were the size of rowing boats, and there were only two of them, 900 K gestures invested in each.

She was certain to rediscover the lost document when she learned of her mistake...

Chapter 10

They'd reached the rain belt three days ago. Conley had picked up a waxed riding cape from a tinker heading south, eight clicks and a smile. It fitted well enough, kept the saddlebags dry. She'd managed to waterproof her hair, but had to wear it straight and down to keep it from holding drips and dribbling them through to her scalp. Roween had a leather cap with a detachable skirt, which she'd arranged so as to direct the unending flow as a stream down her back.

Neither had spoken for several hours, the constant pitter-patter precluding any conversation except that held in raised voices. They were high in the mountains now, following the old herding route into Davia. These days, most travellers took the eastern road instead — longer in terms of distance, but level, and passing through the coastal climate-control zone.

Roween pointed to the right, a large cave. They walked their horses up the grassy approach, dismounted inside. It was empty, but the ash-filled circle of rocks and the graffiti-covered walls were evidence of its popularity as a stopover.

"How much farther?" asked Conley, unbuckling her saddle.

"Can't say, we won't be out the wet until we cross the Rodya. Maybe another day?" She took both horses and led them outside to graze.

Conley surveyed the stone-strewn interior. It extended some way back, but the ceiling dropped dramatically a short way in. Large boulders had been placed to block whatever passageways fanned out at the low end. Safer that way, she supposed.

When Roween returned, Conley had started a fire. They had little tinder left, but wrap-pouch food tasted a lot better hot. Conley noted how gingerly Ro took them out of her saddlebags, like they were alive or something. Maybe to her they were?

"So do you think The King will have taken Vothland by now?" asked Conley, skewering a kidney on the end of a dagger, Roween-style, poking it into the flames.

"I expect so, yes, the Voths don't have anything to counter an army the size of ours. Was probably all over in a day, we'll buy a KNews update when we reach Vadessa."

"Well couldn't we have waited a week or so and then taken the east road?" She sighed. "This rain, it's depressing."

"We're on a tight schedule as it is, you took longer to find me than I'd planned for, and I wasn't expecting you to sleep for twelve days out of Cala Bay Town." She frowned, irritated, as her horsesteak fell into the embers.

Conley hid a smile, watching Roween's lunch ably resisting her attempts to spike it back. "You say you have some kind of plan, Ro."

Roween froze. Then, hooking the meat out of the fire, she spoke, not altogether natural-sounding. "Depends what you mean by a plan..."

Conley sensed her unease, moved to defuse it. "Well, you say we're on a tight schedule — I was wondering what it is, that's all."

Roween nodded. "Might as well tell you now as leave it." She returned her steak to the heat. "You want to know how I kill magic, so you can do it yourself: correct? Well, there's more to it than that — *lots* more. First, you have to learn the way magic works."

"I *know* how magic works!"

Roween paused, patient. "Sorry, Con, but you know damn all about it. What's more, you're going to *stay* ignorant until I'm sure you won't trash things up. Me, all I can do is poop spells, but you, you'd have unlimited powers. And I do mean unlimited."

Conley was silent. *Roween's kidding, right?*

"So before I can explain, you'll need to accept a few unpalatable facts about magic. You have to see for yourself the frightening things it can do, how it can oppress, control, impose tyranny."

"But it can be used for good, too. It can — "

"No. No, Con, it's too powerful. If it were just cures, art, dinky spells to clean teeth, that would be fine. It's not, though, is it? It's domination, pain, power. Remember Cala Bay Town?"

"That's not fair, CBT is almost a one-off, there aren't many places like that. Birgue, maybe Zrenin..."

"They'll *all* be like that in the end, just one giant territory. That's if we're *lucky*. If we're unlucky, there won't be anything at all."

Conley was worried, now. *She's serious*. She bit into the kidney. *Hell. What am I doing here? Following around a doom-struck cynic, trying to find out how she blasts magic — only she won't tell, in case I do it myself*. Maybe paranoia was a prerequisite?

Roween brushed her hair back off her face. "I'm sorry, Con, I just get so bothered by the whole thing sometimes." She smiled at the mage, apologetic. "Look, I don't expect you to believe any of this yet, but please hear me out. You see, I've discovered something very, very disturbing about magic: anyone can use it, any time, and do whatever they want. Anything. You *understand* that? If you want the rain to stop, it'll stop — it'll fall upwards if you like. People will do whatever you say, if you choose to have them exist at all. Complete power over life, death, creation, destruction. Control of minds, their thoughts and ideas, of personalities. Anyone can have it, anyone can be a god. Anyone *except* me."

Conley was staring at her like she'd just broken free of a straitjacket.

"I know you *don't* believe me, but you *must* give me a chance. I'm the first to figure this all out, but I won't be the last. Soon as anyone else does, we're all good as naught — it'll be the end of everything worthwhile. All there'll be is the product of someone else's will. We have to stop it."

"'We' do, do 'we'?"

"It's the only way, Con. *You* have to be the next person to know. When you get the power, you have to use it against itself. If you decree that it's not to work, it won't, ever again. Magic will be gone forever, but everything else will still exist, still be bounded by the limitations that make existence meaningful. We'll be free, just people again."

Conley stared into the flames. These were the ramblings of a mad woman. Roween had some grudge against magic, tried to rationalise it, and come to believe some half-baked nonsense that it threatened the Entire Universe As We Know It. She couldn't possibly be right. Could she?

"Well that's it, I'm finished. What do you think?"

Conley looked back at her. "I think you're crazy."

Roween withdrew her horsemeat from the flames. "You'll come to wish I was..."

* * *

It was dark outside, they'd decided to spend the night in the cave. Roween had been upset; she'd tried to hide it from Conley, but not with any success — smoke in your eyes doesn't make them water for forty minutes. Conley felt a twinge of sadness herself. Roween always seemed so vulnerable, with her outsize coat and her girl-like looks. *Maybe I'll indulge*

her awhile, cheer her up a bit. No harm in it. She didn't *act* touched, but it was *what* she said, not how she said it.

"So how are you going to shatter my scepticism?"

Roween looked up, hopeful. "You'll still come with me?"

"You can still cancel magic?"

She grinned, ruefully. "You're persistent, Con, I'll grant you that..."

"Obstinate, yes, that's me!" She returned the smile. "So where exactly will I be going if I tag along behind you? Anywhere exotic?"

Roween sat cross-legged by the dying flames of the fire. She was pleased beyond belief, her confidence flowing back. "I'll — I'll tell you where I *think* our travels'll take us, can't be sure though."

"Well do you know our destination? Where will I finally be made privy to the wondrous secrets of this cancellation technique?"

"The library in Liagh Na Laerich."

Conley groaned. "So that's why you met up with your friend Medreph: we're going to meet up again in Elet..."

"In part, yes, but my main reason was to keep him updated, he's guiding some important decisions and needs the latest information. The Elets have to determine what to do once Justan and the Messenger have fought it out. He'll feed his dispatch into their foreign affairs network, and — "

"Their what?"

Roween stopped, thought a moment. "Elet has a very different society to ours. It'll take some time to explain, but they're essentially a race of individuals, no leaders. Everyone makes their own decisions, independent of everyone else. To make sure they're all well-informed, they have a number of contact networks, where information is passed among a group of interested parties by members of that group. Medreph will tell foreign affairs, they may release it into another network, say magic or warfare, maybe some will be picked up by specialist nets concentrating on the countries or the people involved. Might even make the main all-network summaries." She almost baulked at saying that; what Medreph would impart was going to dominate the summaries for weeks to come.

"A country with no leaders? Everyone decides collectively what to do?" She raised an eyebrow. "You snicking me up?"

"No, not collectively, individually. People do what they want, not what others tell them. Even if everyone else disagrees. To them, personal responsibility is everything. It's kind of hard to describe."

"So everyone is equal, right? Archetypal idealist society, everybody equally badly off..."

"No, they're not all equal, some own big estates, others run farms, shops, businesses. Some are very poor. It's true that if someone is a great thinker, simpler folk might set great store in what they say. But everyone makes up their own minds about everything they do." She sighed. "It's real difficult to explain, you have to go there to feel it."

Conley shrugged. "So how *do* we go there? Davia isn't on the way."

"Davia, Akrea, the Purasan states, maybe some Purian and Western Vothic countries, maybe a coastal ferry, then the Lowlands to Elet."

"The long way..." Conley coughed a short laugh. "Look, we heard yesterday that Justan has attacked the Eastern Voths. They'll have lost all by now, and it won't take a week to have them completely subdued. Davia must be next on his list, then Akrea. The Messenger, a Western Voth, has already marched all over the Herans, Purians and Nairads, and must be well

through the Purasans by now. He'll turn on Estavia and Akrea next. If we follow your path, we'll hit war after war."

"I know, it's *why* we're going. You have to see, first-hand, what magic can do when misused. The Eastern Voths, they would have fallen anyway, we could have taken them ten years ago. Davia is needed as an ally, and won't be captured; it'll be won over by subtle magics instead. Justan and the Messenger will eventually clash in the democracies — neither want to send in troops, but I can't see their avoiding it. You'll witness then what spells can really do."

"They can defeat a madman, *that's* what they can do."

"Well, not directly, no." Roween licked her top lip. "The Messenger and I share similar gifts in that respect."

Conley's eyes widened. "*He's* immune to magic?"

"He doesn't keep it secret, it's too handy, justifies his ancestry. He's not cursed quite the same way as me, but good enough to stop a magical assault on his person. Our magic or Chaeinish, doesn't matter."

A cold shiver ran through Conley's cheeks. "You don't think he's onto the same theory as you, do you? Absolute power and all that?"

Roween laughed. "No, no, he wants power alright but he won't get it that way. That's not to say that in future someone like him won't, course, unless we stop them now."

Conley winced — she didn't want to set Roween off again. *Abandon that subject, quickly.* "So who'll win in Akrea?"

"Doesn't matter, we press on either way. The winner will advance on the loser's homeland, that'll take time, then after that they'll annex the Lowlands. I'm hoping Justan will carry the field, then you'll see some more of magic's dark side as we cross over to Elet. If he doesn't, well you might not hate it enough."

"But I'll never hate it, Ro. How could I? It's my life."

"You hated your life enough to try destroy it. Twice."

Chapter 11

Porett reached out, tapped into the comsphere-3. His face appeared. "Thought I'd let you know I've decided to use the click-well link, then maybe tell Ansle where to find Conley."

"*Yourself?*" The image raised its eyebrows.

"Hell no, I'll have Liddy try it."

"Had me worried for a moment there!" He smiled. "So why do you think the old lad asked for our help?"

"Still not certain. I'm sure he really has lost his own tag, so he must know Conley's onto *something* or he wouldn't be looking for her all of a sudden. Quite why he'd come to us for help though... Why not make it a priority for his agents? Something he doesn't want too many people to know?"

"Maybe his information is she's out of reach — the wilderness or someplace."

"Yes, I did consider that, it's a possibility. But perhaps it's not Conley he wants at all, he might have found out about the extra zip her click-well's packing, could be trying to flush us into using it." He put his hands on his head. "Well whatever, the chances are he knows more than us about what she's discovered; if we do help him out, we might be able to draw his information. Even if it comes to nothing, at least he'll owe us a favour."

"I agree. No sense in looking too hard for his motives, it's so hard trying to second-guess that guy — he doesn't *think* logically, does things you don't expect 'cause they're so ill-conceived!"

The exterior Porett grinned. "How's it going with you, anyway? Had any more of those turns?" He shuddered. "Makes me near black over just recalling them."

"The disadvantage of a physical body! No, still only the three. I've been thinking, though: yesterday's chit on Conley's last click transaction, well the date matches the second pair of drains."

"Coincidence?"

"Could be, but I don't think so, I've been looking over other stuff for that date. Our woman in Magicorp says one of their night squads was wiped that night, odd thing is their thetics came apart. Clean-up found other stuff weird too, all their comms were out, light-sets too, and their suits were plain ordinary, no point armour, nothing."

Porett stared into his comsphere-self's eyes, thinking. So that was it: Conley had access to a complete antimagic device, Ansle wanted it. *All the more reason to link to her, then.* No need to say anything, his other self already knew.

"Want to merge?" he asked the com-3.

"Give me a while, there's still some loose ends to tie up." Porett reached to tap out. "Oh, but before you go, one more thing. I was supposed to be calling Chewt, see if she could reach Farmer at East/Trad. She was using her comsphere, I couldn't get through."

"So who was she talking to?"

"No, no, I couldn't get through at *all*, couldn't even listen in."

"There was nothing in the upgrade manual that covered shielding, was there?"

"Nothing at all, no, but this was like a greasy wall, just kept slipping off."

"You'd better look into that, doesn't cut with anything new I know, sorry. Oh, flash Elidia to come in, will you? I'll dictate a written reply to Ansle, and perhaps casually mention to her her forthcoming jaunt..."

He tapped out.

Chapter 12

Vadessa was a noble town, architecturally magnificent, with clean, wide streets, beautifully styled statues, fountains. Canals drew off the excess waters of the Rodya, saving the city from flooding with the swell from the Svalan rains. It was mild, temperate, and gloriously sunny.

Roween had taken them to the lower artists' quarter. Davian culture was colourful and flourishing; art and its creators aroused great passion among the people, and Conley soon realised that, unlike in Murak, the epithet 'artist' was regarded as an honour, not as an insult.

She and Roween were strolling down one of the wide, tree-lined boulevards. The buildings seemed in harmony with one another, tall windows framed in intricate plaster-work, slate-tiled roofs, walls all the same golden sandstone. She decided she liked the look of this place.

"Is it safe?" she ventured after a while.

"Sorry?" Roween had been thinking.

"Is it safe to walk around at dusk, two women on their own?"

"Safe enough, yes, safer than Cala. Worried you can't defend yourself with me here?"

Conley reddened a little. "Well, ordinarily I'd be able to use..." Her voice trailed off. "The gesture-hold trick wouldn't be worth trying, either, no-one here has prosthetics."

"Well, you'd be surprised, we're close enough to Svala and Galur to make cross-border surgical trips affordable, least for some. Zipped objects are fairly common — many shops accept click-wells, for example."

Music drifted towards them, somewhere close by maybe. Conley was distracted; it was strange — energetic, but uncannily beautiful. She turned to Roween, face questioning.

"It's a drinks cellar, there'll be one someplace around here, artists' quarter is full of them. This could be it over on the right."

They descended the steps. A handwritten flier, pinned to a board in urgent need of paint, read, "Tonight: Anya Kryslod, keys."

The music was so much louder inside, confined by the low ceiling and thick walls. Conley stared around, absorbing the atmosphere. People were sitting in twos and threes about small, round tables, lights were unintrusive, waiters weaved imperceptibly through the aromatic, hazy smoke. A single light-set illuminated a makeshift stage, a figure hunched over a keyboard, all eyes upon him. His hands, arms, his whole body was playing the instrument, fingers flitting across the keys, hammering them, caressing them, coaxing from them some of the most spirited music Conley had ever heard.

Roween tapped her on the arm, unstrung her gaze from the enigmatic musician. "We better sit down," she whispered, pulled her to an empty table. A white-aproned waiter materialised, Roween gave a brief series of hand signs, and he disappeared, returning a few moments later with two large, frothing tankards. He lit a candle, placed a small bottle labelled "Vaska" in front of Roween, and withdrew to the shadows. Roween pushed the bottle over to Conley.

* * *

When the music stopped, the audience broke into sustained applause. Some rose to their feet, Conley among them. The keyman turned round, sweat dripping from his lank hair,

green eyes searing with energy. He raised his hands swiftly, and the applause stopped: expectancy. He returned to his instrument, touched one note, then burst into an encore of such stinging virtuosity it left Conley breathless.

She turned to Roween. "I didn't know the Davians could *produce* music like that! It was so, so *strong*, forceful." She tried to find words that could express her experience, could only fail, frustrated.

"I never heard of Kryslod before, but that was better than what I've found hereabouts previous," Roween answered. "Most cellars, music's either experimental or just background. This was like a concert."

A hat was passed to the table, already heavy with coins. Roween dropped in a couple more, but as she made to pass it on, Conley added another half dozen. She still didn't understand tipping?

"What do you think of the drink, Con?"

Conley looked like she'd forgotten the question.

"The drink, do you like it?"

She took a sip. "Fizzy, a touch fruity, yes; what is it?"

"It's this sort of punch they do here in Vadessa, mainly juice with some kind of soda. If you want to fortify it, there's some spirit in the bottle." She pointed.

Conley eyed the bottle, picked it up, took a sniff. She quickly moved it from her nose. "Strong..."

"Yes, there's enough there for two, but I'm not having any. If you add half to the fizz, it's supposed to mix up real smooth. Vaska. Locals love it."

Someone dragged a chair behind them, slid it to their table backwards. A man swung onto it, rested his hands on the back, propped his head on his fingers.

It was the key player. He was staring at Conley.

At that point, Roween felt she ceased to exist as far as Conley was concerned. He said hellos, said she fascinated him, Conley stumbled a reply, told him her name, that she couldn't believe his music, the effect it had on her, so potent, so moving. He nodded inscrutably, described what he was trying to achieve, showed her how he rippled an eighth, asked her about herself. She outlined her modest skills with magic, he nodded, intently, compared their arts, the techniques, the dexterity, the profundity. Roween's embarrassment grew: she hated watching seductions.

"Conley," she interrupted, "I'll return to the hostel now, you know where it is?"

"Yes, oh, sorry Ro, yes, I know, see you later, thanks." She winked, and returned to her conversation, pouring the rest of the vaska into her flagon.

* * *

Roween had smiled and waved as she left, but Conley hadn't noticed. It was as well, it had felt so artificial. Conley was the tall, graceful, attractive one, with the educated accent, tinkling laugh, expensive clothes, academic title. She, Roween, was the short, clumsy, tongue-tied nobody with clothes that didn't fit and eyes that didn't look in the same direction. She hadn't fancied him anyway. *Pseud*.

It was mid-morning when Conley returned, glowing. Roween smiled and waved, gave her best woman-of-the-world look, and this time Conley smiled back.

"You eaten, Con?" she asked, then sighed. Bye bye woman-of-the-world pretensions.

"Yes, I breakfasted with Anya. Ro, he's just, just different."

So am I, but where does that ever get me? "So you stayed the night then?"

Conley's reply was a wry grin.

"Seeing him again this evening?"

Conley extended her hand, looked at her nails, ruby-flecked gold. "Perhaps, perhaps not. He's an artist, a performer, he may decide to work if the muse takes him."

If only you knew how inane that sounded... "So what did you talk about?"

"Oh, this and that. Music, magic, politics, aesthetics, life. Did you know he left his parents when he was nine and ran away to study at the Vadessa Conservatory?"

No, I didn't, and I didn't want to, either. "Did he say what he thought about Breska and Mitya?"

Conley seemed a little peeved that Roween wasn't much enthusiastic. "No, he did not, he's a republican, he wants Davia to be a democracy. What's that got to do with anything?"

When Justan takes over, quite a lot... "Nothing really, just interested. So you went back to his place?"

* * *

That evening, Conley visited the cellar alone. She returned the next morning. Roween was wondering whether she should switch to a single room or not, cheaper.

"Do you feel anything for him, Con?"

"He's alright, bit bound up with his work, beautiful eyes though. Intense lover. No, I'm fond of him I guess, but we'll be gone from here soon, suppose that's part of the reason he approached me, knew I was a stranger, that I'd be passing through. He doesn't like ties. Me neither."

"Back again tonight?"

"I said I would." She sensed Roween's agitation. "Sorry, is this worrying you? I don't have to go, I could stay if you liked. Maybe you want to come along too? He has lots of friends, one's sure to want to make up a foursome."

Which friend would that be, the hunchback or the octogenarian? "No, it's alright, Con, you have your fun; hot, you deserve it well enough."

That night, Conley kept her tryst with Anya. Roween visited the local Vadessan guard station.

* * *

Conley almost tore off the door of their room. "Ro! Have you heard? Justan proposed to Mitya last night, Breska had a heart attack when he heard the news! Everyone's talking about it, it's all over the streets!"

Roween didn't look up, was looking at a map of the city. "I hadn't heard, no, but it doesn't surprise me. It was always clear Justan would have to work through Mitya if he wanted Davia as an ally. Thought he might have kept Breska around, though, husked up or something. Now he'll have to delay the wedding."

"The funeral's in three days, and they're having a joint wedding/coronation ceremony next week."

"Convenient he'd made all the arrangements in advance, isn't it?" She wondered if he'd used magic on Mitya, or whether it was unnecessary — Davian nobles had a tradition of marrying foreigners. Mitya probably saw it as the only way to save her people. *Wise woman.*

Conley sat on the end of the bed, excitedly. "The heart attack, that was probably a scaled wallshaker. He'd have had a mage start the gestures sometime last week, wakers on all the time, arranged it so they'd meet the Davian king just when it would be ready. Smuggled the mage in with his entourage, told his brother-in-law-to-be the good news when he got the nod, and seconds later it's so long Breska."

"With Breska, a remote binder would have been enough." She sighed. "You don't think that's just *maybe* a misuse of magic?"

Conley laid back on the bed. "Misuse? I'd say it was the opposite! One weak king replaced by a strong queen. Davia's citizens are spared a civil war, an invasion, all the usual internal strife and upheaval. One man dies instead of thousands. Did you think it was wrong when you killed that innkeep by asking me to cast an illusion on you?"

"There'll be no war, that's true — not between our country and Davia anyway. The Davians will suffer, though, believe that; they'll have lost any shred of real independence before New Year. Breska was a feeble ruler, slipped his grip, let his enemies get too powerful. While he reigned, opposition could grow, ferment, and it did. Unless the new rulers act quickly, *some* people could cause a lot of trouble — at best spreading unrest, undermining their authority, and at worst galvanising the people into a popular uprising. There'll be a purge, there always is. But this time, thanks to magic, everything's happened too quick, the revolutionaries will have no time to organise. Anyone subversive will be found before noon, some could be dead already." She glanced to the window and back. "You realise that'll include overt republicans, ones with a coterie of impressionable admirers."

Conley sat upright. "Anya," she said, "I left him about an hour ago."

Roween beat her to the door. "Foreigners are going to have a hard time of it, too. People will disappear, Davians will think we had something to do with it. We have to move on, immediately."

Conley looked down at her. Roween suddenly felt very small, slight; she could easily be pushed aside, had no way of stopping the taller woman from seeking Kryslod, trying to help him escape.

She stood her ground. "No, Con, leave him. It'll be too late. He'll know how things stand; if he's really in any danger he'll be gone by now, soon as he heard. *We* must leave, too. You don't care for him, any more than he cares for you, it was just a fling. Be practical!"

* * *

They rode out through the northern gate. Spiked on the battlements were the usual heads of traitors, thieves, murderers. One looked like Kryslod, might have been him, maybe someone else, hard to tell. Conley shed a tear.

"Forget him, Con, you were just using each other."

"He's already forgotten. It's his music..."

Chapter 13

Ansle found Davia boring. The capital, Vadessa, was close enough to civilisation to provide *some* home comforts, but the rest of the country was provincial beyond belief — few towns could even boast *light-sets* in their streets, for life, they had to rely on *lanterns*! The buildings everywhere were architecturally regimented, and that fixed the tone for the whole wretched society: everyone so eager to assimilate that they lost all trace of individuality. If nothing else, Breska's short reign had injected new dynamism into the population, although understandably *Mitya* couldn't have allowed it to continue. Known troublemakers had simply been executed. Their leaders, however, had been subjected to shells; it's harder for followers to make martyrs of people who are still alive, even if they *are* bereft of mind. He smiled. He had to admit it, Justan *was* rather sharp.

There'd been fewer guards on the gates this morning, and they'd waved him through. Consequently, he'd arrived early, and had found himself obliged to wait. He was now seated in a large, velvet-covered chair in a large, velvet-covered antechamber. Had this been Cala, he might have imagined that the room was itself in a large, velvet-covered palace; however, it was Vadessa, and even the royal residence had sandstone walls and a slate roof that co-ordinated depressingly well with those of the city's other buildings.

A bewigged footman-type opened the ornate, double doors. Ansle resisted the temptation to flick out a pilatory at him, but only because he wasn't sure in which order two of the last four segments came.

The footman spoke with an accent that probably sounded very pompous to Davian ears, but which to Ansle merely came over as 'foreign'. "Their majesties will see you now, Chancellor."

"'Their majesties'..." He rose, walked through the doors as if the footman was an intrinsic part of the opening mechanism, and bowed. Before him sat Mitya, with Justan reclining to her right in a hasty copy of her throne. After a suitable interval, The King stood, strode towards Ansle, hand outstretched.

"Chancellor, welcome to Davia. It was good of you to come at such short notice." He wasn't much taller or heavier than Ansle, but his grip was cement.

"How could I refuse an invitation not only to a coronation, but also to a wedding? Especially when delivered by the fair General Nolley — and the *less* fair thirty-six armed guards she brought with her."

Justan laughed. "Nolley is the youngest of my generals, Ansle, and she sometimes feels awkward when required to officiate people of repute. Come, let us be seated." He beckoned him to follow, walked behind the thrones. Large, colourful maps were spread across a pair of tables pushed up against one another. Davian-style lettering indicated their origins, although Ansle didn't doubt that Justan also kept East/Trad auto-scale charts, too. Damned Chewt-Farmer gets everywhere nowadays.

It wasn't until he'd flopped into a chair that he realised Mitya had come over too. A sickening thought suddenly seized him: perhaps Justan was the pawn, not Mitya, and actual power rested in *her* hands, not his? *Oo-er!* With relief, he dismissed the idea; he'd had plenty of person-to-person meetings with Justan before, and it was diamond clear that The King was a *very* shrewd operator — no question. Also, Ansle was fairly confident, his majesty had never even met Mitya until last week in Vothland. Quite long enough to become infatuated, though? Maybe, but Mitya was only makeover-beautiful, too formulaic to be special; rather, it was The King who had the classical good looks, who knew *exactly* how to use them...

In which case, why did Mitya's presence cause Ansle to feel so edgy? She was looking at him in such *detail*, like she was weighing him, assessing his value...

"Here is a list of the personnel who must be eliminated." Justan passed Ansle a

handwritten document. The King's own handwriting: now *that* was exceedingly irregular. "Read it later," he added.

"Of course, sir: I wouldn't dream of attempting to do so prior to your deactivating its binder." Justan surely knew he'd perused a draft list already, and had begun making the necessary preparations.

"We're only planning to use this strategy on Akrea, initially. The Estavian leaders should realise that they will be next unless they co-operate, so hopefully they'll invite us in. They'll justify their actions publicly by announcing that we'll help defend them against the teeming hordes of the Messenger's forces, or some such nonsense. If they don't ask for our help, however, we will be obliged to take them out in the same manner as for Akrea; they'll have no way of stopping us. Of course, as elected leaders are rarely people of principle, I do expect they'll readily capitulate, and that further action will be unnecessary."

"A wise approach, sir. Do you have a timetable in mind?"

"It will take at least three weeks to move the rest of our standing army into position. General Nolley will be organising the equipping of our reserves, which should come on stream about six weeks from now. She's also beginning the conscription and training of new recruits; these should be ready by the Spring."

"So perhaps eight weeks from now is when the assassinations should take place? Yes, that gives me time."

Justan shook his head. "It has to be before then; the Messenger is too close. Already, Akrea is beginning to bubble with religious fervour; it is controllable at present, but the increasing proximity of the Holy Army may act as a catalyst as it did in the fall of Herany."

"*Four* weeks then? Well *thank* you for giving me such a *generous* period of warning, sir, but *really*, murdering a thousand people is routinely simple, I hardly need *any* notice at all. Or is it just five-hundred if Estavia can wait until next month?" He knew it was around a thousand per country.

Justan smiled, as Ansle assumed he would: The King commanded enough authority that a little sarcasm from a high-ranking subject wouldn't even jot him. "You'll manage it, Chancellor; they don't have to be culled simultaneously if some other arrangement is easier."

Ansle shrugged. He was planning on three waves, taking those who could most rapidly defend themselves first. He noticed Mitya staring intently at the map. "And what does your fiancée think, sir?"

Mitya looked up, startled. Regaining her composure almost immediately, she said, "I think we ought to send aid to the Purasans."

Now it was Ansle who was surprised. That really wasn't *so* bad an idea! With some well-targeted magical units at their disposal, the Purasans might actually be able to hold until Winter. He looked at Justan, approvingly.

"An excellent idea, my dear, and the other reason why I asked Chancellor Ansle here today." He straightened. "Chancellor, in addition to the assassination units, I also have need of the *rest* of your regiment."

Ansle sighed.

There was a knock at the doors. Upon Justan's command, they opened; the doorman somewhat over-exaggerated his bow as he directed a teenaged girl into the chamber. Ansle could hardly see her because of the intervening thrones, but guessed she was a lady-in-waiting.

"Your majesty," she simpered, "the royal dresser has arrived with your wedding gown."

Inwardly, Ansle groaned. Yes, that was without doubt the honey-syrup voice of a depressingly stereotypical lady-in-waiting.

Mitya frowned at the interruption, but rose nonetheless. She touched her lips to Justan's cheek, and left.

Protocol meant that Ansle had been obliged to stand, too. He tossed The King's Killings list behind onto his chair, turned to his monarch, cocked an eyebrow. "So, now she's gone, what's the story?"

Justan frowned, feigned indignant bewilderment. "Whatever can you mean?"

"Is she pulling *your* strings or are you pulling *hers*?" He snorted. "That aid-to-the-Purasans idea — you didn't call me over for that at *all*, you only *claimed* you did so *she* would think you were on top of the situation. The truth of the matter, though, is that if she hadn't made the suggestion then *neither* of us would have considered such a course of action."

Still frowning, The King looked at the maps. "You rate me rather poorly as a tactician, Chancellor. Perhaps your skills in that area are superior to mine?" He pulled clear a sheet detailing the Purasan states. "The Purasans are fighting a guerilla war. Suppose that instead of the six units I intend to send, I was to despatch but one. Where should I place it?"

Ansle pressed down both sides of the map, spread his hands wide, hovered above it. "Somewhere important, a city, fortified if possible, nearby hills or marshes, good road access..." He pointed. "Dreimen."

There was a rustle of paper behind him; he turned to see the loose-leaf notes that Justan had given him earlier sliding to the floor. The King indicated the list's binder with a nod, folded his arms. "If I hadn't planned on helping the Purasans, why did I make 'Dreimen' the password?"

Ansle felt a cold chill run through his bones. He picked up the papers, put them into order. Odd, the pages were headed 'Wave 1' to 'Wave 3'.

"I've made some alterations since you last saw a copy," Justan added.

The names began on the reverse side of the title page. Ansle scanned them: top of the list was 'Mitya, Queen of Davia.'

He stood, momentarily paralysed, shot Justan a glance of ice.

"Such a pity that my dear wife-to-be had to leave before I unbound the register, she was *so* curious as to its contents. Perhaps if I hadn't relaxed security on the gates this morning, her dresser would have taken another thirty minutes to pass through the checks; he must have deliberately arrived early, expecting to endure a delay with the guards that never materialised."

Ansle was shaking.

Chapter 14

"My life is the Message," began Giquis, "Son of Lon and Lona."

"The Message is my life," came the wispy reply. "Be arisen."

Giquis obeyed. "You summoned me, Messenger," a hint of anxiety rising unbidden in his elderly voice.

"I have work for you. The list of Estavian and Akrean leaders, who knows of it?"

Giquis was vaguely curious. "Apart from Justan and his people, only you and I; I transcribed it directly from the comsphere myself, as you instructed."

"What if the list were to fall into the possession of ... the Akreans?"

Giquis squeezed his beard. At best, it could cause the Akreans to war against Justan; with Estavian support, such a possibility would also be the likeliest outcome. Internal pressure on the governments of those countries, readily provided by the orchestration of their many new Believers, could practically guarantee it. With the Messengers's own armies closing in daily, and a common enemy, the Akreans may even make good allies until the magic-driven forces were crushed. The only minor disadvantage would be that Justan would realise that there was a bleed high in his information pipeline, could diagnose the traitor, and the Messenger would receive no further intelligence from that source.

He cleared his throat. "On balance, I think it a good idea. Perhaps we could ensure our follower in the Muraki hierarchy escapes before Justan can seek retribution. Loyalty should be rewarded."

"I have spoken with this follower."

Giquis paled. *When did he do that? How did he get hold of the comsphere?*

"Loyalty deserves reward, yes, but first it must be fully ... tested. I have required a certain function to be performed, before the priesthood of the Message can embrace ... a new initiate."

Giquis was thoroughly unnerved; existence was always difficult when the Messenger arranged things without his knowledge. "What task is it you wish to be executed, Messenger?"

The Messenger's insipid, hollow laugh rang out. "It is no task, Spellworker, but a person! Loyalty is to be shown to Loss, my nephew, god of death."

He knew the name of the victim already, he felt it, in his heart. "Anslé of Malith is to die?"

"You are sorry for the man?" trilled. "Do not be. He opposes the Message, he opposes the Messenger; he is but an empty shell with ... no soul. He will never believe. His death will spare the lives of many thousands."

Giquis nodded — what else *could* he do?

"Arrange for the death-list to be known to the parliaments of the democracies. Let it be known to their generals. Let it be known to their business-rulers. It is the will of the Messenger."

Giquis bowed, turned to face the exit. Some monarchs forbade the showing of backs to the royal presence, but the Messenger took it as a sign of zeal to do his bidding. Giquis' view was more pragmatic: it meant his life was no longer in danger. He walked to the door.

"Let it be known to everyone!" shrieked the Son of Lon and Lona, distant behind him.

Giquis left, tinkling giggles filling the audience chamber as the door closed.

Chapter 15

Elidia made no attempt to disguise her apprehension; if anything, she exaggerated it. Porett had openly hoped she would rejoice in the chance to do something exciting for once, different, something no-one had attempted before. She, however, did not see it quite that way. Anything not tried, not tested, was intrinsically dangerous. She had no training for the task ahead, nor did she want it; her only qualifications were that she was female, and Porett trusted her. At least, that's what he'd said.

She also found the nature of what she was about to do distasteful. She resented the implied lack of control and she resented the impassiveness. She did not, however, resent invading Conley's privacy.

"You'd better lie down, make yourself comfortable," Porett was saying. She was wearing a two-fifty click suit; suits like that have cut, style, you don't just sprawl over a couch in them, they crease. Porett was waiting. She removed her jacket, slid off her shoes, reclined.

"Now this isn't going to hurt or anything, but it might be a bit disorienting at first." He passed her a lathed piece of wood, finger-grips cut into one side, just slightly longer than the span of his hand. "This is what I tuned to Conley's click-well. When you hold it tight in one hand and make a focus with the other, it patches in. Break either the hold or the focus to patch out. Understand?"

"I understand how to use it, yes, but not what it does. Will I be able to snap away at any time I choose?"

Porett nodded. "The way it works, you'll be receiving all Conley's senses, like you were seeing, feeling, hearing them yourself. You'll also continue to pick up your own senses. Anything you do, it'll be your body you move, not hers. When you first connect, there'll be a confusion as your brain tries to react to conflicting signals; just let it wash over you. Remember, you're lying on a couch in my office, you're not walking or sitting or whatevering else Conley may be doing, so don't try to compensate with your body for her actions. Just stay passive, take it all in, enjoy the ride!"

"I hope you're right about this..."

"Well the half-K of Technologies shares you're getting ought to sweeten it, either way." She figured his mild agitation was probably due more to his sharing her worry than to his doubting it, which further convinced her that her fears were fully justified. "Close your eyes, make a focus, give it ten seconds, then break."

Elidia focused with her left hand, took the grip in her right. She squeezed, slowly. She was on horseback, high up. She opened her eyes, everything was a collage, fading in and out, the mare's head, Porett's face, the rolling plains. She closed them again, cut off the office scene. Was she breathing? It felt like it, but had she control? She took a deep breath. She was rocking back and forth in concert with the motion of the horse, but she wasn't moving a muscle. She let go of the focus.

She was hyperventilating. Porett was speaking. "You alright?"

She raised her eyelids. Everything fitted again, senses matched actions. She looked up at her employer. "This isn't going to work," gasped.

* * *

Next time, they were more organised. Elidia had changed into a loose-fitting silk robe, slackened the ribbon in her hair. Porett provided a velvet eyeblind that she rested on the bridge of her nose. She wasn't happy with the arrangement, but at least she knew she could stop any

time she wanted, which made it easier.

She patched in. She was riding, following a muddy road. She felt giddy, she was falling backwards, but nothing changed, still the road, did she blink? She smiled, herself, not Conley. This was better than before, she was getting the measure of it. The double-breathing was awkward; she tried to match her rhythm to Conley's, but it was difficult. She could shadow it, but it was hard to throw off awareness of her own lungs. She felt herself gulping air again, released the connector grip.

"I've an idea," said Porett.

* * *

Elidia wasn't pleased with Porett's suggestion. It meant staying at the office late; she also suspected his motives. She was going to link to Conley when Conley would be asleep. That way, there would be no overwhelming sensory input from either end of the connection, except for that concerned with breathing. If Elidia could overcome the problem of dual diaphragm control, she could begin to direct attention to her proper mission.

What worried her this time was the possibility of nightmares. She did not want to live even a moment of Conley's dreams as if they were her own reality. Porett wasn't sure whether she would pick them up or not: the special tag on the click-well could transmit sensations, but not thoughts; dreams were somewhere in between.

She made the link, broke it seconds later. She hadn't felt anything, not Conley's breathing, not her bedding, nothing. Porett hypothesised that the body had some way of cutting off external stimuli when asleep. Only really strong sensations got through, like loud noises or pokes in the ribs. She didn't have any better ideas, but neither did she trust his interpretation of the situation.

It was impossible to learn to conquer double-breathing this way, anyhow.

* * *

The third day, Elidia was on edge. Porett had temporarily reassigned Caltra, from Marketing, to her position; she herself was to devote all her time to this dubious linking magic. Her left hand was giving her pain from holding it in a focus all the time, and she'd found that once she'd squeezed the grip into her right then it had to leave completely before the magic cut out. Vision was easier for her now, and she didn't need the blindfold any more; if she did open her own eyes, the effect was like placing an angled mirror in front of one of them — bearable. She was still having problems breathing.

She was riding, and talking. The other girl was slightly-built, very scruffy, and with absolutely no dress-sense. She had a streetworn accent, without much body behind her voice, and she spoke with food in her mouth. She'd also had some amusing spellwork done to her eyes. Some men might find it attractive, Elidia surmised, but it looked ridiculous to her.

"And just because a mage could reproduce an illusory copy of a painting or a sculpture in a fraction of the time it took to make the original, why does that invalidate its worth?"

"The skill is in the creation," she — as Conley — replied. "If anyone can create, it dilutes the overall accomplishment. It becomes commonplace. In Murak today, to say you can paint is as meaningless as saying you can breathe." Elidia — as herself — winced.

"There's a distinction between creating and copying. Artists are trying to say something, to express an opinion, convey an emotion. They're not merely capturing reality. Why don't

people use magic to fashion new works of art? Why'd they just copy?"

"In a way, we do: spells can be artistic. They're like music, a series of notes — gestures — strung together in a format which can be pleasing to others. One mage can find a purity in another's sequences that is so profound, so crystal, it can overcome you." She sighed. She felt tears welling up; Conley was remembering such an experience.

"But that contradicts your earlier argument, since any spell-prover can reproduce it. Mages have an obsession with form over content. It's not *how* you do it, it's what you do *with* it. Why don't you academics realise that? Why isn't there a single mage who uses their artistic talent for something that ordinary people can understand? Why waste it on honing gesture sequences down to optimal lengths?"

"I don't see what you mean. How could — "

"In Vadessa, in the gallery, you looked at the painting of the girl in the bridal dress. What did you say?"

Elidia was beginning to feel dizzy. She broke the focus.

"I wondered why she looked so sad."

Elidia sat up in panic, throwing the grip in the air. Porett was smiling.

"Sorry, Liddy, you were doing so well I didn't want to break the link just to tell you. I took the liberty of putting an FF between you and the grip, while you were still able to make a focus."

She was panting. "An FF?"

"Focus fix, it keeps your focus tied to the grip, you can use it now without having to make a focus at all."

"You did *what*? You should have told me first! You can't take advantage of a personal focus like that!" She realised she was losing her calculated coolness, swiftly reined it back.

"Yes, well I said I was sorry, but the idea just hit me, and it was the longest you've ever been connected; I thought I'd try it while I could."

"You've no right," she coughed. "I almost passed out because of you."

"Well don't worry about that any more, I have it sorted now. We'll use these." He reached over to his desk, pulled out a strip of shots. "Sleepers, they'll work, I'm certain of it."

She was breathing regularly now. "Tell me one thing, Dr Porett: why don't you do this yourself, if you're so sure about everything?"

"Would you link to Conley if she was male?"

* * *

"Now keep calm. All you need to find out is who the other girl is, where they are, and what they're doing. Try and remember as much as you can."

"How long will these sleep shots last? What if something happens to me while I'm in Conley? I won't be able to drop the grip."

"Three days, tops," he said, unpeeling a shot and placing it on her temple.

"Three what?!" She tried to pull it off, but she couldn't; her arm wouldn't obey her. She was holding a rein in her hand, resting it on her saddle. They were on the same mud track, riding across the same Davian plains. She couldn't even *feel* the wooden grip any more, let alone drop it.

She hated every second. She was trapped, her own body cut off from her mind the same way that Conley's had been when asleep. All she could do was observe, through someone else's eyes, looking where they wanted to look, focusing on what they wanted to focus on, all input, no output.

Her bitterness she directed at Porett. She was angry, very very angry, that she had been imprisoned in this way. She was an excellent organiser — Porett Technologies relied on her — and she knew a lot, she knew the kind of things Magicorp would pay well for. When she was out of this, Porett was going to suffer, suffer *so* much.

If she could have cried, she would have.

* * *

"We'll be in Akrea within a couple of hours," the short woman remarked.

"I hope they don't have cornfields, I'll go crazy if I see many more of these," she heard herself reply.

"Didn't used to be like this, it's the rains that fall in the Svalan hills, the Davians draw water off the river, use it for irrigation."

"What do they do with so much wheat? We've seen enough to feed all of Davia for ten years."

The other woman forced a smile. "Akrea, Estavia, they've a much larger population than they can feed, they monopolise the farming syndicates, just like in our country. It doesn't matter to them whether their grain comes from Davia, Galur, Soat, so long as they get it cheap, don't have to give much in return."

"I see," she felt herself nod, "economic rather than military domination. Take what they want from the lowlife, throw them a few manufactured goods in return."

"Comes of their being traders at heart. The reason we all speak Estavian is because when they had an empire they imposed it on us, just for the sake of trade."

"At least they don't make us pay for using it..."

"In a way, they do. Chaïen is much closer than Estavia, yet because many of the city states reverted to Old Chaïenish we hardly trade with them at all. Estavia, Akrea, they take a lot of our stuff, sell us our own grain in return, stock their ships full of zipped toys. You'll probably see more comsphere-2s in Rhiev than you ever did in Cala. And Rhiev isn't even the capital."

"Why don't they make their own artefacts? Why do they import ours?" She felt a twinge in her knee as her horse pulled to the right; Conley brought it back.

"Why should they bother? Why risk using a tool as dangerous as magic when they completely control the market anyway? Porett and Magicorp are driven by export orders, that's partly why they're successful. East/Trad is even *owned* by an Estavian consortium. The smaller companies specialise in one area, maybe even one product, and hope to grow one day like Magicorp did when its binders started selling by the cartload. Some just make cheap copies or obsolete kit for the home market most light-sets these days are cooked by smaller outfits with low profit margins."

"Where did you learn all this?" she asked. Elidia wanted to know, too.

"Had plenty of time to think, spent long enough in Cala Bay Town to get to know some people, merchants. How I met Medreph."

"You're full of surprises, Ro..."

* * *

It cost them five clicks to pass through into Akrea. It should have been four, but Conley had been a little too condescending to the captain.

Elidia was finding the ordeal endurable, but every moment her displeasure grew. Porett was going to rue what he'd done to her. Conley had eaten fish in the evening, she hated fish, it tasted ghastly. Conley had an itch on the back of her hand that she just would *not* scratch — couldn't she feel it or something? It was infuriating!

They were in a room in an inn. For some reason, Conley had asked Ro or whatever her name was whether it was safe to use the click-well. Did she suspect it was tagged? Ro had given it a nod, anyway.

It was conversation time again. Elidia could do nothing but listen, remember, plan revenge. She spoke, "Rhiev tomorrow, then?"

"Yes," replied Ro. "It's the nearest city both to the Purasan states and to Davia. It'll be near where the battle takes place." *Battle? What if Conley were killed?*

"Seems unfriendly here; is it just the country folk, or will Rhiev be like it, too?"

"They don't have country folk in Akrea, well, no peasants, everyone is educated. They dislike uncultured foreigners at the best of times, but they'll be very wary of us now. The Messenger hasn't got this far yet, but he could be crossing the border already for all anyone knows, so any non-Akrean will be treated as a potential enemy."

"You've been here before? Do you know their customs? Could we blend in?"

"You'll be fine, long as you don't speak. You're tall and blonde, so are most Akreans. Me, I'll have to bleach my hair or something, colour it lighter, they might think I'm younger than I am."

Elidia felt herself falling backwards onto the bed. These sudden whims of Conley's were really *irritating*. "How are you going to do that, then? Tinting magic isn't going to help." *Why not? Conley's supposed to be one of the hottest casters around.*

"They go heavy on cosmetics here, I'll buy a bottle of something, maybe get some powders and pencils, they'll think I've darkened my eyebrows and lashes." She didn't sound too enthusiastic to Elidia. Unsurprising — creams and shadows were a chore to apply and a devil to remove, that's why publishers made so much out of make-up books; stacked with short illuso-spells provably safe within a 5% margin of error, even schoolies could use them. Why didn't Ro?

Elidia wondered who would take the bed, but didn't find out. Conley removed her topcoat. In the pocket was the click-well. For Elidia, the universe disappeared.

She was unable to see, hear, feel anything. No background smells, noises, no faint murmur of a heartbeat. She was just a consciousness in emptiness, independent, unconnected to anything else. She knew nothing of movement, there was nothing *to* move, she was blind in every sense. Perhaps sleep was always like this? Perhaps when she awoke, she would forget it, as people lose memory of their dreams?

* * *

She had no awareness of how long it lasted, a moment or two, an hour? But she was sitting up, the room swimming into view, Porett slapping her face, her hair tumbling down over her eyes. She was laughing, or was it crying? Laughing, and more the harder Porett hit her.

Panic gripped her, she couldn't stop, nothing made sense any more, it was so funny, so frightening, she was shaking as the tears flew with every slap. He pulled something from a paper strip, pressed it to her temple. The serenity of sleep closed in.

* * *

She opened an eye. Porett was dozing in a corner. She was still on the couch. Every muscle ached, stiff. What time was it? What day? She propped herself up on an elbow, swung her feet to the carpet, tried to stand, fell. She felt so weak. Her throat was dry. She wanted to go back to sleep again.

Porett was kneeling beside her. "Liddy? You alright?" He cradled stroked her hair. "Bastard," she spat, lapsed into unconsciousness.

Chapter 16

Conley just had to smile when she saw Roween. She'd really done it rather well, but not because she'd planned it that way, it was all through sheer naïveté. Her hair was perfect, she'd bleached it first then washed in a golden tint; it was now roughly the same shade as Conley's natural ash. Her face was a gem of teenage exuberance, colours too strong, too richly applied, no blending, no subtlety whatsoever, just a block. Conley reminisced: she'd been the same herself, ten years ago, experimenting with twinkly illusions, trying to forge a vision of herself as she wished to be understood. Roween looked the consummate fifteen year-old.

She was also clearly embarrassed at her ineptitude. "I think maybe you should have put it on for me, I'm not really used to this..."

"No, no Roween, it's just right, I wouldn't change a thing." She paused a moment, raised a fingertip to her lips. "Except I think I might be able to..." She reached for one of the paintboxes, selected a pale near-white that contrasted with the greeny-brown Roween had used on her eyelids. "Close your eyes, I'll just dab some highlight here and here — yes, there, that's an improvement."

Roween picked up the handmirror, looked. Conley had placed the lighter tinge slightly off-centre, closer to her nose; the effect was to lessen the impact of her squint. She half-laughed, nodded. "That is better."

Conley replaced the applicator. "So you haven't used cosmetics much before? You've always been immune to magic?"

Roween slumped in a chair, gazed around the room. "No, not always, only the past four or five years. But before then, I scorned makeover spells anyway."

"Now that's interesting." Conley perched on the edge of the bedside table. "If you could have used illusion to uncross your eyes, why didn't you?"

Roween stared out of the window, over the rooftops of Rhiev. "Why should I? I am who I am, I don't want to be someone else. People who wear masks all the time do so for one of two reasons: they yearn to be something they're not, or they want to manipulate others."

Conley was about to argue, stopped herself. Roween *looked* the part of a moody, immature girl, but she was actually her senior. "I didn't mean to offend you, Ro, it's just that, well, you have this obsession with your eyes..."

"And I have every right!" She turned, burning. "People with straight eyes pretty them up, aim for some superior 'perfect' look, then assume for *themselves* that superiority. But the more they do that, the more they lower the likes of me; folk who are *different* become folk who are *flawed*. It's not fair — and it's not honest! Why do *you* wear grey lenses? Why do *you* lighten your hair?"

"I — I've never thought", confused. "Because I *like* being attractive? I suppose I have a mild sense of power, in a way — what you implied by 'manipulate'? But I could do more, really it's minimal. I'm not sure."

Roween sensed her own anger, relaxed, smiled. "Oh sorry, Con, my fault, it just fires me sometimes. I must've spent too long in Elet!" She stood, laughed. "Come on, let's go out, it's gloomy in here and the world is a safe place today."

* * *

It was warm, summery, and to Conley's delight Roween had at last eschewed her greatcoat in favour of an Akrean smock. Conley had sent her out for it alone the previous

evening, as the best way of ensuring she'd get something that made her look like she was still growing. The ploy had certainly worked: the chosen garment finished off Roween's disguise to ideal.

Now, of course, Conley wished she'd gone along too, bought something for herself. It wasn't that her clothes didn't fit in — Cala fashions owed more to Rhiev than to Taltu — it was just that she'd never *seen* such glittering shops before, could only marvel. Each was like one of Hease and Eller's specialist departments, dealing in one, narrow product line — only here they carried every variety imaginable. Small boutiques were crammed with exotic goods: Ca-Atlan coffee, leather riding boots, old coins and military insignia, savouries, fabrics, silk shirts, hats, floral perfumes, Davian sheet music, local lace, porcelain, jade, Berean bronzes four hundred years old, wines from Chaien, silver thimbles — *if you can afford silver for a thimble, why sew?* — Panavian quilts, beadwork, carved wooden figurines, old-time dolls... Some of the windows had the glass curved away, like it was cut from a cylinder, no reflections. And these weren't even the *fanciest* streets, there were arcades with beadles who wouldn't let you in unless you were formally dressed.

"What do you think of Porett?" Roween asked.

"Porett?" She'd been watching the pastry-seller on the other side of the street. "In what way?"

"Oh, just general. Do you like him?"

She clicked her tongue. "Well he's no great looker, not a total disaster I suppose, but he wears his hair back like this," she demonstrated, "and he has the mangliest beard I ever saw." She nodded. "He's just being individual, though, old-fashioned in an eccentric kind of way. Yes, I'd say I like our Porett."

"I remember him from when he was a student; he was much the same then. Does he have a girlfriend?"

"A girlfriend?" She frowned, smiled. "You know, I haven't ever thought... No, I can't see it, he doesn't have the time. Besides, he's guarded by his secretary, and *she's* so stuffy I doubt anyone could even get her to a dinner table, let alone a bed."

Roween nodded. "That's what I'd have expected. What about his personality? Does he really like what he does?"

Conley wagged her finger. "Now come on, Roween, not more of this 'magic corrupts' stuff! Porett lost both parents young, and that's enough to turn anyone peculiar. Besides, I think he'd have succeeded at whatever he did, he's got that kind of mentality. He would certainly have excelled at anything rule-based — law, medicine, navigation — and his single-mindedness would have propelled him into a position of power whatever career he chose. Magic was just the horse, not the rider."

"But law and the rest have formal, written, ethical codes. Where's the equivalent for magic? The only morality Porett knows is what he acquired when he was cutting convoluted, prickly gesture segs as a year 3 undergrad: selfishness, and the supremacy of knowledge."

"He's a damn more ethical than — " She broke off. "What's going on ahead?"

A man was standing on a box outside a light set shop, addressing a crowd assembled before him.

"Just some religious crazy, let's cross the — "

"No, wait, I want to hear what he's saying." She touched Roween's arm, stopped.

He was speaking in a rich baritone, trained, charged with charisma. "And so I say to you: let the Messenger into your heart, as I did! Feel the joy, the euphoric *joy*, when he takes your troubles as his own. For the Messenger is the well of living water from which this rapture flows."

"Rapture! The rapture!" sang out a voice.

He snatched on it. "Aye, the rapture! The rapture of change, for I am a changed man, a man full of love where once I was empty of all but hatred. I have changed, changed from a wasted soul to a man complete. All things exist to change!"

"They do, they do!"

"Pray to the Messenger, that he may gain from your strength as you do from his! Meet the gods, here," he pounded his left breast, "know them, choose one to be your special! Develop your relationship, let it grow, as your faith will grow, that you too may be born anew!"

"Ast, of the sun!"

"Ried, the sky lord!"

He held out his arms, calmed them, pastorally. "The Party of the Message has three candidates at the forthcoming — "

Conley sneered, crossed the street to where Roween was waiting.

"Well, Con, you believe any of that stuff?" She took her hands out of her pockets.

"Incoherent, disconnected tosh! I'd have to have a brain of putty!"

A sigh. "Unfortunately for us, lots of people do..."

* * *

They'd stopped at a pavement café, bought two frothy coffees and a mid-morning roll.

"I've been watching the other waiter," Conley announced between sips. "He seems a real soury."

"What do you mean?" She was waiting for her own drink to cool.

"Well, he never smiles, but he has this sort of permanent smirking attitude, like he knows something we don't."

"Probably does, or at least thinks he does. I've noticed there are two types of Akreans: menacingly polite ones like him — they're the Message lot — and ones like our waiter, doom-aware but sad, ultimately helpless."

"I don't know which is worse."

She stirred the coffee. "And all because of magic..."

Conley suddenly snapped. "I've had enough of this, Roween! Look, you *have* to tell me more, it's only fair! I know practically nothing!"

The outburst caught her unprepared. "I, but there's so much, I have to think, I can't simply — "

"Well just give me the beginning then! What was it happened four years ago that gave you your magic-deadening skills?"

Roween leaned forward, almost covered her eyes with her hand, remembered the artificial face, drummed on the table instead. "Can't put it off forever, I suppose. We'll go to the park, less ears there." She picked up the cup, drained it in one continued swig.

* * *

They were walking along the edge of an ornamental lake heat-hazed in the noonday sun. Carp swam lazily in the clear, clean waters, couples in rowboats heedless of their presence, eyes only for one another. Roses grew by the side of the path: neatly pruned bushes, heavy with heads of pale pink, scarlet, soft orange. It was a scene deliberately calculated to inure serenity, yet too weak to influence Conley: she was edgy, impatient, waiting for answers...

"How many clicks we have left?" asked Roween.

She fingered the well in her pocket. "Just under six hundred, although I could have spent the lot this morning!"

"When we leave here, we'll have to convert it, gold and gems. They don't have them further west."

"Click-wells? Or gold and gems?"

"Either... I got some stuff of Medreph's stashed in a pouch, should see us through if there's anything unforeseen comes up; it's quite a sum."

They skirted the lake a little further. There were other people around, sparing them glances, looking them up and down, but no more than Conley was used to. She hid a secret glee that they could wander through a park in the heart of Rhiev, momentous religious and political upheaval in the air, and yet pass for Akreans, no-one even suspecting. Had Roween done it before? Perhaps that was why she bobbed her hair? She'd maybe scythed off the bleached ends from the last time she was here?

"What do you know about spell-proving, Con?"

"What do I *know*?" She was surprised. "All there *is* to know! Spell-proving was the subject of my thesis! It was me who worked out the length-formulation test that everyone uses, so you can prove all those multi-K spells without their blowing up in your face."

Roween nodded, assenting. "The general rule is that each of the five principal gestures is assigned one of three types. They usually use colours — red, green and blue. Fist and wrist are green, palm is blue, fingers and point are red. For a spell to be safe to use, the total number of gestures credited to one of the three colours mustn't be less than half the overall number of gestures. If they're all below, then the spell *may* still be safe, but it'll more likely explode — taking with it your hand, maybe your whole body, your mind, anything else close by."

"Very good. The specific rule I developed is that it's not the *total* number that matters, it's the lengths of sequences. You count consecutive gestures of the same colour, subtracting one from the length of each series, and total those decremented *lengths* rather than the individual gestures. If it comes to half or more, the spell is still safe. It means many big spells, with a lot of gestures, can still be proved reliable. Before, they could be very close to having the right balance, but the large number of gestures would tend to normalise the distribution, so no single colour would dominate. My work chops away the spurious figures you get for individual, isolated colours, and brings the computation more into line with reality."

"There are still working spells that are not provable within that system, though."

Conley rocked her hand. "Yes, it's a necessary condition for success, but not alone sufficient. Tighter than the old way, nonetheless. For example, prosthetic-oriented spells used to be unproven, as were ones that altered living body tissue. People took big risks doing augmentations. Now, replacements on dead meat are provably safe, so if you want stronger muscles then you swap your existing ones for thetics. No-one bothers chancing death by souping up actual attached limbs any more; it's *likely* they'd have no problems if they did, but no-one can ever quite be sure unless it's proven..."

"And you designed this new proof system all yourself? No help from anyone?"

Conley was about to reply with indignance, but something about Roween's demeanour told her it wasn't worth it. She drooped her shoulders. "I don't think so, no. It didn't

seem like it at the time, but afterwards I realised that I might have been fed a lot of the leads, guided towards the solution. I thought maybe my father had really discovered the technique, though he denies it." She sighed. "But I guess I'm — no, I *know* it: I'm a fraud, Ro."

They meandered beneath the leafy shade of silver birches, the light breeze rustling their branches, carrying away the sound of hoof on cobblestone from the streets ringing the park.

"So do you know whose original work it was, then?"

"No, I don't — I wish I did. I just want to tell them I'm sorry." There was a sadness in her voice that wrenched at Rowen, more strongly even than had her tale of childhood despair.

"You were used, Con, don't reproach yourself." She reached for where her pocket should have been, snapped her fingers in annoyance when she remembered her coat was back in the hotel. "I'm going to tell you something, but first I have to present my credentials. We better sit down."

There was a bench beneath one of the trees at the edge of the copse, positioned to unveil a grand vista down a lime-outlined avenue, statuesque fountain at the end.

"The best segments, the ones in the libraries, they're the colourless ones, like Chewt-Farmer, right?"

Conley looked across to her, trying to pay attention, still downcast by her admission, not understanding fully why she'd made it. She felt so *shabby*. "Yes, er, they have roughly the same count in all colours, so there's a minimal effect on overall totals. Some have variants, biased a little to favour a particular colour."

"Well, what about sequences that are monochrome? Fist, wrist, fist, wrist, fist, wrist?"

Conley puffed her cheeks, let out the air. "They might do something on their own, but most would be pretty useless except for fine-tuning spells of that colour, or ones so far over to another they'd make no odds."

"What if they were *provably* useless? What if you could guarantee that they didn't do anything at all, ever, no matter what other gestures surrounded them?"

Conley was curious. "What do you mean?"

"If you look at blue spells, ones dominated by palms, the main work is done by short groups of five or six gestures, glued together. You rarely see blue segments more than about twenty long because they don't *do* anything, they're inert."

"Yes, that's true, I'd noticed that."

"Now there are many gluing triplets, all genuinely colourless. They take the form RGB, RBG, BRG, BGR, GRB and GBR. So, what if you had RGB, then a thousand blues, then BGR to bring it back to red."

"Well if the RGB came at a glue point, so the earlier gestures didn't affect it, you'd get a binding sequence a thousand and six long that did life all."

"And what if you spliced that into a spell that was five-hundred long and not provably safe?"

Conley was stunned. *You'd get a fifteen-hundred spell that was way over half blue, but with the active parts unchanged.* The same trick could bring any sequence into safety, colourless, multi-coloured, whatever. She felt her jaw drop, couldn't stop it. She realised she looked a complete idiot gaping like that, but her mind was reeling with the implications. Maybe she really *was* an idiot? "Hot, Ro," she gasped, "why haven't you told anyone this before?"

"Because the last time I told anybody anything like that, they ripped me off."

Conley wasn't as devastated as she thought she should have been; she was quite calm, really. It was a relief to know, at last. It was also very humbling. Roween was in a different league as far as magical research went; she could never hope to match her. All the searching, the travelling, well, at least it had taught her a lesson. She'd have harsh words to say to her father when she arrived back home.

Roween was slumped in a corner, watching her pack. She was tearful, but had made no attempt to stop her. A green-brown streak traced her cheek. Conley couldn't help but pity her, she looked so defenceless. *How does she always manage to do that?* She tried a smile. Roween opened her mouth, couldn't seem to say anything.

"It's for the best, Ro. You're in the clouds compared to me. I'll stay with Porett Technologies, take up some managerial post, sink into well-deserved oblivion." She felt upset herself, now. "Don't worry, I won't tell anyone about your latest discovery."

"Please don't go, Con." Roween looked away, biting at her bottom lip, innocent of the gloss that coated it.

"I must, Ro." She realised she'd stopped putting her kit into the saddlebags. "I've stolen from you once, I won't do it again, don't let it trouble you."

"You didn't steal, it's not your fault, you didn't know. And I don't *care* if you take anything else, it won't matter a damn soon as someone else figures gestures are worth toss."

"That story you told me in the cave, you still stick by it?"

"It's true, Con. Come to Liagh Na Laerich: if I'm right, we save everything; if I'm wrong, shows I'm not as infallible as you think."

Conley gazed down at her pack, started to fill it again. "Find someone else, Ro, not me. I'm broken." She pulled at a strap. "Just one thing, though, before I go, you have to tell me, would it have worked?"

"Would what have worked, Con?"

"If I'd discovered how you killed spells, could I have inverted it, found a way to extend them?"

She waited for a reply. None came. So, Roween would deny her even that? She tarried awhile longer. No, time to leave. She turned: Roween was scribbling frantically on a scrap of paper. Her eyes were dry, wide. She looked up at Conley.

"Hot, Con, you could! I never thought of that."

Conley blinked.

Chapter 17

Elidia awoke in her flat, in her own bed. She sat up. She felt fine. She didn't usually sleep in this nightdress, had she put it on last night? She didn't remember last night. There were a row of sticky cloth patches on her arm, two of them with 'Do Not Remove!' written on, Dr Porett's handwriting. She left the others on, too, just in case.

She looked in the mirror. What a mess! Her face colours had completely gone, her lips were thin and pale, her eyes lacked definition. Her hair was a tangled knit — how in the world had it ever got *that* bad?

Outside, it looked afternoon. *Afternoon?! She must have overslept!* She walked into her slippers, pulled her hair back to give some semblance of tidiness, and tapped her comsphere.

Caltra answered. "Dr Porett is on his way to see you," she advised, tapped out.

Why was Porett coming here, to her home? Elidia wandered back to the bedroom, picked up a makeover booklet. She thumbed through it one-handed, gestured a simple teeth-cleanser with the other.

* * *

When Porett arrived, she was her usual presentable self. Her normal workday suit was a little creased, so she'd switched to the royal blue one. She'd chosen a navy leg-sheen to match.

Porett asked her to sit down, so she did. She offered him a cup of tea, he declined.

"You didn't remove the shots?" he asked her.

"No, of course not," she replied, affecting righteous indignity as if it were natural.

"The top one is a pain filter, you'd better keep that on. The bottom is a memory blank, experimental; it works on bunnies, never tried before on people — I had to send to CBT for it. You can peel it off now."

She pulled up her sleeve, careful not to wrinkle it, until the shot was exposed. Carefully, she slid a thumbnail underneath and removed it.

She sat still, thinking, looked at Porett. "I resign. Get out of my apartment."

Porett didn't move, but was agitated. "Calm down, Elidia, it's not my fault, *I* didn't know what would happen when Conley broke the connection. I had the sleep shot off you as soon as you stopped talking, hit you with as many wakers as I could. You'd have been dead if I'd left it any longer."

"What do you mean, 'talking'? I wasn't talking."

"Ah, yes you were, Liddy, sorry, I needed to know what was happening so I had Penderley come in and zip you with a proto CS-490. It's something she's been working on with Madrett, new comms slices. For a while, you were part comsphere-4."

"So you know everything that happened? Marvellous. Well you have your information now, so *go*. I'll get a job elsewhere, I — I can't work for you any longer."

Porett remained seated.

"Didn't you hear me? I told you to go, get out of my *home*."

"I can't let you quit like that, Liddy, you know too much about Porett Technologies." His voice was impassive.

"Well try stop me!" She was on her feet, heading for the door.

Porett stood up, began gesturing. "Liddy," he called, "do you know what this is?"

She turned, looked. *Point, fingers, point, wrist, palm, fist...*

Porett smiled at her puzzlement. He opened his left hand. In it was the carved handgrip she'd used in the link to Conley.

"When I fixed your focus to the grip, it did more than just help your attaching skills. It was really *fixed* — the grip *itself* became your focus. So whenever I hold it, I can cast any spell I like at you as if you were making a focus for me — whether you are or not."

"And what spell are you casting?"

"It's the final one for a shell, you've had the other three already. A husk they sometimes call it..."

Her eyes widened. She pulled at the door, opened it.

"You won't make it down the hall."

He was right. She stopped at the top of the stairs, frozen like a mannequin in Hease & Eller's window. A faintly bemused smile flickered on her lips. The dark-rimmed eyes were vacant.

Porett approached, stroked her cheek.

Chapter 18

The hotel restaurant charged fifteen clicks a head at the carvery, but this evening the pair had decided to blow some, to celebrate their fellowship. Roween was once more playing her youthful rôle to perfection, enthusiastically living the life that had been denied her ten years ago. *Denied? Rejected.*

Conley felt free. Two men, dining with whom she assumed were their wives, were giving her the eye. She sent back all the right signs, teasing, provocative. Her self-esteem was restored, she could forget her past. The future was now, existence meaningful again.

There was a strained atmosphere in here, though, she felt it. She'd noticed the same feeling in the park, earlier. Anxiety, people worrying, knowing that things were about to be thrown into chaos any day, unable to influence events; just waiting, trying to behave normally until the inevitable finally happened.

A tall figure approached their table. *All Akreans are tall; this one isn't the right kind of fair-haired.* He pulled up a chair, sat down. *Sennary of Castle Whiting?*

"Good evening, Conley, Roween. Small world."

"Well, you found us." Conley tried to sound like she'd been expecting him. "What are you going to do?" She eyed Roween. Her companion was staring at him in a most un-Roween fashion.

"Talk. Perhaps, a little later, dance."

Conley threw back her head. This was her father's doing: he'd sent out Sennary to find her, bring her back; Sennary would be good at that.

Roween was looking almost bashful, timid. She obviously recognised the man, and he knew her, too, he'd used her name. Yet he wasn't paying her the slightest attention.

"So have you been following us for long?"

He laughed, loud, strong. He smiled; Conley liked his smile, it was bold. "Picked you out this morning," he said. "Ansle directed me here four days ago, took me three horses to catch you up."

Roween swallowed, nervously. "Must be important," she ventured. Sennary did nothing to indicate he'd heard.

"You two know each other?" asked Conley. Roween replied with a short nod. Sennary turned and faced Roween; she instantly looked at Conley as if in panic.

"Oh yes, we've met — haven't we, my dear? Of course, your hair was darker then, and longer, and you weren't wearing any of this fanciful face-paint," he waved his hand, palm uppermost, "but your eyes are the same."

Roween, put down her knife and fork, dabbed at her mouth with a serviette. "I'll be in our room, Conley, if you need me." Hesitant, she stood up. Sennary grasped her wrist, tight. She pulled, hard; his arm didn't even leave the table.

"Don't go too far, Sage, I may wish to pay you a visit myself."

"Is that..." she started, but cut off as he released her. Involuntarily, she rubbed her wrist. If he'd wanted, he could have squeezed it to crack as easily as she could an egg. She gave Conley a muddled sort of wave, headed quickly for the exit. Sennary watched her leave.

"Well you did a good job of fazing Roween, Sennary. And she's sensitive about her eyes."

He looked back at Conley. "I think she frightened herself." He popped one of Roween's uneaten peas into his mouth.

"So why are you here?"

"Progress report," he shrugged, "your Daddy wants to make sure you're safe."

"My 'Daddy' is wondering why whatever tag he had on me has disappeared," she replied.

"Perhaps," Sennary conceded, "but he *does* worry. What father wouldn't when his daughter is so far from home?"

"Mine wouldn't, the scheming..." She didn't finish the sentence.

Sennary popped another pea, swallowed it. "So why *did* his tag disappear?"

She snarled a grin. "That *is* why he sent you. Well I can't say I know, and I wouldn't tell you if I did."

"Oh, but you do know." Sennary frowned, his eyes suddenly boring into hers. She breathed in, sharply; she was soft for eyes. "Young Roween up there has a way of negating magic: some spell or other that cleaned off your ring, your lenses, and some poor bastard's arm." He leaned back. "Maybe *you* can do it, too..."

Conley relaxed, chuckled. "No, Sennary, I can't, although I dearly wish I could. She won't tell me how she does it." A pause. "Tell father I'm working on it." She cut another piece of lamb.

He rose. Despite his size, he was lithe, moved easily. Conley could sense the hard muscle beneath his awkwardly formal shirt, silky fresh, no unkempt creases. He crouched down, low, whispered in her ear, "I'll see how well I can do on my own, then."

"Room 620," Conley mumbled after him as he turned for the door.

* * *

It was a while later when Conley decided she'd better rescue Roween. Sennary wasn't likely to be violent, but Roween only came up to his chest, he could be physically intimidating. Besides, Conley felt sure that Sennary had some other way to work on Roween. Blackmail, maybe? Bribery? Not monetary, perhaps positional? Maybe father wanted Roween's services, was ready to acknowledge her abilities, offer her a post at the Academy? She'd certainly reacted uncharacteristically earlier, so Sennary must have *some* kind of leverage on her. Come to that, how did the two know each other anyway?

She opened the door, walked in to the sound of laughter. Roween glanced over to her, guiltily. She was sitting on the bed, one leg folded under her, facing Sennary; he was lounging in a padded armchair which seemed to look much smaller than it used to. Conley appraised the situation immediately: Mister Smoothy was playing on Roween's vulnerability — telling her how young she looked, how she attracted him, her slender figure, tender lips, not to mention her crossed eyes (if he could help it).

Sennary didn't seem to welcome the interruption, but Conley noted the way he lit up when he looked over to her.

She acted. Slowly, alluringly, she slinked across to him, draped herself on his lap, arm loose around his neck. He raised an eyebrow, but took the bait. He didn't seem to notice Roween staring open-mouthed, first at Conley, then at him.

"You said something about dancing," murmured Conley, softly, investing her s's with the slight slur of someone who's tipsy with wine, inviting.

"Yes, loosen up a bit, been in the saddle too long." He stood, lifting Conley with graceful ease, setting her on her feet. He looked over to Roween. "We'll finish our conversation tomorrow."

The pair left. Roween didn't say anything, but later she went in secret to watch them dance, peering over the balcony; Conley saw her.

* * *

Roween was awake first, of course. She'd been asleep when Conley had returned, but had heard her close the door. She donned her smock, went into the bathroom.

She didn't straight away recognise herself in the mirror. Her face was a mess, smudged silly with the eye-shadow she should have taken off the night before. Her new-blond hair was awry, and stiffer than it used to be, like the tint she'd used had coated it in a thick, rough resin. She took the face cloth, dampened it. How could she *ever* have believed that Sennary might find something of virtue in a visage such as hers? Even with normal eyes she'd be plain — these made her plain ugly. *Don't kid yourself: dying your hair and painting your face isn't going to change anything. You always knew that — your inside's as unattractive as your outside.*

She began to rub at her cheeks. It wasn't coming off, just blotching. She was supposed to use some of that turquoise stuff. She went back into the bedroom to look for it in the bag on the dresser. Conley was still asleep. *How easily she took Sennary, just when it suited her. She out-guns me completely.*

Back in the bathroom, removing the colours in greasy smears. Maybe she'd try a paler brown today, she still needed a disguise. Conley had done her a favour, really, shown her what a fool she could be at times. He'd seemed interested, though, he'd listened, laughed, told stories of his own, he'd touched her, inoffensively. She was staring into her eyes. Reflecting. She couldn't read signals, was too eager to misinterpret them, or missed them altogether.

Hastily, she reached for the soap, started to wash her face. *Forget him, he was just leading you along, plying you for information, he wasn't really bothered about how you felt, your fears, your hopes, he was just looking for a way to reach you, find out what you knew.* Talking to him had been so easy, natural, he must've had some training in making people open up.

She picked up the foundation, it was in like a mini wrap-pouch, she hadn't noticed that before, East/Trad must make them special for Khrov and the other cosmetics firms.

* * *

There was a knock at the door. Another knock before she could answer it. Sennary entered, shut it behind him. Hadn't Conley locked it?

"I have to leave. Three hundred top Akreans died last night, magic — only remote binders by the sound of it, but none of the victims knew how to break them. Now the whole *place* is in turmoil, the guards are arresting all foreigners, and it's only a matter of time before they'll be here for you. Ansle's told me to rendezvous with an MSR squad, head west, you want — "

"What's that?" Conley had woken up.

"Quiet, Con," Roween, snapped, "he's in a hurry."

"There are gangs of Message followers on the streets too, attacking people, flaying, raping, shouting for Lon to save them, blaming us — whipping up fear, frenzy. It's not *safe* any more, the whole country is heating up under pressure: it'll burst, blow through Davia, destroy us. You want to come with me? You might stand a chance of getting out

unharmmed."

"Yes," answered Conley, "No," Roween.

"Which is it to be? I can't wait much longer."

"We'll stay," said Conley. "You go ahead. Catch you somewhere Purasan."

Sennary looked at her, kissed Roween on the cheek, left.

Chapter 19

Ansle didn't recognise the knock. "Enter," he called, looking up. Sennary's face appeared round the door. "So the Purasan border was blocked?" He put down his pen, slid his left hand under the desk.

"I was called back by The King:" Sennary's arm avoided the blackboard, "I was instructed to bring you this." He took a small box from a belt pouch, opened it, removed a medal.

"What's *that* for?" Ansle was moving his concealed hand as quickly as he could manage without its showing in the upper arm.

"There's a campaign medal for everyone in the magical support regiment, and you're their commander-in-chief; look on it as a perk."

"The campaign isn't over yet," nonchalant.

"Well don't take it up with me, I'm just the messenger." He looked warily at Ansle's left arm, saw it withdraw from its hiding place, rest on the desk.

"Put it on that pile of books."

"Justan said I've to pin it on you personally. He seemed to find it amusing."

"Where is Justan now?" More time...

"North Davia when I met up with him. Look, can we get this over with? I'm busy."

"Why didn't he call me about it? Why did he send *you*, not Nolley?"

"I don't know; perhaps some private joke. General Nolley is west somewhere, recruiting."

"Make a focus."

"What?"

"Make a focus." Ansle demonstrated. "I want to check you're not tagged."

"Tagged? Why would I be tagged? What would it matter if I was?"

"Just *do* it!"

He obeyed; Ansle started gesturing. Sennary's eyes studied the mage's hand, sliding through the motions, slower than usual. "Can't you hurry it up, Chancellor? I don't like having to hold a fo — "

Suddenly, he clasped his chest: a pain, searing, agony. He dropped the focus, staggered back, too late.

"The trouble with you, Chewt, is you're so *damned* predictable."

"What? You can't..."

"That was a quickbind, you're suffering a heart-attack."

"But, you, it was a tag-check..."

"With my right hand, yes, but my left did the damage. Oh, didn't you realise that it was an illusion on the desk?"

He was sinking to the floor.

"Not as good as yours, of course, no audible or tactile components, and only a short duration. But then it didn't need to be *perfect*, did it? Just enough to fool the gullible."

The Sennary illusion broke, Chewt was gasping, clutching her chest.

Ansle indicated an eye. "These are MedSpell night lenses, I bought them last week. Day vision is impaired, but I can see infra-red. Your *Sennary* didn't emit heat, did he? Of course, *you'd* forget that. Your outline glowed through his image like a candle behind a sheet."

Chewt was twitching now, nearly gone.

"You failed, Chewt. Too unimaginative. You relied on your speciality. Stupid."

He rolled over the body, tugged the medal from her hand. It was a Magicorp binder now. Placed above his heart, activated, he'd have gone the same way as her. He put it against a book, said, "Congratulations". It stuck.

Reliable to the end, our Chewt.

Chapter 20

Elidia's feet were aching, she should move them. Her realisation of that fact, and of her awareness that she had realised it, slipped into her mind as naturally as if there had been no interruption. She relaxed her stance. Her memories of the past week were intact. She checked her arm: there were no shots there, nothing to suppress recall. Porett had told her to stand and wait. She had obeyed. How long ago was that? An hour? Two?

There was a binder on the door, she couldn't leave. But then, no-one could enter, either. Was this a mistake? Had Porett forgotten to renew the shell?

The comsphere on his desk glowed red. *Red?* His comsphere-3: her hopes waned. Stiffly, she walked over, seated herself, tapped in.

"Elidia, how are you feeling?" It was Porett.

She tapped out.

She considered her options. Porett had her well and truly nailed. He could husk her up again any time he chose; there was no escape. She was worse than dead.

She opened the blinds on the nearby window. She could throw herself out, end it all now, but then she'd never have revenge. She really *wanted* revenge...

She could try to escape, find the grip, break it? No chance! Perhaps there was a way to redirect her focus elsewhere? Yes: if she could invest it in some other artefact, then destroy that, she'd be free again. But where would she find someone who could do an FF before Porett twigged what she was about? She was bound to be tagged.

The comsphere shone red again; she ignored it. She was in Porett's office in the main building — maybe she should just wreck the place, then, set it on fire? Perhaps she could use the comsphere to contact someone outside, let them know what Porett was doing — she was sure it was illegal. She had a hunch Porett wouldn't have left her his precious comsphere-3 if that were possible, though. That globe was spooky...

He hadn't mistreated her while she was a husk: she'd been hurting at times, but it had meant nothing to her. He'd kept her moving, eating, remembered regular toilet trips. No sleep: husks didn't sleep.

The comsphere went green, started flashing. She poked it.

"I have a proposition, Liddy."

She laughed, scornful. "You want to *bargain* with me? I'm *through*, I don't exist any more, I'm a puppet. Shell me again, I'll do whatever you want." She sounded so abject to herself.

"I want you to link with Conley for me, find out what's happening."

Elidia wiped her cheek. "I see. Husks can't initiate magic, the most they can manage is a focus. You give me a few moments of freedom, in return for which I jump through your hoop, then you take away my mind again until next time. No deal. Do your worst."

"Wait, don't cut off, I have a solution."

She gazed into the crystal through eyes brimmed with tears.

"Remember the shot I gave you, the memory-suppressor? I've found someone who can make it permanent. Do this link for me, he'll wipe the past two weeks from your mind. You'll wake up in hospital, we'll tell you some story about your passing out at work, within a couple of days you'll be back in your old job bright as a brass button, none the wiser. What do you say?"

"Do you treat all your shareholders this way?" She tapped the comsphere, watched him

fade.

He'd offered a way out. He probably didn't *enjoy* keeping her as an automaton, any more than she liked having been one. He'd be getting away with everything, of course, he'd never be punished for all he'd done to her. She'd be trading justice for cognition. She flicked her hair back, irritably, she detested it loose. Perhaps she could fall in with his suggestion, and yet subvert it, warn herself somehow of what had happened, tell herself to leave, sell out to Magicorp. Or MedSpell — what would they do if she described to them Porett's latest project? Probably recruit The Queen of Davia!

She selected a pencil from the holder to her right, put the com-3 into a drawer.

* * *

She tapped in, Porett responded immediately. That man had unbelievably fast reactions. "I keep my shares?" He nodded. "Then I agree."

"The password for the binder is the same as the switchword." She smiled. When he'd instructed her to activate it, she was told to say 'minor'. 'Miner?' 'Mynah?'

* * *

She was sorely tempted to snap the grip as soon as he passed it her, but if she did he'd just slap her with a sleep shot, bundle her off to the bottom of a lake somewhere. She thought of the letter she'd placed in her desk, her bound drawer. *Patience: revenge will come.*

"Ready?"

She closed her eyes, squeezed the wooden handle, succumbed to sleep and Conley's world.

She was actually holding the click-well. "I thought you said we could sell it?" Walking down stairs, uncarpeted, a back exit.

The other girl was blonde now, wearing hideously amateur eye-shad, speaking through lips far too red. "Magic's taboo, anything could be hiding extra zip, same as those notepad 'samples' that minced some of the generals."

"They'll take clicks again when it's all over, though. This has survived three of your blasts, are you telling me it's worthless?"

"Anyone going to buy it from *you*? You sound as foreign to them as Medreph does to us. Me, I look like a schooly here, they'll think I stole it. You may as well chuck it!"

Elidia panicked. Conley slid the well back into her pocket.

"Have you seen enough of Rhiev, Con?" she was asked.

"Mobs on the streets, fires, looting, rival army units chopping each other, local parliament suspended... Yes, I think I have a broad impression of anarchy, now." They reached the bottom of the stairway, went outside.

"All because three-quarters of Akrea's top-notch elite got their hearts stopped or their heads rotted."

"I know your game, Ro: stay just long enough for a lecture on the evils of magic, then head for safety."

"Well I'm right, it *is* all due to magic."

"Nonsense!" They were entering private stables, monograms everywhere, a hotel chain? "These rioters are the Messenger's lot, howling for their gods to avenge them, to seek out the sorcerous heretics."

"That's just an interaction between Justan's plans and the Messenger's. You've read the news, the Messenger had *warned* people they were on a death list. They thought he was trying to restrict their movements, reduce their effectiveness while he instigated a popular revolt. Two days later half of them are dead, magic's fault, and Message followers naturally start pushing for war. Whoever gets here first takes the country. Lots of blood."

There was no-one with the horses any more. 'Ro' threw on her saddlebag, Conley's was already there, must have been protected somehow.

"No," she argued, "this is religion's doing as much as magic's. Without magic, we'd still have rebellion here."

They mounted up. "But fewer deaths. Magic is unfair, those people stood *zero* chance, it's furtive, dishonourable."

"Its users are the ones without honour, magic is neutral." They rode off into the narrow streets, the shadows of Rhiev's tall buildings closing in on them, driving them onwards.

* * *

Porett didn't have enough yet, he hadn't broken the connection. No-one had spoken for the past hour as they'd made their way through block after block of high-cut offices, glittery shops, later sliding to lowtime franchises, one-off repair shops, converted housing. Towers rose again on the outskirts, boxlike flats, hives, drab places for drab people with drab lives. Was Elidia herself such a person? Sister superficial?

It was getting dark, beginning to rain. Down the road marched a troop of soldiers, coats like the small woman's, muddied up, drooping, disheartened. "What news from Rhiev?" called the captain, dripping. He had a defiant strength about him, a beacon to his men, a flame to Conley.

'Ro' surprised him — and Elidia — by answering, she looked the junior of the pair. "The city is lawless, nothing is open, no-one works. Tolov holds the citadel."

The captain glanced back at his bedraggled squad. "We'll join Tolov. Nowhere else for us in any case, the Estavian army has advanced in the north, taken two provinces. They'll hold there for now, they've claimed their share of the spoils. Leave the rest for others to fight over."

* * *

They rode through many towns — Akrea was a mass of people. It was late when they finally cut across country, found a barn. They didn't light a fire, probably daren't. Outside, the rain was teeming.

"Where are we heading? Dreimen?" *Dreimen?* "My geography isn't too good for these parts."

It was so dark she could hardly make out 'Ro', propped against a cart, only her false-fair hair betraying her location. "Dreimen, yes, that's west of here. It'll be much the same, though, we best sit it out, see who wins."

"Where? Here? With the Purasans?"

"Not here, maybe the mountains south of Dreimen, should be safe there, we can buy

provisions."

"What about our meeting with Sennary?" Elidia felt Conley's heart pump as she said that, a short adrenaline boost.

"He can take his faraway looks and his perfect teeth and his velvet voice, and drop them on some other poor doxy."

"Gone off him, Ro? Look, I'm sorry about what I did, but he was only trying to milk you, find your weak spots, how he could reach you, plunder you for information."

A half-hearted laugh. "He succeeded there right enough, I almost believed it, all he was saying. No, you did me a good turn, Con, do it another time if I ever go stupid on someone again."

Elidia noticed Conley was strumming her fingers lightly on her thigh. *Fidgeting? Thinking?*

"Do you want to tell me how it is you know him, Ro?"

Silence. More strumming.

"May as well, it's part of the story, nothing special really. The night I left home, I was in the library, dusting books. Da comes up, says the chancellor is here to see me, he's brought soldiers. The chancellor? For me? With soldiers? He's come to make sure no-one can tell he's scammed my work. I have to hide, but where? Da suggests the bound-book room, he knows the password to the door binder. So, I sneak in there. They don't find me, but I throw my first magic wipe, it's huge, people upstairs, they're shouting. I run, straight into Sennary, he's alone. I'm done, he's going to turn me over, but no, he sees I'm just a kid, frightened near-witless. He lets me go, I flee to CBT, Ansle never finds out. The end."

Conley spoke slowly, clearly. "You're saying my father tried to have you murdered?" Her hands were tensed.

"Looking back, probably not, least not straight away — he'd see if I had any other neat ideas first. In a way, I have to thank him; if he hadn't have come for me, I wouldn't have hidden in the bound-book room, and if I hadn't done that I wouldn't have — ". She stopped. "No, I'll tell you that some other time, not yet."

Conley was exasperated. "Go on, Ro, you can't leave it there! What happened with the books?"

"Night night, Con."

* * *

She was being chased up scarlet-hued stairs. The walls lacked definition, just flat tokens representing reality. *What? Conley's dreaming!*

"Come back here, come back!" shrieked a voice close behind her. Loud, thump-thump noises came in, exaggerated, feet bounding up steps.

"You're evil, I despise you, I want to kill you," she was saying, her voice high, tearful. She could hear cracking behind her, something lashing out, striking wood, walls.

The scene suddenly folded round, they were in another room, she could see Conley herself. *Odd, reconstructive?* An older woman was facing her off across a table. In her hand she had a stick, very detailed, clear, significant to Conley. The woman was snarling, making cat noises. She looked a bit like Conley, same fervid eyes. Suddenly, she seized a figurine from the table, hurled it. It clipped Conley's arm, shattered against the wall. Elidia could feel her heart racing. Her dream-heart? She couldn't tell.

"You can't hurt me any more, mother, I'm past hurting. I don't love you, I never have, you're a monster, I'd be better off dead."

The creature across the table screamed — a terrible, strangled scream. She advanced on Conley, Conley didn't move. Things folded again, to Conley's eye view, there was just her and her mother, nothing else, nothing except the stick, the inescapable stick raised above her head, the stick thrashing down, the laugh.

Conley was awake. She opened her eyes, but it was dark. She breathed slowly, calmed herself. *Did she dream like that each night? What had happened to her? Would Porett have realised it was a dream? Did he even know she'd been asleep?*

Did Elidia know she'd been asleep herself? When Conley drifted off, had she link-slept too?

* * *

Morning, more rain.

"If you spell the rain off your hair, they'll realise you have do-it-yourself magics. You're going to have to get wet like the rest of us."

"Don't make up today, it'll just run, there's no need."

"I wasn't planning on it anyway."

She walked between the bales, looked outside. "It's warm, I think I should remove some layers or I'll stew under that cape." She dropped back her jacket, pulled an arm from a sleeve...

Extinction.

* * *

It was twelve hours later when Porett broke the link. She opened her eyes.

"Liddy? How goes it? I thought I'd better check in, Madrett's comms slices short off after a few hours."

No reaction.

"Liddy? Liddy?"

Elidia dribbled.

Chapter 21

Porett didn't take pleasure in his dual existence. His time in the comsphere-3 was boring in the extreme, and his actions strictly limited — just taking calls and making calls. He didn't have a body, couldn't command muscles. When he talked, his mind sent the same cues as when he was outside, and he heard the words, but nothing moved, his anatomy a memory like for a man with an itchy finger in an newly-amputated hand. While in here, he was just an illusion projected into one comsphere or another, looking like he did when he last merged, sounding like himself, but really nothing more than a consciousness wrapped in a bubble of glass.

It was very empty at times, he needed to keep occupied. He missed not having paper to write things down, having to memorise everything. The comsphere-4 was going to have playback, he could probably get some patches cooked that would upgrade the 3 in that respect, it'd be handy. But come the time when everyone had a 4, with its snoop-proof security, he'd lose the ability to copy in on other communications. That would be a shame. He found the facility highly useful, sure, but it gave him something else, another type of freedom, a sense of reality. Without something to look at, absorb, he could go mad. Perhaps that's what'd happened to Liddy?

Liddy, yes. She'd been a good secretary, she'd kept her distance. Communicating with some women from here could be distressing at times, especially if they held their comsphere up close, as did Mitya. With no body to react as his emotions directed, no reassuring feedback, it was at times hopelessly frustrating, like watching a porn show while paralysed from the neck down. The mere *thought* of it was distasteful. Had he been able to shudder, he would have done.

He stared out of his global glasshouse, looked over the notes his real self had left where he could see them. There was a green tinge to the scene, deepening by the moment. Incoming call. *Wait awhile, don't answer it too quickly.*

"Good morning, Porett."

He pulled back, as if he was returning to his swivel-chair out there in the office, just tapped in. "Hello, Ansle." *Better admit it.* "Sorry to hear about Chewt, nasty business. Who'd have thought she followed the Messenger? She seemed so stuffy."

Ansle's hand reached out, enormous as it closed in, stroked his comsphere, brought up the volume. "She was the *ideal* convert — open-minded, educated, ready to believe, to accept what she was told until the contrary was proven. It's done with now, anyway. I hear *you've* had problems, too, with Elidia. How is she?"

Porett was concerned, his non-existent brows deeply furrowed. "No better, she's completely gone, nothing anyone can do. Babbling, crying, staring at the wall, drooling, no bladder control. It's very sad."

"Well if there's anything I can do to help..."

"No, thanks for the offer, I've fixed her up with a clinic in Birgue. They'll look after her, put her in a shell, stabilise her."

Ansle picked up a magnifying glass, stared through it at his comsphere (inside which Porett felt he was locked during the conversation).

"I thought so, Porett: that calendar on your desk shows *yesterday's* date."

Porett didn't know where exactly Ansle was looking, it had been to the left, yes, he kept the wooden block calendar to the right of the com-3. *Damn.* Of course, it was frozen for the date he'd last merged. He spared a glance in approximately the correct direction. "I'll turn it later." *Well, it doesn't look like it ought to roll automatically.*

Ansle leaned back. "I'll find out your secret one day, Porett: I know you don't keep that

junk comsphere *just* to honour the research lab that was blown away making it."

He shrugged a non-shoulder. "Why are you calling, Ansle?"

"A change of subject, very well... I called regarding my daughter."

"I told you where she was, you sent Sennary to pick her up. What's the problem?"
Except Sennary left her behind.

"Let's stop playing games. We are both aware that the girl she's travelling with, Roween Sage, has, shall we say, certain magics at her disposal."

"Certain magics *of* disposal, you mean..."

"Precisely. Now I very much want to find out how she does it; it suits perfectly some schemes I have in mind. I have no *commercial* interest in it at all. *You*, on the other hand, would like to exploit it commercially, or at least use it to advance your interests in the business world, rather as I intend to in the political arena. It seems that we could benefit by working together."

"Team up, yes. So you'd be helped with knowledge from my tags on her, but how would I gain?"

"*You* may have the means to locate her, Porett, but Sennary is loyal to *me*. I have the ability to act. Besides, by joining forces we can share our present theories."

Porett didn't hesitate, had run through this scenario already. "It's a deal. Let's start by your telling me how you think Roween does it."

"She has a spell; we've seen her cast it before."

"In the library?" Ansle closed one eye to him. "Yes, I do know about that. You're sure she doesn't use an artefact of some kind, though?"

"If she did, then it would clean itself on the first use. I suppose she *may* have the listings to create *another* one if she chose."

"Unlikely: I can detect when she does her trick, and there have been two in close succession. She wouldn't have had the time to fix it to an object, although I guess she could have more than one."

"You continually astound me, Porett. And does no-one else activate your detector with similar spells?"

"Empirical evidence suggests not: all I've picked up have verifiably been her doing. Currently, she's the only one using that kind of negation sequence." *Thank hell.*

"Good, she must have designed and proved it herself. I have ordered Sennary to wait until Conley knows the secret, then bring her back. Roween can be disposed of in whatever way he finds appropriate."

Porett grinned, "If you say so." His eyes suddenly widened. "Oh yes, I have a couple more surprises for you, Ansle. One, don't count on Sennary to kill her: he caught her at the library that time, but let her go."

"Sennary is ultimately dispensable: I have the MSR under my command. If Conley doesn't find this mythical gesture sequence soon, I intend to drive her and Roween west until they are captured by the Messenger, then pick them up at leisure when our forces storm his empire."

"*If* they do, Ansle. We're badly outnumbered."

"Oh, they *will*. I have Chewt's comsphere, you see, and her ability to cast illusions was in no way singular..."

He brought his imaged hand to his chin. "Does Justan know you have it?"

"You've been monitoring my calls, so you're *already* aware that he doesn't. All *he's* been

told is that Chewt is dead, although I'll inform him of the full truth once I've established communications with her contact. The public story is that she's resigned her position in anger and stormed out."

Porett sighed. "I guessed you knew I could intercept calls; oh well, it was secret for a while. Keep it to yourself? The comsphere-4 will have shielding anyway, you'll be able to connect guaranteed private."

"That's what you're *still* saying about ordinary comsphere-2s. Advertising them as secure..." He snorted. "What was surprise number two?"

"Oh yes, it's Conley. She has nightmares about her mother."

"She ought to, she murdered her. Tell *anyone*, that and I'll fry you."

Porett smiled, leaned forward like he was going to tap out.

"Oh, one last thing, Porett..." Porett looked up; Ansle jabbed a finger at the sphere, quick, unexpected. Porett flinched as the huge nail thrust towards him. *Damn and damnation!*

"Scared of a finger, Porett? Perhaps there *is* yet more to your com-3 than I've presently discovered..."

Chapter 22

'Purasan': Conley didn't know whether it was a noun or an adjective, singular or plural. *He is Purasan, she is a Purasan, they are Purasan, maybe Purasans...* No-one else seemed to know, either, the words were used interchangeably as fancy took. When someone actually *was* a Purasan, though, you were left in no doubt of the fact.

"Fiercely independent," Roween had said, and she was right. Their lands were maybe a hotch-potch of tiny duchies, but the Purasan nation was proud, coherent, and united against adversity. It *meant* something to be Purasan, the overwhelming sense of history, tradition, continuance, belonging. Her own country was just four miserable nations thrown together by geographical proximity, economic necessity, use of magic, and, yes, a common, ignoble heritage. It didn't even have a proper name.

But there was no point in trying to pretend to be Purasan, the cultural differences were too wide. Your movements, dress, accent, attitude — they all marked you as a non-Purasan. Purasans would no sooner accept you as one of their number than they would a shaved gorilla.

That was why the Messenger was having such trouble conquering them. In other countries, sexagenarian missionaries were not tied to trees, did not thereupon have thirty arrows fired at them, and were not subsequently set alight. Here, to worship false gods was to deny your birthright, and for others to challenge your myths meant they threatened the heart of Purasan lore, thence all society. The Messenger was thus obliged to take the Purasan lands by force of arms.

She looked to the North. Dreimen couldn't be seen for the mist, clinging to the marshes like moss to an ancient gravestone. Dreimen was there, though, walled, insolent, holding out against the tide of Followers that swelled daily outside its gates. Visually obscured it may be, but in the minds of Purasans it was a beacon of resistance, refusing to be snuffed despite the continuing near-suicidal assaults on its defences. It couldn't last much longer, however, Conley knew. She and Roween wouldn't have been able to enter it even if they'd wanted to.

Their small mountain village nestled snug in the foothills. They'd arrived the day before yesterday; the locals had paid them scant attention, preferring to herd their goats and hoard their grain than bandy words with foreigners, even if they were nominal allies. At least they hadn't been offensive. There'd been a lot of visitors recently, it seemed; they were used to it.

The villagers spoke in a dialect so thick that at first Conley wasn't convinced it was Estavian at all, it sounded like it should have been Old Purasan from a thousand years ago. Roween assured her it wasn't, and after she got used to it understanding became easier. Some villages still used their ancient alphabet, though, so for outsiders reading was often impossible.

Roween must have known that the roots of her hair would be showing brown now, but she didn't bother reapplying the bleach. Disguise was of no consequence here, and she maybe didn't want to be someone else again. "Other people can be so stupid..."

They'd camped against a dry-stone wall, out in the fields. The air was fresh, breezy up here, but down below it didn't clear the swamp fog. *Weather magic? Out here?* Sennary had said he was heading this way with a squad of mages.

She wandered over to Roween. "These Purasans are strange. I talked to a shepherd, young, gangly, a little shy looking. He didn't want to know. Polite, of course, but he just answered questions, never made comments or took the initiative."

"You talked to him *alone*?"

She nodded. "Safe enough — I can flick when you're not with me. No, he just kept back."

"Maybe he was scared?"

"I don't think so, he was more, well, like aloof, but not in a nasty sort of way. Distant. Must be because I'm not Purasan."

"Probably is, it's a good enough explanation for anything round here."

Conley crouched beside Roween. The ground was wet, so she didn't sit. She noticed white, salty crystals forming around the toes of her boots, a watermark, brushed them off. "Don't you wish we were more like Purasans, Ro?"

"How'd you mean? In looks? Customs? Don't the women tie their hair back or something when they're married?"

"Culturally. For a Purasan, being Purasan is important, it's the most important thing in your life. There's this mass of things past, always there to comfort you, to guide you, give you confidence, support — a reason to feel good about yourself, like you're a member of an exclusive fellowship."

"Some peoples need the strength of a national identity just to survive. If the Purasans didn't think that way, they'd have been crushed long ago. With a sense of uniqueness, being somehow special, sharing with their kinsfolk an intense loyalty to their collective legacy, they can keep from going under."

"But it must be inspiring for individuals, too, heartening to feel you really belong, have a background you can be proud of. I envy them."

"It's alright for Purasans, they're at an international crossroads, they get invaded every time some hothead decides to rule the world, they need it. It's dangerous for the rest of us, though, especially if someone emerges who can succeed in identifying their personal goals with the destiny of the nation. Suppose the Messenger had been Purasan, he'd have stomped all over the continent by now." She looked out, towards the marshes. "But no, I don't like it personally: there's no room for individuality. It's a way of excusing your actions, discharging responsibilities. I'd rather be proud of being *myself*, not of being a part of an abstract ancestral animal evolved over centuries."

"That's a philosophy you picked up in Elet, right?"

Roween pulled up her knee, linked her hands around it. "No, it's just the way I am. Your individuality is all you have, you have to keep it to be worth anything. The past is gone, and though it's still relevant, using it as a template, a surrogate for your feeling of self, well it makes life meaningless. Likewise, religion: false promises, demanding subservience. If you force conformity of opinion, you rob people of their spark, their vitality, their expression, their reason for existence." She was struggling, trying to frame her ideas. "If you can't think for yourself, you might as well be dead." She sighed. "I wish I was better with words."

"No, it's alright, think I know what you're saying. For you, the fundamental point to life is to act independently. Once people fall into line with some group, be it religious or cultural, they're conceding the right of that group to direct their actions, at least partly. That stops them from being fully free-thinking, and so they're squandering some of what, you believe, ultimately justifies their existence."

"That's it, yes. If you don't do things completely of your own free will, you don't really live. You're just a pebble on the beach." She reached into her pocket. "I ought to write that down..."

"So your convictions are your own? You didn't take up the Eletic doctrine having become exposed to it at some point?"

"Well, no. You see, in Elet, they go one stage further, they rein in their emotions, only letting them loose when they want to. They don't wish their own *feelings* to enslave them any more than they wish the dictates of others to. To them, the mind is a continuum from emotion to sentience. The more you surrender to your emotions, the less your real self is in control."

"Life must be monotonous..."

"No, they're not machines, far from it." She rolled to face Conley, hands needed to make her points. "They do enjoy themselves, do worry, get angry, fall in love, just like everyone else. They just don't let their emotions gain the advantage. You need a free mind to appreciate your feelings, to understand them. Otherwise you might as well just happy yourself up with shots or drugs, only come off for a while each day to eat, sleep, keep your body ticking over."

Conley couldn't decide whether Roween was philosophising or lecturing. "But what is life, then, if it's not to be happy?"

"If you're unable to reflect on your happiness, what value has it? Are trees happy? So what?"

"Well, it matters if you're a tree."

"No, without self-awareness it doesn't at all. If you can't contemplate your feelings, or if by experiencing them you reduce your reflective faculties, you're just a husk. You may be in euphoria, but it's meaningless. You of all people should realise that."

She was lecturing... "So where is it exactly that you and the Eleys differ?"

"I can't accept that my emotions are an external influence I oughtn't to trust. I take them as integral to my personality, and I don't mind — can't help — listening to them. Just sometimes, though, because of that, I can't do something I know in my mind I should do. Or I just do something plain dumb."

Conley remembered Sennary, relaxing casually in the armchair, shirt undone at the neck, half a day's stubble roughing his chin, exuding wit and charm and fascination, seemingly unaware of it. She sat up straight, quickly. "You've given this a lot of thought."

"What? Sorry, yes, yes I have." Roween had been thinking of him too, transparent.

"But isn't it all a bit selfish?"

"Selfish? In what way?" She bit at a side of her lower lip. "I don't normally think of myself as a selfish person."

"Well, there's nothing in what you've said that allows for self-sacrifice, doing things for the greater good, for your children, for others."

"Yes there is. People who go in for philanthropy, they do it because they *like* it, it gives them pleasure. If they dislike it, then they must have ulterior motives, doing it as a step towards attaining rewards later on — maybe much later on, like an afterlife. Don't kid yourself, Con, in the end everyone's in it for themselves, no matter how much they might like to think otherwise."

"You're being over-cynical, you take things too far. I see no harm in..." She stopped. *Hoofbeats*. Roween had heard them too.

"Coming this way?"

"I don't know." Conley peered over the wall. Charging straight at her was an enormous black warhorse laden with barding, its helmeted mount leaning forward in the saddle, looking back. Behind him, five, ten other riders, in pursuit. *Hot, we're directly in their path!*

She bobbed down, put her hand on Roween's head, stopped her poking it up. The sleek-muscle stallion leaped over, thundering as it landed, lathered sweat flying backwards. Seconds later, the rest followed, all sides, close, so close. Roween rolled up in a ball, Conley flattened against the stonework, tight up, tense, terrified. Dirt flew, the air rushed, men shouted. Conley pressed her back as hard as she could against the sharp, flint-like rocks — kept pressing, through the pain, until the sound of hooves drifted into the distance.

She opened her eyes. The camp was a mess, their makeshift tent shredded to rags. The little cooking pot she'd bought in Rhiev was overturned, cracked. Their clothesline had been brought down, their washing trampled. *Damn and damn again!*

Roween was over by the tent. She'd found something. Conley crawled to see. A body, dead.

"Must've fallen."

"One of the Messenger's?"

"I guess so. That horse they were chasing, it was one of ours, had to have been — it'd need added muscle to jump like that with all the armour it was carrying."

"Sennary?"

* * *

Their first impulse was to hide lest the riders return for their man, but it seemed clear they'd left him, at least for the moment. So instead, the two had bundled what they could onto their own horses, and followed the tracks as far as possible. It was getting dark now, though, and the prints grew ever more indistinct. The lone rider must have escaped, anyway; surely if the posse hadn't caught him after this distance, they weren't going to?

Roween was constantly on the alert, turning to every rustle of the trees, movement in the bracken, flutter of wings in the evening sky. Conley began to feel cold, shivery, although it was warm. Her stomach was tightening, and she felt her arms keep tensing up. Angry, she realised she was getting scared. *If those horsemen hadn't been chasing someone else, they might have been after us.* She shuddered. *They could have turned back by now, be coming towards us, minutes away.* She didn't have any proper weapons, couldn't use her spells, was outnumbered. Her arm started trembling a little again, involuntarily, she stopped it but it returned a moment later. Roween's hand touched her shoulder. She looked over, apprehensive.

Roween wasn't a vision of confidence, either. "Do you think maybe we should turn around, or would they have gone back to the camp, found the body, be waiting for us?"

"I want to get somewhere safe as soon as I can, forget the camp, it's trashed anyway. Maybe the bottom of that ridge?" She pointed; Roween followed her arm. The trail narrowed, wound through a tumbling ravine, led upwards to the top of an escarpment before carrying on into blackness that her eyes couldn't make out. Left, before the ascent, were woods — pine trees that clamoured round the base of the scarp, stretching off someway down the lower slopes.

"That's safe?" asked Roween, giving her fears voice.

Conley spurred her mare. *Logically, probably safer, yes, it's not on the track. But bandits live in forests near desolate, narrow passes, thieves, murderers.* She caught her thoughts. *Calm down, bandits live nearer main roads, they'd be down by the swamp.* Wouldn't they?

* * *

They dismounted in the woods. The sun was down maybe half an hour, but the trees made it dark as midnight. Conley was ahead, searching for a clearing where they could leave the horses. As the boughs flew back from her passage, Roween was being whipped, needles brushing at her face, lacerating with a pine-scented purity.

"Over to the right," Conley ordered. They pushed through, broke out into a small glade. A tall, smoke-scarred tree had fallen, lightning, taken some of the smaller ones with it. They tied the horses. "This will do, no-one will find us here."

"I wouldn't count on that," said a voice, male, western accent, malicious. Conley could just see his outline, against the trees. Hot, he was drawing his sword, a warrior.

"Roween, he's carrying — "

"I know, take your dirk; if you get chance, go for his neck."

He was advancing, smiled when he saw the glint of their steel, pulled a dagger of his own from a sheath on his back. *Oh for love, he's professional.*

"I think we ought to run, Ro..."

His first swing was just for show, worry them a little. Roween circled round until he was between them, but he tracked her, keeping both covered. He lunged at Conley, she fell back. *Jittery*. He smiled. Another teaser, not intended to do damage, only check her mettle, lack of it.

Roween tried a quick stab; he parried her knife with hardly a glance, like she didn't even deserve that, concentrated on the older-looking woman. Conley regarded his gleaming weapon, a sabre, meant for slashes from horseback but easily pointy enough to rip through an unprotected gullet if thrust. She looked beyond him to Roween, on his left. Roween was making, hand signals, trying to say something. *Palm, fist, palm, point, what? Gestures?* Conley quick-frowned, puzzled, desperate, what did she mean? *Tell me!* The sabre scythed across her midriff, whistling a handspan away. He grinned. Still playing.

Suddenly, she grasped Ro's message, started gesturing, flicking a spell, or a non-spell, he wouldn't know. His gaze was momentarily caught, surprise, maybe a tinge of panic. She had magic? He'd better end it swiftly, then.

Roween was instantly on his back, arm round his neck, trying to hold tight as he threw her. He cursed, bent low, rolled a shoulder, swung her underneath as she held on, her body tumbling on the flat of his sword. He stabbed with the dagger, missed as her grip slipped, she fell. He looked up, pulling free his longer blade, watching for a strike from the taller girl. Conley's knife beat his late parry, bit into his neck, left side. He buckled on one knee.

Conley hesitated. Should she stay back, out of his range, or press on, get underneath his swing, protect Roween. Ro was scrambling, she'd dropped her dagger, was moving away, crawling on her back. Blood was gushing from the wound on his neck, his left hand was there, empty, trying to plug it, futile, it was mortal. He roared, took a chop at Ro, she was far enough back, the blow short. He tugged at his sword, embedded in the dirt, strength waning.

Roween stumbled to her feet, joined Con, rested on her shoulder as the pair watched him, gruesome, dying, blood gurgling audibly from his severed jugular.

* * *

He'd been dead awhile, they knew it, but they still didn't want to get close, were still afraid. Roween was drenched waist-down in blood, spattered elsewhere. She ignored it, stared at the cadaver until the smell got to her.

"He was alone then, no-one came when he shouted." Conley recovered Roween's dagger, began to clean it.

"I guess you're right, I hadn't thought." Roween stared around, into the pitch-blend of night. "What was he doing here? He's army, not an outlaw."

They reached the same conclusion simultaneously. Conley spoke. "He's one of the riders we were following, he's looking for Sennary."

Roween continued. "There's only one of him, so he was expecting to find a corpse."

"I'll make a light."

* * *

It was late, very late, when they found him, crumpled among the boulders creviced beneath an overhang. He must have hit trees, bounced here. It was Sennary, and he wasn't dead, not quite. Pretty broken up, though.

Roween loosened his breastplate, he wheezed, spat some blood, not much, probably a tooth.

"Careful," Conley cautioned, "don't move anything that's..." Her words trailed off as Roween's mind-charged, cross-eyed stare raged gravity at her.

"We'll need to make some splints, the branches slowed him down but he's cut up, and his sword-arm is shattered. His leg looks twisted, maybe it's busted too."

Conley nodded. "I'll get my notebook, I think I have the sequences."

* * *

When Conley returned, Roween had raised Sennary's head onto her lap as she knelt. She was rocking him, ever so gently, stroking his yellow, red hair. She looked up at Conley, cheeks glistening with tears. "You know what to do?"

"Yes, I can numb him for a couple of minutes if he makes a focus, realign the bones, tighten them up. Is it compound?"

Roween looked away, not wanting to be reminded of the jagged, splintered ulna ripped obliquely through his forearm. She nodded.

"Is he conscious?"

Roween nodded again. "Just. Can't speak a lot, I think his ribs are cracked, armour must have saved him."

Conley crouched, held her notes to the light. "Is this going to work with you here, Ro? I don't want to push you away, but..."

"Yes, no, oh I don't know, some will, but if one doesn't then they'll all disappear. I'll leave." It hurt so *much* to say that. She slid out from under Sennary, slowly, lowered his head with a careful tenderness. He looked up at her, reached for her hand, drew her towards him.

She choked back a sob, he was in such pain. He moved his lips, was trying to say something. She put her ear to his mouth, pulled back her hair, listened. "Find ... my ... horse," he rasped.

She froze a moment, had she heard him right? He let go of her, Conley waved her aside. She stood, walked back, kept looking at him. *His horse?* Delirium? She followed the rocks round to the right.

* * *

The horse was a crumpled mass of meat and bone. The prosthetics had reverted on its death, flesh shed from the skeleton, red joints on blue-lit rocks. It had taken her a while to find the beast, it was wedged higher up, she'd only looked when she'd noticed spots of marooning blood dried on the stones below. What did it have that Sennary wanted? A dying man might ask for the Books, but *he* wasn't religious was he? Documents he was carrying,

then? Plans? Secrets, lists of names, places, details of organisations? Why would he want them now?

She unbuckled the saddle, trying to avoid contact with the cold, matted skin. She worked the saddlebags free, dropped them to the ground, pulled out his blanket, tossed that too, might be useful later, keep him warm.

The bags weren't full, there was little food, he must've left someplace in a hurry. She *felt* something, though, deep behind her eyes: there was zip in here — well of course — but some of it was *good*, healing. She delved deeper, found papers — just scrawled notes and a map — a bit of gold, a strip of shots. *Maybe he wanted these, take his mind off the pain?* He hadn't seemed that sort. No, there was something else, niggling her...

His comsphere was split in two. *Shame, looks new.* She rummaged around further. A small light-set, a flicky dagger, lightweight platter, whistle, compass; there was more in here than she'd first thought in the flicker of her candle-lit panic.

At the bottom of one of the bags, she found it, in a small tin that looked like it used to hold boiled sugars. Gel, some gone, but plenty enough to staunch his arm, sterilise it, stop the rot getting in. Hot, it was so sweet! She replaced the lid, hurried back.

* * *

"Is it safe?" she called from the edge of the trees. Conley lifted a finger to her mouth, *shhh*, she nodded.

Roween tiptoed over, as best she could. Sennary was asleep, and now it was Conley's lap he had for a pillow. Roween felt the inevitable twang; it would always be thus. She held out the tin. Conley tilted her head sideways, *what is it?*

"White gel," whispered Roween, "for his arm."

Conley's eyes widened. She reached out her hand, beckoned, impatient, took it; Roween had kept the lid. Conley smelled the contents, nodded approvingly, tasted a smidge. "Hot, Ro," whispered, "there must be eighteen hundred clicks worth in here — you could do a heart replacement with this much! Where'd he get it?"

"How would I know? Just put some on his arm!"

"I can do better than that," she reached for her notebook again. "Can you boil me some water?"

* * *

Roween didn't know what spell Conley flicked at the melted gel, she couldn't risk standing close enough to watch, might have smelled bad. She figured it was a seeker of some kind: Conley would have like magnetised the fractures, made them hot spots for the programmed gel to find. She'd have him drink a bowl of the stuff, and once it got into his bloodstream it would circulate, stick to the highlighted breaks, promote healing. They'd be able to move him tomorrow, day after that he'd be able to move himself. He'd be very grateful. *To Conley.*

* * *

They snatched some rest, not much. They'd have to start off early, before the other riders missed their man, came looking. Sennary was the last to wake, they had to stir him so he could climb onto a horse. He shared Conley's; she was stronger than Roween, could hold him if he started to topple.

"How much did you use?" he asked.

"About a third."

He nodded, jutted his jaw. "I owe you."

Conley smiled, "But where did you get that much gel? Steal it from a hospital?"

He laughed, short, it still hurt. "I did a job clearing a black-fac that was running the stuff, mixing it with a poor clone they had, selling it like it was the real article. They had a few unadulterated jars, I took them before I fired the place. It burned like a candle, all that grease." He coughed. "I'd better shut up."

Roween was leading them out of the forest, careful not to let the branches spring back and lash Sennary, needling herself instead. Too smart for her own good; if she didn't think of these things she could behave as innocently inconsiderate as had Conley yesterday. She hadn't seen a mirror, but knew her face was going to be grimy, scratched, blood-splattered, tear-stained... Conley was a model of radiant freshness.

Roween breathed a sigh. What did it matter anyway? She was fooling herself if she thought Sennary would — could — ever be attracted to her: she'd always have the wrong eyes. Conley's were alert, alive, showed passion. Hers were just boring brown, out of line, laughable. She was stupid. *Stupid stupid stupid!* Why was she still worrying about her hair? *Maybe the Elets have it figured right.*

She could hear further snatches of Conley's chat with Sennary. So much for his keeping quiet. He said he had split the riders, four had chimed with him, the rest had gone off north. Those that stayed, they knew the area, had had some short-cuts to play with. Two had cut him off, worked him to the top of the cliff, the drop had just come up as he rode full gallop, he couldn't stop in time, over he went. Conley was oohing in all the right places, interjecting with exclamations where appropriate, keeping him talking when he should be resting his voice. *Why doesn't she think, sometimes?*

* * *

Lunch was eaten beside a stream, lolling through a heather-bedded dale. They didn't have many rations; Roween had built up courage, offered Sennary some of hers, but Conley had already beaten her to it. *Of course.* If she wasn't careful, Roween could get awful jealous of that girl. No point, though — just something she had to accept. With looks flawed like hers, she could spend her whole life envious of others. She ought to get rid of some of this caking dirt in the brook.

She was surprised when Sennary excused himself to Conley, followed her to the stream. She hurried on. *What was he about?*

He didn't call after her, just kept going, she could hear him struggling to keep pace. *He might loosen a splint.* She slowed down, let him catch up.

"Feeling better, Lord Sennary?"

"A lot better than I would have if you hadn't have found the horse." *Gratitude. Polite of him. Why does he have to put his hand on my shoulder?*

"You haven't chased after me to make sure I don't fall in the water: what is it you want?"

He fell back a little, dropped his arm. "Sorry, I..." He tipped his head forward, she looked aside. He was so *sweet* when he did that.

"Yes, you..?"

"I... Oh, well I need some advice. About Conley."

Here's some: give her an excuse to feel inadequate, so she'll use it to toss herself into a pit of depression.

"Rumour is, her father's dead."

Her father? Roween wasn't sure of his relationship with Conley. *She seems to worship him, thinks he adores her likewise, doesn't absorb any evidence to the contrary.* "Don't tell her, leave it to me. Where'd you hear this?"

He leaned against a beech; too much quick movement just now, he might have shaken some of the gel. *Why did I have to walk so fast?* "The MSR unit received orders to return to Davia. Chewt's the new chancellor, she's assumed full control of the regiment, pulled them back, she doesn't want a war."

"And Justan's let her?"

"Well they went, anyway. They have husbands, wives to go home to. Who knows what power games Chewt's playing? Justan's away, his army's success is dependent on her mages, she's maybe showing him what she can do, what she's made of, that she's not to be messed with."

"If it's true, she probably wants something; she's expecting he'll agree to whatever she's after, then she'll send the MSR squads back into the fray. But if Justan calls her bluff, or even if he doesn't, it could be too late, the Messenger may by then have crushed Purasan resistance, Akrea could rally, join them."

"If there's definitely no threat of assassination, Estavia is a major player, too. Have you heard they — "

" — invaded two of Akrea's border provinces, yes. How did he die?"

Sennary wasn't expecting the question, paused, pursed his lips. She liked it when he did that. "Ansle? Chewt didn't say, killed, I think, wasn't natural."

"Did you speak to her?"

"No, I saw though, she was in Ansle's office, black ribbon everywhere." He winced, put his free hand to his bad arm.

"You better go back to Conley. Don't mention any of this to her, promise?"

"No promises," he said, "but thanks." He hobbled back. Roween watched him, ached. She realised it, cursed herself, scurried down to the stream.

* * *

They bought him a horse at the next village, thin, but well. Roween paid, rubies. They picked up some food, moved on. You don't sleep in places where people see you have a stash of gems, may be you have more.

He'd mentioned to Conley that the mage squad had been withdrawn, didn't say why. Said how he'd stayed with some Purasans in the swamp, acted as tactical adviser and comms link, Justan's forward command. There were two groups of mages, his and another. When they'd left, they'd fixed the mist to stay another week, give time to pull everyone else out. Spies got wind of their departure, though, and three thousand frustrated Messenger warriors had charged in next day. He'd been lucky to get out alive, wouldn't have if he hadn't

been given the horse. Even luckier that he was still alive now. Thanks to her. *Here we go again.*

They were in a stone hut on the lower slopes. Winter, it'd be occupied, shepherds or goatherds would stay here the night if a heavy snow fell. They'd be higher up, now, though, letting their flocks eat the Summer grass while it was still accessible, before the weather turned.

"You'll be well enough to fend for yourself tomorrow," said Conley, motherly. "Will you be leaving?"

Sennary shrugged, wished he hadn't. "Depends where you're heading. I ought to stay with you, obey my last orders. Things have changed, though, and my comsphere's broken. Not unless you can fix it?"

"I don't know the sequences, take it to a dealer." They both smiled.

"I think I should head back east, there's an exchange in Rhiev; if they're still open I can get a message through to Cala's, they'll patch me through to the Academy."

"Send my love to father..."

"You'll need money." Roween's interruption surprised them both. "Money, if you're going to Rhiev, you'll need money. Do you want the click-well? Some Eletic rubies?"

Sennary looked at Conley. "Well, rubies I guess. Your click-well still works?"

"Shouldn't it?"

"Another theory blown away."

* * *

Roween hadn't listened to their conversation. Conley's giggling a while later woke her up, still, at least giggling was all it was. Could have been worse... Sennary's arm would burn like a torch for another week, and if he didn't get the soft support renewed by then it'd be Spring before he could wield a sword again. Splintered bone painfully gelling together has a distracting way of making all strenuous activities difficult. So, at least she was spared *that*.

She'd decided not to tell Conley about Ansle. Something was going on, she wasn't sure what, but it was big and it was sinister. She didn't know much about Chewt, except that she and Ansle were the only powerful old-timers left at the Academy; the rest were next generation or imported industrials. Chewt was an illusion specialist, wasn't she? Chewt-Farmer, yes, of course.

Besides, if Conley knew, or even suspected, that her father was dead, she'd be back like an arrow.

Roween was having a hard time tallying things up. Conley's mother had hated her, fine, she could accept that. Conley had love-hated her mother, fair enough. She also hated herself, probably because of what she did to her mother, guilt and all that. However, she still loved her father, yet he was not at all a nice person. Maybe he hadn't always been that way? Maybe part of the reason she was out here with Roween was because she didn't want to face what he had become, preferred to remember him as he was? Or was she afraid that if she did face facts she'd lose control, try to hurt him?

Too many unknowns, Roween didn't have the right experience, couldn't empathise enough with Conley's situation to predict how she'd react. *Best take no chances, keep it secret. Can't jeopardise the master plan.*

* * *

Sennary left next day. He'd tried to say something to Roween just before departing, but Conley had showed up out of nowhere. He pecked Ro on the cheek, did the same to Conley. "I'll see you again, sometime," he said. Conley waved him off, Roween moped in a corner of the hut.

An hour or so later, they saddled up, made their way north, wide of Dreimen. The coast was still two weeks away, along the battle lines.

Chapter 23

Ansle had donned the illusion as usual, but yet again it hadn't really been necessary. He'd had to *sound* like Chewt, of course, but all he ever saw when he answered her marbled comsphere was the back of a man's head; or, as some believed, a *god's*...

He tapped out, dropped the Chewt figment, tapped in again while he thought of another, particular comsphere belonging to Justan. There was a long pause, but he kept tapping; it always took time when he called the secure link. The metal-grille box containing it was heavy, and only The King knew the password to its binder. Sometimes when it glowed he went to it, but more often it was carried to him.

"Chancellor Ansle. You've been busier than I expected."

"Your majesty." He eyed Justan; The King hadn't shaved this morning, three days in a row now. The background was unfamiliar, but indoors — Akrea?

Justan smiled, but didn't look pleased. "Yes, it worked. Estavia surrendered this morning, as I suggested to you they would."

"We didn't even need the second wave?"

"No. Taking the army commanders was enough: the parliamen-tarians agreed to my terms at an all-party session overnight. They now act only in an advisory capacity, absolute authority being vested in me. I've banned the Message as a legal religion, and instructed the entire Estavian army to stamp it out. It'll give the ranks a constructive way to exercise off their anger, and the junior officers an opportunity to show their worth."

"What of the Akrean army?" His own spies had told him, but best keep up appearances.

"What's left is now no more than a collection of individual garrisons, holding cities; we'll negotiate. Some regiments were thinking of coming over to us anyway — they were none too pleased at the way their rulers were trying to appease the Messenger instead of taking him on." He glanced aside. Someone asked him a question, he muttered an order, waved them to leave.

"The Messenger doesn't know yet, he still thinks I'm Chewt."

"Good. You spoke to him? Told him what I said?"

"Yes, just now — it's why I called. I don't know if he'll sucker for it, he's ... flaky. I did find out that he has mages of his own, though: the best one is top class, so it seems he trained the others — and he definitely is a *he*, although I don't have his name. He seems to double as the Messenger's principal adviser, yet, strangely, he apparently doesn't know about the Chewt comsphere connection. Whatever, you shouldn't relax your guard against possible magical assassination attempts."

"Which brings us to the subject of my wife."

Ansle had an uneasy feeling about the way Justan said that. "Is she unwell?"

"She choked to death yesterday, in the same manner as did two hundred Estavian generals."

The chancellor paled. She was *supposed* to go in two weeks, once the Davian army had been thrown at the Messenger's horde. Now was the wrong time, completely — it changed, well, everything! "I ... I don't understand, she..."

Justan rubbed his chin, peering into the comsphere so close that Ansle could hear the bristles crackle, wet logs on a fire. "She choked, breakfast. I had an autopsy done, bone in the throat, one of those expanding ones. Your lot's methods."

"Not under my orders, sir, I swear it! Is there resistance in Davia? Someone killed her for selling out to us? Or did *you* — ". He cut, cold on continuing.

"I'll find the culprit soon enough, but in the meantime we have a problem. The Davian army yet needs to be broken; although they're formally our allies, they cannot be trusted. I have to use their regiments of foot sacrificially, and in so doing draw the Followers into a trap; it's the quickest way we can be rid of them, and it will help minimise our own losses. However, they are not likely to co-operate if they *know* their queen is dead."

"What, what can we do? Is news of her death contained?"

"For the moment, yes, but if she makes no appearances, people will suspect: rumours will grow, and reach the army. Who is our foremost illusion expert?"

Ansle hesitated. The group at East/Trad was paramount in illusion research, with all the best people. He himself had some lesser specialists, as did Magicorp and Khrov (Soat), but with Chewt gone there was no-one outside of East/Trad of any stature. "How good do you want them to be? I can put an Academy team onto it, toss together some disguise people from Espionage, if there's an image of her somewhere we — "

"Ansle," Justan's voice sounded tired. "Stop trying to find a way of bringing it under your control. If cobbling together a bunch of nobodies was a solution, I could have done that myself. I want someone able to create a realistic lookalike Mitya that will last fifteen days without detection. Now, is there anyone who can do that, or do I have to adjust my other plans?"

Ansle swallowed hard. "Farmer at East/Trad."

Justan nodded, smiled, shook his head. "Tell Porett the price is now fifty million, and I want Farmer on this immediately."

"Porett? What?"

"Just tell him — that is, if he doesn't know already." He turned, left. Someone else placed the comsphere in the cage, tapped out.

Ansle's comsphere immediately shone green, Porett calling.

He answered. "Did you get all that?"

"Not what the Messenger said, no, but I heard Justan alright. He definitely suspects his communications are compromised."

Ansle threw his arm out, exasperated, his loose silk sleeve billowing with the speed of the motion. "Never mind *that*, what's this fifty million business?"

Porett grinned, or was it a smirk? "Justan is good — very, very good. *I* set up the hit on Mitya; you bought those gro-bones from me, from a black-fac Technologies pulls in CBT via a couple of our dietary subsidiaries. With Mitya dead, Justan implicated, and the Davian army still very much alive, I knew His Maj would be in deep trouble. He'd either have to set our army onto the Davians — which would probably cost him the war against the Messenger — or keep Mitya's death quiet. Naturally, he chose the latter course of action. That means he now needs a substitute Mitya for a while, and that in turn means he needs Farmer and his group at East/Trad. Now, as well as Mitya and your generals, East/Trad's Estavian board of directors keeled over yesterday, too. I let Justan know I arranged that by offering him thirty million for their shares; under occupation law, the crown can claim such loose holdings as spoils of war. He could have sold them to Magicorp for three times as much, given time, but *now* he's under pressure to stabilise the company as soon as possible, so Farmer can perform his tricks. If he lets *me* buy them out, I can send in my managers, and Farmer can start tomorrow with my financial backing. If Justan won't sell, however, East/Trad runs on inertia, and he has to pay for Farmer's Mitya out of the treasury. Fifty million is a fair estimation of East/Trad's worth. Besides, if he did let Magicorp take over, the resulting combine would command enormous power, could threaten even him. Would certainly threaten you. He's just being practical."

Ansle found this hard to believe, that anyone could take these kind of chances playing for such great stakes. "You stitched *The King* just to get your hands on East/Trad? You could

have brought the Holy Army down on our necks, you seriously jeopardised *my* position, and all to make some paltry business deal?"

"Not just any deal, Ansle," snapped. "This makes Porett Technologies 10% bigger than Magicorp. We'll be the largest manufacturer of magical goods in the world, interests in a dozen other industries. In business, you have to take risks; I took some, they paid off. Now quit worrying."

Ansle wrinkled a smile. "So be it. But I warn you that I know you haven't told me everything: there was no reason to kill Mitya if *all* you wanted was East/Trad — you could have acquired it in other ways. No, you have *other* motives that you're keeping hidden." He straightened, sneered his eyes. "One day, Porett, you're going to make a gross miscalculation, and I doubt you'll live to see the day after."

Chapter 24

"They can't all be homeless..." Conley watched from the hill as the unending line of refugees threaded its way into the Purasan heartlands.

"I don't know, never seen anything like this before." Roween half-marvelled, half-aborred the surreal scene; people, dressed in all clothes from patched rags to the latest in Taltu high fashion, some pushing handcarts, others riding in carriages, all travelling at the same, slow pace, stretching back way to the distant forest. And silent, but for the wails of the youngest children.

"This is just, just so..." Conley gazed in disbelief. "Where are they all coming from?"

"Where are they all going?"

"They're tall, fair, this far north they *must* be Estavians. Why would they be leaving? Has Estavia fallen?"

Roween was pulling up her hood. "Ask, make out we're Akreans, displaced, eager for news..."

* * *

Close up, it was a miserable sight. Despair haunted the adults, the children were morose, vacant. Whole families had uprooted themselves, were heading west across Purasan. Conley selected a youngish woman who seemed to be travelling alone, rode alongside. Roween followed behind.

"Good day, I am Conley of Rhiev, in Akrea. My friend and I seek news of our land."

The Estavian cast her a disbelieving glance, seemed too weary to dispute. "Akrea has long since fallen to Justan of Murak."

Conley feigned anguish. "How can this be? When last we heard, our armies were regrouping, organising, *resisting* Justan."

The woman laughed, scornful. "You have *us* to blame for your fate! We were *told* that Justan could no longer call upon magic, we were *told* that our leaders felt themselves safe. Intelligence had reached them, *very* reliable, they were confident, so, so *sure* of their source. And thus it was that Estavia, mother of democracy, invaded Akrea on the pretext of saving it; we scattered your armies, drove them into the cities, liberated the north as Justan routed the south." She spat, self-consciously. "But of course, we had been misled. Our army commanders were assassinated, *all* of them, within hours. Magic. Parliament met, the government resigned, and all power over both nations was ceded to Justan."

"Then... then there is no hope for us?"

"None." The woman snarled at some private contempt. Conley scanned her, critically. She put her at about twenty-five, maybe a tad older. No rings, no jewellery.

"Tell me, why are you, all these people, why are you leaving Estavia? Where are you going? Surely only death awaits to the west? Are things *that* bad?"

"Yes, they are, they're deepest black. These others," she nodded to her right, "they're Followers. Back home, our brave army is redeeming itself by purging them, killing anyone even suspected of believing the Message. Or anyone they simply dislike."

Conley felt as if her blood temperature had dropped twenty degrees. She heard herself saying, "You mean, all these people, they're Followers? *You're* a Follower?"

"Most of them, yes, Suns, some Earthies. Can't you tell from that smug mindlessness they all wear?" She turned, shouted, "What good's your well of living water now?" They ignored her, trudged onwards, pious, self-satisfied. She curled her lip. "As for me, I have the wrong 'friends'."

Conley pulled to a halt. The other woman kept on riding, didn't even look back.

"Come on, Con, we better cross this fuse before someone lights it."

* * *

"More magic, more misery." Roween was riding alongside Conley now, the northern road was wider here.

"You can't blame magic for what happened to those people, they're just suffering the normal consequences of any change of rule. *Sad*, but normal."

"None of it would have happened if it hadn't been for magic. The Estavian democracy grew from the reaction to their oppressive empire, it's been a stable influence on the region ever since. It was basically fair, just, honourable. The ordinary people led good, fulfilling lives, and they were at peace. Then, overnight, we barbarians took everything away, trashed nine hundred years of history, and all directly because of our superior command of magic. You can't deny that."

"I *don't* deny that magic brought about Estavia's downfall, but it would have gone soon enough anyway, once the Messenger had built enough support for a religious revolution — you saw how many people he's won over already. And don't forget, the Estavians did attack Akrea."

"Yes, but to save it, from us. Anyway, just because another evil exists, doesn't mitigate magic's use in that fashion. If magic is as conducive to benevolence as you've said in the past, why didn't Justan feel disposed to use it directly on the Messenger's rabble? Why did Akrea fear us enough to refuse an alliance? Magic could have saved the democracies, instead it's destroyed them."

Conley was shaking her head, tousled ash-blond hair flowing free. Roween hadn't noticed when she'd stopped using the hold spells, not that it mattered: Conley was staggeringly beautiful either way.

"You disagree, Con?"

She tossed a lock over her shoulder. "I keep telling you, it's how magic is *used*. It's the people, the manipulators of magic, it can be employed either for good or evil. At the moment, in certain high-profile cases, it's being misused. But there are decent, honest uses, Ro. All the time."

"Most spells are intrinsically bad. You can use them for the better on occasion, but they tend to promote misuse by their very nature. It's hard to use them non-detrimentally."

Conley wasn't sure whether she was expected to take Roween's words as given, or argue. Ro had reined back her horse, let Conley go first to avoid a large, water-filled hole in the road. Conley took the time to think, decided to argue.

"You're wrong, Ro, spells are just sequences of gestures, they carry no implicit judgement on how they are to be used. How could they?"

Roween hesitated. *Perhaps this is the time to explain a little more?* Conley was getting restless, all this seemingly pointless wandering across boring, hostile terrain, farther than ever from home. "Spells are not sequences of gestures, that's just a trick to concentrate the mind. Suppose," she paused again, "suppose I told you I could distinguish between good spells and bad."

"Well I wouldn't believe you."

Belief. "Let's think about it from basics. For everything else humans can do, they have some way of telling they've done it, registering the change in the environment. They can see it, feel it, smell it, taste it, hear it. Five senses, classic. There's maybe others, like balance — doesn't matter for the moment though. Now, does it not strike you as odd that we can make magical alterations to the world and yet have no immediate way of knowing we've done it? You stroke a comsphere, but can you feel any magical energy making a connection? Can you sense the target glowing? You look at a binder: can you tell whether it's locked, or just lying there on top of a book?"

"You're telling me you can sense magic?"

"Not just me, Con, *everyone*. In order to develop a skill in using some faculty, you have to get feedback on it. Otherwise, it could never have evolved."

"Ah." She nodded. "You're an evolutionist, then. So this is all — "

"No, I'm not making a pitch, it's — take a similar sort of thing, with prosthetics. It's possible to graft extra arms onto people, but they can never use them. Why not? Because the prosses aren't plumbed in to the brain. To fix that, you have to stick them where some other limb used to be, although even then if they're too different they won't work properly, not to start with. Put on a tail instead of a finger, and the brain still thinks it's a finger — but if you give it enough stimuli, moving it about and suchlike, eventually people can learn to do a few tail-like things with it."

"Physiotherapy, yes." She clicked her tongue. "So you're implying that to use magic, people must have some organ receptive to it?"

"That's right, exactly."

"But it doesn't follow from your argument! I can build a fountain at the bottom of a hill, then turn it on at a valve at the top, and I don't need any special hydraulic-sensing ability to understand what I've done or why it works."

"No, that's because turning on fountains is not something you can just *do*. Magic, though, *everyone* can do, like lifting an arm, it's inbuilt."

"I disagree with that. Spells have to be worked out in advance, planned, proven, then cast. They're manufactured by making gestures, like water courses are dug by hand movements; neither product is itself an extension of a person's body. Therefore, your argument about needing to sense spells' effects is fallacious! Detecting that what you just cast caused someone's tortoise to float in the air is no more innate than is detecting that a fountain in a valley will come on if you turn a valve."

"No, no, I'm right." This was going too fast, if she wasn't careful she'd blurt out things before Conley was ready to accept them. "Look, just assume for now that using magic is something people can just do, as easily as winking their eyes. If that were the case, then it would be reasonable to assume people could, at least in the distant past, tell when they were using magic. Agreed?"

Conley clearly wasn't so sure, but then she hadn't had time to think of things Roween could be missing. She smiled. "I'll let it ride, go on."

"Well I had this idea myself, a few years back. I figured that if people were once, ages ago, able to sense when magic was in use, maybe we still could, if we tried. No harm in trying, right?"

"I'll grant you that." Conley wasn't looking at her now, she was staring ahead, scanning the horizon.

"So, I had a try. I borrowed a few trinkets, you know, light sets, click-wells, and tried to feel any aura they were giving off. Held them close to my head, thought that's where any sensors would most likely be, kept them under a beret, did that kind of thing for hours every

day."

"And you succeeded, yes?"

Conley's half-hearted reply irritated Roween. *I'm trying to say something important here!* "No, not straight away. Are you listening to me? I can say this some other time."

Conley looked over, gave a one-shoulder shrug. "Sorry, Ro, go on. It's just it seems a bit contrived, that's all. I don't really see the point you're trying to make."

Give me strength! "I'll be brief. My little experiments didn't awaken any unknown spell-detectors in my brain, no. Imagine you were born with your eyes closed, like rabbits, so you couldn't see. Maybe we're all born blind to magic, or maybe we just get that way because we don't look, so our sensory organs dull, atrophy. Whatever, even if you try and see things with your eyes closed, you still won't have any success. You need something to open your eyes."

"You can see magic?"

"Hot, Conley, listen to me! Listen to what I'm saying!" *No, too angry, you'll forget something, make a hash of it.* "Look, if you couldn't open your eyes, what would you think might do it? If someone poked one? Probably, but we don't know where magic-eyes might be sited. A very bright light, perhaps? When I was locked in the bound-book room, all around me was magic, more magic than I'd ever encountered before. My mind could feel it, dimly, my games with the light-sets had awakened my senses a little, but the magic wasn't bright enough for me to notice, so I didn't know. These books, they felt so drenched in magic, it was all over, everywhere. I began to unscramble it, picking out distinct binders, it made sense, but it was surrounding me, all sides, unpleasant, I didn't like it. I couldn't stop, though, it was like looking at the sun through closed eyes, you can still see light no matter how hard you try not to, you have to look away. Only I couldn't, I was trapped. The feeling got stronger, it was nagging, like toothache, I couldn't shake it off. Or like a screeching, shrilly noise, getting louder and louder, engulfing me, oppressive, I just *wanted* it to stop, a release, I couldn't take it. I was crying, it hurt so bad, deep in my head, hot, Con, it was awful, I couldn't stand it any longer, I'd rather be captured, I just had to get out, escape from it! I screamed, I don't know, anguish, hopelessness, despair, then something amazing happened."

Conley was rapt.

"I had this most indescribably joyous sensation where the pain had been, it was marvellous. Relief, I can still remember it now. I'd opened my eyes. But I couldn't feel the magic on the books any more, I thought I'd damaged my new-found sense, like a huge-volume noise can deafen you. That wasn't it, though, because the binders on the loose volumes had fallen to the shelves. I'd triggered off some kind of reflex. If someone shines a light in your eyes, you can't help but close them. I'd discovered humans have a magic-wiping reflex, too. If they can sense magic, then they can defend against it. It's like a protection mechanism against magical attack."

Conley's mind was a whirl of questions. "So, so what's its nature, this sensory modality? Is it like sight? Sound?"

"Well despite the metaphors I used just now, I think of it more like smell. I can't turn it off, just like with smell, and there are characteristic, well, I call them scents, associated with different kinds of magic. I pick up a waterpatch, say, and I can sort of smell that it's got some kind of hardener in there, plus a binder, a little webbing. Put it against a leak, it uses the water as a trigger to bind it to the surrounding wood or whatever, and the hardener makes it rigid. The webbing keeps out any more water."

"And some of these 'scents', you don't like them?" She clicked her teeth. "Ah, *now* I see what you were implying! The spells that you dislike the smell of are the ones you think are inherently bad?"

Roween sighed, *at last!* "Yes, that's about right. Some are really lovely, best of all is the dispel itself, but most are life-awful."

"But smells can't be the same for everyone, can they? Normal spells can be thought nice by some people, but bad by others. I don't like the taste of marzipan, but my mother adored it."

"In general, there's a lot of agreement: the worse something smells — in the normal sense — the more likely it is to be harmful. Some things may smell nice *and* be bad for you, like roses, but there's certainly a meaningful correlation between the two. Now I'm not pretending that I have an unfailing ability to smell which spells are bad and which are good, but I've noticed that those I *think* are bad also have the vilest scents. Very bad-smelling ones will *always* get me. Artefacts, if they're passive, I can handle them in small doses, but if I'm nervy or on edge, or if there's too many of them like in Cala Bay Town, it can spark the reflex." She shivered. "Or standing with those books, it was like being in a sewer, I thought I was going to throw up."

Conley nodded. "What's your range? Depends on how strong the magic is?"

"Yes, how bad it smells. Doors, walls, they don't make any difference, and the scents aren't directed, not like light would be. Just seem to radiate in a ball centred on the source of the magic. If I stay as far away as I did from Sennary when you gelled him, I'm usually safe enough. Might catch a whiff in the corner of my..." She tut-tutted. "I'll have to think of a word for it someday."

"So this whole trek of yours, you're taking me to Liagh Na Laerich because you want me to develop the same reflex as you?"

"It's not just that, there's more to it. Another person just like me would be no good at all, I can't cast spells. I want someone who *can* — you. Yes, I do intend for you to sit in Liagh Na Laerich library's bound-book section until you wipe their binders clear, but you need to learn more first. Otherwise, I'd have just taken you to a black-fac in CBT, or a click-bank in Cala."

Conley's shoulders dropped. "What is it you're holding back, Ro? What is it I need to know?"

Roween put her hand on Conley's leg, looked askew at her, wishing she could tell. "Sorry, Con, can't risk it till I know you won't go starry on me."

* * *

Farther north, there were more refugees, scattered groups rather than the single, depressive, line. They had less possessions with them, didn't seem as organised.

The first few Conley had approached wouldn't talk. They looked like city folk, but then all Estavians did. The next batch, however, were more forthcoming, albeit still suspicious.

The man driving the mule had a thin moustache, artificially darkened. His wife was skinny, red-faced, sullen. She nursed a baby, unenthusiastically.

They were from the small Altinn region in the west of Estavia, where the River Erva kinks round in a looping semi-circle. They weren't believers of the Message, and they didn't know why they'd been attacked. For some reason, though, their houses had been set ablaze in the night; swarms of armed men had ridden in, swinging swords, shooting arrows, and they'd had to flee. They'd been lucky, had time to take the wagon: other people had been forced to leave everything. It hadn't stopped there, either; they were pursued across the Erva, driven forward, broken up by ambush. Now they were confused, beaten, destitute and hungry, nowhere to go but onwards.

Roween dropped the family one of Medreph's rubies.

* * *

Conley waited until the group was out of range before seeking Roween's opinion.

The smaller woman narrowed her eyes. "They were herded out of Altinn, herded over the Erva, and are still being herded now. I don't understand: why would anyone want to do that?"

"To steal their farms? Some would-be warlord? Revenge for something? Just soldiers, looting?" She gave up. "Who knows?"

"No, whoever it was didn't do it to capture or destroy, they deliberately set about driving the people west. The natural escape route would have been east, where there's no great river to cross. It was calculated coercion."

"A sudden influx of displacees in the north — it could draw away resources from where the real fighting will take place, more centrally."

Roween bit her thumb, stared intently at her mare's mane. "The Followers we saw are going to cause the Messenger far more problems. They're of his faith, so he can't ignore them. They're more numerous, and they're turning up right in potential battlefields, just where he wants all civilians out the way. These people up here, he can forget them, they'll cause the Purasans more problems than they'll bring down on him."

"Well, whatever the reason, at least we now know that there's a whole wodge of army types chasing them westwards. If we're not careful they'll probably pick us up, too." She looked over her shoulder, automatic. "Why is it important we reach the coast, couldn't we cut west ourselves?"

Roween didn't answer immediately, something Conley had said... "We can go west, yes, I did before. Just hoping to catch a boat round to Elet this time, that's all." She scratched her brow. *Too much running away, you get paranoid.*

"Well let's turn now, get ahead of this lot before they hit civilisation. Every town will close its gates once people know what's coming."

"We might find they're closed anyway..."

Chapter 25

"It is the will of Lon," began the Messenger, even before his adviser had prostrated himself. Giquis was so surprised that he nearly looked his master in the eye.

"Messenger? I do not understand. What is the — "

"Invasion!" The Messenger laughed, quickly, cutting short before he finished.

Giquis just knew that he simply had to have mistaken the emperor's meaning. Surely! He *must* have done! Yet none could ever tell with the man-god. "Invasion?" he repeated. "But Justan has the Estavian army to command now, we cannot hope to invade this year. We need time, to sow the seeds of the Message once more."

"The thinking of gods is beyond ... the ken of mortals. We will not invade Akrea or Estavia, it is King Justan who will invade ... our lands."

"But Purasan is crushed, Messenger! The last great city of the south has fallen to us. The Holy Army can easily hold at the Erva until Winter sets in, when war-making becomes impossible. Come Spring, we will have regained enough of our support in — "

"King Justan will invade." The Messenger's interruption was almost sung, airily. "We will allow him to cross the Erva."

Giquis pondered. "You're hoping to trap him? Pull back, surround his forces, overwhelm him?"

"It is not ... my plan, Giquis. It is that of Lon, my father. He has promised the Messenger help, from Taloss, goddess of all wars." He chuckled.

This is dangerous. Giquis ran his thumb through his beard. The Messenger had never before involved other gods, even when a victory was already assured. If he claimed Taloss was on the side of the Holy Army, and yet it still lost the battle, then matters would require some very careful explaining. His master was clearly taking a risk, but any attempts to talk him out of it would be futile. After all, he *had* been told what to do by Lon himself...

"You are silent, Giquis."

"I was considering, my lord, what form this assistance from Taloss might take." He waited for a reply, but none was forthcoming. He was about to make a conjecture of his own, when the Messenger finally spoke.

"The Holy Army, for a period of up to one day, will be unharmed by all things magical."

The spellmaster felt a heavy sickening welling just below the base of his ribcage. This was it. How in the world could the Messenger ever deliver on a promise like that?

"Our army must be told. It will give them ... heart." The whine of the son of Lon and Lona cut the air. "You, Giquis, must tell them."

"Me, Messenger?" He was momentarily confused; his god-driven ruler had some plan, but there was no time right now to ascertain its nature.

"Take my guard, proceed to Dreimen. Take also the magical sphere, which so treacherously ... betrayed us. Tell the Believers ... that when you break its glass, Taloss will come, will caress them, will enter their bodies, protect them. Tell them, Giquis."

"I will, Messenger, as you command. But, if I may be permitted to ask, why is it I who must go? I am old, I do not travel well; there are others who would do better than I."

The Messenger half-snarled, sounded disappointed. "People must see, Giquis, that although magic has ... hurt them, it cannot while Taloss lives in their souls."

Giquis suspected more — it wasn't a strong enough reply. "There are many magic-users

in your guard, Messenger. I believe that it is not solely for my magical skills that I am needed."

"Indeed not. It is symbolic. Symbols are powerful." The Messenger was tapping his foot, as if listening to the music of his voice. Gigus was unnerved. "It was you, Gigus, who told the Estavians that King Justan's spell-casting troops had been withdrawn."

"But at your command, Messenger! I warned you that Chewt was acting — "

"It is therefore because of you that Estavia surrendered to King Justan."

"But — "

"So, Gigus, it is you who must redeem yourself, to save the victims of your deception. When you crack the glass globe, shattering magic's ... grip on the world, Taloss will accept your ... renunciation. She will swathe her followers in ... her godly presence."

Gigus gasped audibly as realisation gelled. If the morale-boost didn't work and the battle was lost, he — a magic-user — would be the scapegoat. He felt the god-emperor's snare closing about him. "But Messenger, if Taloss is not impressed by my plea for forgiveness, if she believes I am insincere, then defeat will surely follow! The Holy Army will burn my limbs."

"Perhaps then, Gigus, you should ensure that Taloss ... is disposed to help."

Chapter 26

The visual link was abominable, but Ansle could at least hear Sennary's voice. He was calling from Rhiev in Akrea, using the public inter-city trunk. That meant someone in the Cala exchange was holding whichever sphere was receiving the incoming call against another making the outgoing connection to the Academy. Whoever it was would, of course, be able to listen in on what was being said, and Ansle was sure that this ability to eavesdrop was why most connectors *took* the job: the rewards otherwise were almost certain to be deservedly sorry.

"Ansle? At last — it's taken fifty minutes to reach you." Sennary sounded a touch distant, distorted as his voice bridged between the two comspheres' physical contact in the switchgirl's hands.

"I've been trying to call *you* for the past two days," drily.

"Ambushed, broke my com-2. Look, I met up with Conley, she still doesn't have the information but she's working on it. The other lass is handing it to her a few bits at a time — I could probably get it quicker myself, if you liked." There was something about the way he said it, something, but Ansle couldn't tell what, too much interference.

"Things have changed a little now, Sennary, I'm venturing a different approach. The situation will be too hot in the Purasan south, now that Dreimen has been taken, so Conley will want to be heading north. I've arranged a little pressure to drive her west."

"West? Into the ". There was a momentary volume drop as the junction spheres slipped apart, somewhere in the Cala exchange. The switchgirl reconnected them. "Won't that mean she's likely to be captured?"

"It's what I'm *hoping* will happen, yes. Confined in one of the Messenger's dungeons for some while, it may give Roween time to contemplate how much her spell is *really* worth if she is the only one who knows it."

There was no mistaking Sennary's disgust. "You'd deliberately lead your daughter into his hands? What if she's killed? What if Roween is?"

"They won't be, I assure you. The Messenger *may* attempt to convert them to his beliefs, but he wouldn't kill two fleeing mages, they're too interesting. I expect you'll be able to collect them in a couple of months' time, when his armies are beaten and he's surrendered."

"The Messenger may never even get to see or hear of them before they die. Besides, Roween isn't a mage anyway, Conley casts all their spells."

"Not the important one, Sennary. And he *will* hear of them, I'm absolutely certain."

The mercenary said nothing for a moment. "I'm running out of time here, Ansle, these business links are expensive. What do you want me to do next?"

"Ah, yes... The Estavian army is in sore need of commanders. Justan requires the services of reliable men to take control. I suggested your name, among others; he saved a regiment for you. How long before you can reach Taltu?"

"Taltu?" Another pause. "Three, four days if the roads are clear, maybe a week if I have to go cross country."

"I'll ask Justan to hold it for another week. He's somewhere in the north of Akrea; you might present yourself if you pass nearby. Oh, and if you *do* find him, there's one of my MSR men with him by the name of Vyval: ask him to get in touch with me, please."

"I'll try, Chancellor. Anything else?"

"Not for the moment, no. Oh, wait, yes there is: Porett, of Porett Technologies, may be going to Estavia in the near future. He and I have a certain arrangement, haven't we Porett? I think he may have some equipment for you, to assist in your mission."

"Another comsphere wouldn't go amiss, that's for sure. By the way, Conley's click-well's still functioning, I guess that's what he's tagged."

Ansle nodded: it made sense — Roween might indeed have made an effort to avoid eliminating their source of income. "A useful observation, Sennary." He tapped twice on his chin. "So, did you learn anything worthwhile during your stay with the Purasans in the marshes?"

"Not from the people themselves, no, they care too much about the past, they're completely ungrateful for any outside help."

"Well I think they'll find The King is *past caring*, too." He smiled, self-satisfied smugly.

Chapter 27

The ruined, moss-strewn stones loomed large from their bramble tangle. Tall grasses, threading through the briars, caught the breeze and the hazy evening sunlight. Swallows flitted between majestic arches, chasing each other in knotting dives and loops, a swooping dance of aerobatic ease.

The building had not been visible when, earlier that afternoon, Roween had led the way deep into the untended woodlands. Conley had first glimpsed its ancient walls only moments before the army of trees finally opened ranks, ceding space to a grave of architectural grandeur.

"Hot, Ro, what is it?"

"Purian monastery, Medreph showed me it. Sorry, I thought the path was bad *then*, it's even worse now, probably no-one's been here for years."

"It's magnificent!" She coughed. "How did Medreph discover it? It looks deserted."

Roween gently steered her horse toward the paving stones, barely visible through the matted undergrowth that beweeded the once-splendid structure. "I don't know, he had Eletic maps, maybe they recorded this place from times when it was prosperous. He always used to spend a day here, he said, exploring. It's vast."

Conley was following, looking about at the weathered, collapsed masonry, becoming increasingly awed with every sight of time-intricate carving, or faded, cracked fresco.

"There's a courtyard inside, with double-level cloisters. The thorns haven't penetrated that far yet, we can leave the horses there to graze, sleep under cover if it looks like rain." It didn't. "There's even a small pool, running water."

"We'll be safe here, then, for a few days." She cleared her throat. "No-one would spend five hours on that winding path unless they knew where they were headed, and it looked so unused, I can't believe there's possibly anyone else around."

"It's not the only way in, just the quickest, but yes, we should be fine for a while, so long as we don't light a fire, attract attention."

Conley pushed against a creaking, rusted iron gate, stared into the green shadowiness ahead. "This way?"

* * *

It was growing dark. They'd eaten apples, just ripened in a gnarled orchard that still bore fruit, sheltered as part of a walled garden. Conley indicated she was longing to investigate the rest of the remains, but it would have to wait until the morning. Night animals were beginning to stir, there were noises in the woods; Roween felt it was wiser to return to the known safety of the courtyard. They flattened some grass in a corner, sat down.

"So what purpose does this complex serve, then, Ro? Like a huge temple?"

"In a way, yes, it's a sort of abbey. Abandoned maybe hundreds of years, long enough for its fields to surrender to forest, the stones to crack to ruin, for all but books to forget it ever existed."

Conley began a small light spell. "The size of these buildings, the order that dwelt here must have been very wealthy, commanded much power. What happened to it? Why did it decay?"

Roween shrugged as she watched her companion's hand sliding easily into the gestures. It saddened her, in a way, that some day — because of her — such a skill would be worthless.

"There was a Purian queen," she recalled, "abolished the old religion, wanted the wealth of the church for herself, took it. I think its influence must have been fading in any case, or she couldn't have done what she did. If our own past is any guide, the monks were corrupt anyway, selfish, greedy, long abandoning any pretensions of worshipful prayer or study."

Conley's light flickered into being. A faint, white cast betrayed the pillars of the walkway, like enhanced moonlight; exaggerated shadows swayed with every tiny movement, voluminous cloaks caught by the wind.

Roween glanced around, wearily. She felt sure now that Ansle was alive, in control. Was here a safe place any more? Was anywhere?

Conley listened, open-eyed, as if the surrounding stones were speaking to her, captivated by the glow-magic. She shivered. "Do you think the Messenger has places like this?"

Roween felt small against the massive backdrop, her skin a bluey grey in the half-bleaching light of the spell. "I don't expect so," she replied, "not new, anyway. These places take decades to construct, he's only been on the scene for maybe ten or twelve years. He'll have refurbished some that were to older gods, though."

Conley leaned back, let her hair flow behind her, looked upwards to where the first stars were peering through the veil of the night sky. "I don't believe in gods. I know the tenets of the Books, of course, from school; I read a little of Chaenish lore in classics lessons, too, though nothing of the Message. But I know there are no gods."

Roween smiled, rubbed her neck. "For centuries, Con, people have been staring out into the vastness of the night, the birthplace of philosophies, dreams. They've pondered on its immensity, its actuality, sought explanations, a meaning for it all. Whence did it come? Who created it, and why? What purpose do mere humans serve in a darkness of such magnitude?" A sigh. "The skies have inspired a thousand religions, Con, and will inspire a thousand more. And yet you, you casually glance upwards and blankly announce you don't believe in gods!" She laughed.

Conley looked at her, askance. "You're not telling me that *you* do?"

Roween shook her head, still smiling. "No, it happens I don't, it was just the way you leaned back, beheld the wonders of the universe, and didn't so much as hesitate in denouncing the very notion of gods. It was just so, well, innocent, that's all."

Conley humphed and lay back in the grass. Roween chuckled to herself. Sometimes, she just couldn't help but feel like hugging her.

* * *

After a time Conley spoke, her voice contrasting with the musical tinkle of the courtyard's half-hidden fountain. "Do you know much about the Message, Ro?"

"The Message?" Roween had been thinking about it herself. "Superficially, yes, just what I picked up last time I came this way."

"What I saw in Rhiev disturbed me, and then all those Followers, the intensity of their belief..."

Hastily, "Yes, well I can give you some idea of what they hold true, if you like. Oh — if you don't mind talk about religion, that is."

"No, it's fine, I'm comfortable with it."

Roween grinned. "That's good. So, do you want the full myth or a rough outline?"

"A rough myth..."

She looked down, hooked a finger under her chin, collected her thoughts. "Well I might get some of the names wrong, but I can give it a roll. It all starts off with nothing but Existence, and Existence is a god called Lon. He looks on himself, thinks a bit, and manifests three different aspects of his being: objects, change and feelings."

"Interruption!" shouted Conley, suddenly, rather too loudly. "Sorry," quieter, "but what do you mean by 'manifest'? A form of parthenogenesis?"

Roween rested back on both arms. "Yes, manifesting, it's a central concept of the Message, one of the ways it devours other religions. Any deity can manifest another one of the opposite sex. That god or goddess will usually have responsibilities that are some specialisation of those of the manifesting goddess or god. When the Message absorbs another creed, they just say that that religion's gods are mere manifestations of those of the Message. Sometimes they might simply identify them one-to-one, but usually it's by manifesting, since that gives the gods of the Message a certain superiority."

"So you mean the Message has a stock of gods at the ready in some classification hierarchy? And when the Messenger wants to invade a country full of frog-worshippers, there'll be a god somewhere he can claim is the real Frog of Frogs, and that their existing Holy Froggy is nothing but a manifestation of it?"

Roween chuckled. "Yes, in a way, not for frogs of course, but there are some gods that occur in many pantheons, and the Message is designed so as to be primed for accepting them. Take its goddess of war, Taloss. Most gods of war are male, like the Akrean Tah, and the Davian Lyod Mar. The Messenger can easily claim that these are no more than local manifestations of Taloss. However, the Purasans have no overall god of war; instead, they have several semi-deified spirits of dead warriors, both genders, and with overlapping spheres of interest. This kind of set-up isn't so easy to assimilate into the hierarchy through manifestation, but there is a secondary way, using children."

"Well before you delve into the intricacies of that, can you give me some more of the background? So far we have this one god and he's manifested three — goddesses?"

"Yes, sorry. The three are Kyri, goddess of objects, Lona, goddess of change, and Eskh, goddess of feelings. Kyri is the eldest, so she works first. She creates the earth, the sky and the sea, and manifests three gods to watch over them. Mun is earth, I don't remember the other two. She also creates the sun in the sky, to light her creations, but doesn't manifest a god because the sky, sea and earth are so much bigger than the sun. Neither does she manifest gods for the creatures that she's placed on the surface of the earth, and in its seas and skies. She sees that what she's created is beautiful, and steps back."

"She sounds stupid to me. And vain."

"Well that's right, she's supposed to be. Anyway, Lona, goddess of change steps up, as second eldest, and decides that this is all very well, but everything is still, motionless, like a painting. So, she gives movement to the air, the seas, the rivers, and manifests gods of wind, rain and current to look after them. However, she also gives movement to the sun, and manifests a god for it, Ast, he's called."

"I remember the name from Rhiev..."

"Yes, well this change to the sun doesn't please Kyri, because when it moves out the sky there's nothing to light her creations. So she makes the moon, to illuminate the world at night. This irritates Lona, so she in turn imbues it with movement and manifests herself another god, Trell or Trill or something. Kyri loses her light source again, so she makes planets, and Lona moves these, too. Finally, Kyri creates the stars, and she puts them everywhere in the sky, so even when Lona moves one there are always others visible. That's how their dispute was resolved, and it's how we got Time."

"So, at this stage we have two bitchy goddesses. Why do I just *know* the third one is going to be a goody-goody?"

Roween shuffled back against a column, settled down again, sitting on her foot. She

could see Conley gesturing, the light was probably about to dim out. "We've not quite finished with Lona: she gives movement to the trees and plants that Kyri has created, but doesn't manifest gods for them because they are so many and so weak."

"And it would have been *so* inconvenient for the myth..." She held her penultimate gesture, waited for the old spell to cut out.

Roween felt a murmur of pride, continued. "Once Lona steps back, it's the turn of Eskh, goddess of feelings. She sees a world of ever-changing vitality, but with no direction. Only the gods are able to appreciate its beauty, to add to it. So she gives senses to the creatures, and manifests a god, Teder, to help in their use. She distils in the creatures desires, such that they have a purpose in life, and Anean is the god she cooks to watch over them. Notice how handy it is having a male god of desires to manifest all those goddesses of love everyone else uses."

"Yes, I had..."

"Now Eskh stops short of giving feelings or desires to the plants, because she fears that too much interference will annoy Kyri and Lona."

"Smart girl." She released the light spell, just as the old one died.

Roween beamed her smile. "You've heard this before, admit it!"

"No, not at all, what do you mean?"

"Well you said she was smart."

"So? Oh, I see, yes, 'thinking powers' have to come from somewhere, and there's only three goddesses... She's goddess of intelligence, right?"

"Near enough — the term they actually use is 'wisdom'. Eskh is the wisest of the goddesses, and she bestows her wisdom on just a few of the creatures. She knows her pseudo-sisters, or whatever the relationship is called, might be angry, so she makes *herself* be the goddess of wisdom, rather than manifest a new god. She has another name in that context, Kesk, I think. Sure enough, the other goddesses are not pleased. Kyri doesn't like these creatures — which we know as humans"

" — surprise surprise"

" — she doesn't like the way they create objects of their own. Lona doesn't like the way they change things to suit themselves, as *she's* supposed to handle all changes. Anyway, together they ask Lon to manifest a goddess of nothingness, so this new goddess can destroy the humans. However, he refuses, because he sees that Eskh is wise, and that her actions are good."

"That won't stop them, there's a god of death to come yet — *everyone* has a god of death."

"Well it may be crudely obvious to you, yes, but remember this has to be understood by people who've never had an education, who are used to simple, oral stories rather than tightly-plotted novels... So you're right, of course the sisters don't take it lying down, jealous backbiters that they are, and they put together a plan. Lona gets together with the god of the earth and bears him a child, Wul, god of the otherworld. For religions with an evil god, the Messenger usually identifies him with Wul. Kyri then creates this otherworld for Wul to rule over, which is basically either an empty, boring, cold place, or a crowded, boring, hot place, it sort of depends on who you talk to. Next, Kyri gets into bed with the god of wind and has a son, Loss, god of death. He's the one who gets to carry people off to the otherworld."

"So these children, they could be any sex really?"

Roween nodded, adjusted her position to stop her leg going dead. "Yes, male or female, doesn't matter; it's the Message's way of dealing with those pesky, ill-fitting gods and goddesses that other religions sometimes have; a means of tying up loose ends. Gods that don't mesh properly with the mainstream set-up tend to be popular, cultist. Claiming they're

children of Message gods is a neat solution. Most evil gods and gods of death are male, so they equate with Wul and Loss. Sort of sets the precedent."

Conley sat up. "Well that about covers it, then. You've described the main gods, they explain all the great issues, so the rest of the Message is just so much detail."

"Ah, no, almost, but there's the final hook yet." She rubbed her calf as pins-and-needles set in. "As it stands, once you're dead that's it. So Eskh decides to create learning and writing, but she doesn't want her work subverted by the other goddesses. Hence, she goes to Lon directly, and asks him to father her children. She has twin daughters, Loneskh and Eskhlon, easy to remember. Loneskh is learning, Eskhlon is writing. The other big two goddesses aren't going to mess with them, because they're Lon's children, and Kyri and Lona are frightened of him. They accept the two new goddesses without complaint. What they don't realise until it's too late is that Eskh has outsmarted them, and she now has a way to get people *out* of the otherworld."

Conley rested on one arm, stroked the nose of her horse as it wandered nearby looking for grass the best length to eat. "I can see why an account of reincarnation would be useful for swallowing certain religions, but I don't follow how learning and writing can help."

Roween paused, then nodded. "When you die, Loss takes you to the otherworld. There, you can recollect everything about all your past lives, so you can ponder on your fate. The length of time you stay is dependent on how much people remember you after your death, because in a way you live on in folk's memories even after you've died. Writing, recording deeds — even to us, learning of things passed can seem to bring history to life. In the Message, it actually *does*: the more that people think of you when you're dead, the more your reincarnation becomes a reality. If they continue to respect you, your actions; if they hold you up as an example of how people should live, long after you've gone — it's like your spirit lives on. Surely, after a time, after enough experience of this existence in words and thoughts and minds, your soul is strong enough to make the transition back from the otherworld, and you can be reborn, come alive again? Everyone has a vain streak, everyone likes to think they'll be remembered after their death for *something*. People in positions of power especially so, they *expect* it."

Conley was thinking. "Yes, I can see how that could be quite seductive to anyone with a big ego."

"As have mages?"

Conley laughed, wheezed a little. "As have *most* mages!"

Roween smiled. "So, it's quite well thought-out, really. It's not just remembering people's *names* — so what if you do know your great-grandfather was called Arvin — it's their *actions*, what they did and why they did it. That's why people need to make a *real* contribution, not just publicise themselves, shamelessly erecting statues all over the place or whatever. The Message gives the little people hope, too, that even they can get out of the otherworld before long if they did the right things while alive. For lowlives, unambitious peasants, they simply have to be good and well thought-of, leave messages at temples and shrines for Loss to pass on to dead people, and it'll all help reduce the duration of their stay when they eventually die themselves. You don't have to daub yourself in glory to be remembered."

"Something for everyone," Conley observed. Roween noticed she was gesturing again, couldn't make out the spell. "It sounds quite a caring religion, really — isn't it a form of ancestor worship, like the Nachatee practise? There are bound to be far worse religions, anyway." She looked at her hand a moment as it moved. "So why are the Followers so intimidating? Why is everyone so scared of *this* faith?"

"It's the Messenger. He claims to be the *son* of Lon and Lona, which puts him on a par with Loneskh and Eskhlon in terms of status. His charge, he says, is to ensure that everyone understands the *true* nature of things, that they believe the Message."

"But what *is* the Message? That Lon is chief god, and if you're good then when you die you'll come back sooner rather than later?"

"You don't have to be *good*, just *remembered*. Yes, the Message is acceptance of the myth, but like any religion it's more than that, it's an entire system of beliefs, complete with rituals and its own morality, a whole outlook on life. There's a nutshell that's supposed to sum up the essence of its theology: 'things exist to change'."

"I see. So that's why the Messenger chose his parents the way he did — the god of existence and the goddess of change."

"Perhaps; I don't know if the encapsulation came before or after the ancestry."

"So the reason people fight against the Messenger is because he's an evangeliser?"

"Partly, but it's the *way* he does it." Roween absently pulled a lock of hair behind her ear. "He says that the best thing you can do to be remembered, something really worthwhile that will ensure your wait for resurrection will be brief, is to convert a non-believer to the Message. Failing that, it's to send them to the otherworld before you."

"If you're not with us, you die.'" Conley nodded, slowly. "Now *that's* sinister". She looked down at her hand again as it flowed through familiar permutations of the five stylised positions. "Hold on a moment, sorry, I have to cast this spell..." Rolling over to face the centre of the courtyard, she flew out the last gestures of the sequence. Roween braced herself; the air began to move, slowly at first, then sporadically quicker, small gusts. Conley continued the hand flicks.

"That doesn't smell too good, Con, do you want me to — "

"No, I won't be much longer, just a wind, getting rid of the mosquitoes..."

"Leave them, no, keep it down!" She was struggling into a crouch, frowning like her head ached. "It's like looking at the sun, I'll *have* to blink!"

"That's it, finished." Conley broke off, and the minor cyclone dropped. The algae-marbled basin of the small fountain stood proud again, amidst the straw-like matting of now storm-damaged grass stalks. The courtyard looked eerily untidy, like Roween's hair first thing in the morning, in need of a brush.

Conley drew herself up into a sitting position, looked over to her friend: Roween was on her hands and knees, her eyes closed, nose wrinkled, trying to breathe steadily.

Conley gasped. "I'm sorry, Ro, it was only a little breeze, there were things buzzing round the horses." Roween tried to kneel up, still dizzy, as she scrambled towards her. "I didn't know you'd — I thought you'd just have blotted it if it was too much, you didn't have to hold back for me, I — if I'd have *known* it would hurt you..." She put her arm round the other girl's shoulders. "Are you alright?"

Roween blinked, let out a long sigh.

Chapter 28

Porett was rather pleased with his work. It'd taken him three days, on and off, but he appeared to have succeeded in his aim: the link-tag on Conley was now routed through to the comsphere-3. Naturally, the handgrip was still important, remained something more than a mere piece of carved wood —

Inwardly, he shuddered. It also held Elidia's focus, of course, and fixed in the static segs of her husk. *So?* He lobbed it into a drawer.

The first problem he'd faced was that the nature of link matrices ordained that he couldn't directly transfer the activation end over to the com-3: it had to persist in the handgrip or the link would simply cease to exist. He'd tackled that put putting a link-tag on the handgrip itself and making the comsphere-3 *its* activation object; this would hopefully enable him to chain through from there to Conley.

The second problem was that the necessary control segments which he'd needed to splice together were almost evenly red and green, so he couldn't prove the final sequence safe. He'd had to rip out all the standard blue 'copy' elements, and replace them with versions of a less general (but red) one that he remembered from years back. Overall, the final spell had been ever-so-slightly red, but then that's all he'd required to stop its feeding back on him. Now, his other self should be able, by making a focus, to initiate the link to the handgrip and patch from there to the click-well. He tapped in.

His own eyes looked back at him. "Success?"

He nodded. "It's all yours, now. You want to try?"

"Guess so. I'll switch incoming calls to Caltra." He faded out.

Porett tugged at a knot in his beard. He wasn't sure whether this was going to work. While in the crystal, he couldn't cast spells. He could feel himself making the gestures, but nothing ever happened at the end. He'd been resigned to that when he first wrote his personality into the device, but a focus was different. He hoped that by making the sphere itself a link receiver, it would be brought into his duplicate self's reality, like the situation that arose when making com-calls. If that happened, his focus might be meaningful, and he could link to Conley. If the plan failed, he'd have to use his physical self, a prospect he did not relish.

He sighed. Why hadn't he put a normal tag on the second click-well? *Because Conley could have detected it, that's why.* Still, he should be safe enough, so long as Roween didn't loose her antimagic while he was patched through. He yawned, rubbed his eyes.

When he opened them again, the com-3 was glowing green, he tapped in. "Ready?"

"Ready. I'll try for just a few seconds, initially anyway..."

* * *

His virtual hand made a focus.

The first thing he noticed was the weight of her breasts, heavy, unexpected. Sensations were coming in from everywhere, unscrambling as his brain mapped them onto parts of his new body. He heard words, but defocused before they made sense. He stared out of the com-3 at his real-world self.

"You look dazed..."

"That was ... an experience."

"Breathing difficulties?"

"I didn't really notice, no, none I guess, nothing in here to give conflicting signals. I think that for long sessions I should close the com-channel, cut out all external input. Then, I can open my eyes. If you need the sphere, you can tap in and interrupt me."

"Good idea, why didn't *I* think of that?" He smiled. "Want to try again?"

"I won't stay linked for too long, it's, well, disorienting. I'll patch in for a few seconds at a time, only remain if they're talking something interesting. I should find out where they are soon enough, I'll let you know once I do."

"Fair enough, but try it a few more times with the call to me still open, in case I need to do anything."

"I was planning on it." He closed his eyes. "Wish me luck!" He focused.

He was scrambling down a rubble-covered stairway, leading into darkness. He let the first flood of extraneous sensory information ebb over him, concentrated on what he knew would be the same. Vision, sound, balance. There wasn't much in the gloom below, but he could hear the rocks sliding as he made his way down, feel them cutting into his hand. *Filter out everything else, you can explore the body later, just think of sight and hearing.* No, can't ignore that rhythm, break off...

"You stayed longer that time."

"She was going down into a cellar of some kind. This is going to take some getting used to, I'm being distracted by her physiology."

"We figured that would happen. Can you handle it?"

"From within here, I suppose so, but if it was you doing the work, your juices would be singing by now."

"It's erotic?"

"It's..." He paused. "It's maybe the link. Once I get used to it, the effect will probably dull. But yes, it's very erotic, more so even than husking Liddy was; it isn't even a tenth as easy to gain control of my instincts. Best not merge until I do."

"Agreed. Ready for another attempt?"

He nodded, closed his eyes, formed a focus.

Looking back up the steps, the other girl was coming down, unsteadily. Conley was watching Roween's feet, making sure she didn't slip, her face wasn't clear; he knew she'd have crossed eyes, though. *Did Liddy mentioned dyed hair?*

"I'll make a light," he felt himself saying. Conley breathed, moved so effortlessly, he wanted to gasp, to savour it, couldn't. His hand started flicking gestures, so fast he could hardly track them, never mind follow the casting's progress. *Hot hot, she's off-world, no-one's that quick!*

"A storeroom, maybe?" the other girl remarked. She had an undistinguished voice, accent maybe Cala's Inner Stretch area, flat A's. He tried to attend to what he could see and hear, disregarded what he could feel.

"Empty, though. There's a doorway here, looks like the wood's rotted away." Light burst from his hand. Conley looked down at it, he could see the source cupped there, could see her arm, his arm, elegant, slender, sleeve rolled back and tied at the elbow. He dropped his focus."

"Better that time?"

"I'm getting used to it, but it's frustrating, amazing. It's like she has everything physical any man ever sought in a woman, but it's so much *stronger* than just looking at her, I can't ignore it. I'm really *in* there, it all compounds the effect, complete. Pictures of nudes are nothing against it, it's so strong, the suggestiveness, so true. But I can't *do* anything, though, that's what irks me. I'm going to have to be practical about it, but it's torture!"

"Any idea where they are?"

"No — looks like some old castle. I'll try again."

The corridor was long, Conley's light didn't reach either end. There was another door across from theirs, and more placed in pairs opposite each other, both directions.

"Is that writing? Hold up the light?"

He raised his arm, strained to read. Didn't she have night lenses? *Roween must have blotted them.* Just a number.

"Looks like we've found the old storage area, Con. Well, you're the explorer, which way do we go?"

He ran his fingers through his hair. It was so smooth, so fine, silky. "I don't think it matters really, let's try to the left."

They walked to the next pair of doors. Porett felt an unwilling pawn, his hips swinging with Conley's easy movement, bound by her whims, her will. He could now make sense of all the sensory input incoming, his subconscious mind somehow able to build a usable spatial map of Conley's physique. That the human brain was capable of such feats never ceased to dismay him, but it bothered him considerably more that in the comsphere-3 he didn't actually *have* a brain, he was a projection in glass, nothing more. He noted that he felt little different "down below", as he'd have phrased it, just a mite shrunk and static. Perhaps his ersatz brain was sparing the deeper, more primitive parts of his emotional make-up from such potentially grievous information?

He didn't know whether he was deeply attracted *to* Conley, or to *being* Conley. He suspected the latter; everything he'd desired in women he now had himself, at least by proxy. He let his concentration wander, searching her body with his thoughts, his awareness spreading through her. Her legs, lithe beneath loose breeches; her waist, slim, curving, high, so different from his own. He wished he could control her movements, wanted her to brush the soft skin of her face with her hands, his hands, running gently across her lips.

He opened his eyes, broke the link, flashed green to the outer world.

"There a problem?"

"I'm going to have to think about this for a while. It's opening too many doors that are better closed."

"Should we merge?"

"Definitely not!" He disengaged the sphere.

What was his problem? If he could specify it, maybe he could properly address it. Well, it was what he'd suspected that it would be originally, why he'd made Liddy use the link. At the time, he'd feared that he might actually *enjoy* being one with Conley, and that it might awaken within him certain urges, urges that he did *not* wish to have thrust unbidden upon him. In practice, though, it was far worse than that, because sure enough he was getting aroused from the link, but he had no body of his own. Conley's could not react in any way to his heightening excitement, and he could envisage himself becoming increasingly tormented at having no feedback.

At the Academy, Porett had always been obsessed by all things magic. He was one of a small group of like-minded students who'd spent all their spare time cutting: delving into every aspect of the subject, knowing the ins and outs of anything plausibly relevant to the business of casting spells, from first principles up. Experimenting with new gestures, risking unproven spells because they "felt" like they should work; he sighed, *those were fun days*. He and the other cutters had spurned the usual kind of undergraduate activities — going on shot-binges, cooking savoury Ilathic food, politics, dating one another. It was just something cutters didn't *do*, even the female ones. Hot, he remembered the day some goof from one of the History colleges had made a pass at Roenna, she'd looked at him like he'd asked her to eat

eighteen sticks of chalk.

He chuckled. He'd never understood why it was like that, but it just *was*. Cutters enjoyed having control, and bringing other people into your life at that kind of level meant losing it. Fantasising about girls beyond his reach, well, that was fair enough — he *guessed* the other cutters did similar things, too, but no-one ever talked about it, gauche in their circle.

This patching in to Conley, though, was way beyond fantasy. It was living her. Too tangible — it was undoing all his carefully-maintained repression. If he did merge with himself, then once back in his physical body he'd be suffering again, having the memory of being Conley — and once more the means to deal with it — but not having the immediacy of the actual stimulus itself. He might even be tempted to link *directly* from there. There was no time for that kind of indulgence, he had a business to run, status to maintain, an edge. Besides, he was becoming increasingly aware that it could become very addictive. He wanted to share her again right now.

And the merge itself could prove traumatic. It was often confusing for a while when his two halves had different ideas and opinions on certain subjects. If he merged back now, he'd be bringing on board an expanded emotional apparatus that would clash with what his real-world self was using.

So what alternatives did he have? Merge now, before it was too late, so his other self would know the score? No, he'd gone over-far already. Never merge ever again? Dangerous — merging was the only reason his real-life persona tolerated a copy in the com-3; he could use it to justify to himself that his dual existence merely implied an extension of his personality, not the creation of a different individual. He had to be able to trust his comsphere counterpart.

The only viable solution was deliberate suicide, for this merging at least. He found it disturbing to think of it that way, but it was a fair representation of the truth. His experiences linking to Conley had developed his psyche in a direction which made him a different person to the Porett outside, distinct. If he merged, he'd live on, but if he didn't then that would be the end of him as he now was. He was sacrificing his existence to spare his corporeal self the details of his knowledge. Could he perhaps live as before, knowing what he did? Yes, but life wouldn't be as good. Better than no life at all? Depravity beckoned.

He remembered what he'd decided when he first started using the com-3. If ever there was any conflict of interests, the real-world self took precedence. The com-Porett was completely subservient, and should always do whatever was in the best interests of his physical being. If he did merge as he now was, he'd be very angry with himself for doing so. Schizophrenia was something that had always haunted him about fusing into one his double identity.

He determined his fate, flashed on the comsphere. "I'm going to continue to link to Conley until I can find out what we want to know. I'll tell you, then explain a few things about what it's like linking to her, so you'll know in future. When I've finished, I want you to overwrite me, re-initialise the com-3: you *don't* want to have memories of what it feels like being Conley."

He broke off again before the other Porett could reply.

* * *

"all the others." His slotting back into Conley's form was by now almost natural.

"Well, we have plenty of time, and at least there are no rats down here."

"Something that's been nagging at me, Ro." When Conley spoke, there was a sort of reverberating in his head of her words. It took a little getting used to, her voice was pitched

octaves above his own. "I thought we were in a hurry to reach Liagh Na Laerich?" *Liagh Na what? Oh, in Elet, right.*

"That's true, we were, but we can tarry awhile now." Roween's flat tones echoed from the bare, stone walls of the empty room. Conley was looking at her, and he could see those strange eyes. He wondered what it might be like to see through a squint like that; probably intolerable — Roween's brain would blank away images from a lazy eye, but he'd see double.

"We didn't take it slowly before we got here," he said, "we were even on schedule to reach the coast a day earlier than we'd reckoned. We raced alongside those refugees, and now, just when we are almost ahead of them, you sidetrack to this monastery." He could feel a wheezing in his chest, coughed.

"Let's go outside, talk about it. There's nothing down here."

Roween put her hand on the small of his back, slid it to the nearside of his waist. *Hot!* He waited for the rush of adrenaline, but nothing came. *It wouldn't, would it...* What he regarded as erotica, Conley held to be commonplace. *Why do women touch one another so much?*

Down the corridor, outside, up a clearer flight of steps in a room they must have found when he wasn't patched in. He revelled in Conley's fluidity, savoured every new sensation, wallowed in her being. He had nothing to lose, he'd cease to be in a while, he may as well enjoy his liberation of (to?) desire.

"So, are you going to tell me?" he asked.

Roween was looking down as she walked. "We've run enough. I thought we'd wait for the displacees and their herders to pass by, then head up north again, catch us a boat. There'll be local ferries to Bleuchurt, from there we can take a timetabled service to Bridges."

Conley was nodding through all this, he'd noticed she did that a lot while listening. A trait of hers? Of most women? Oh, how could he *hope* to generalise?!

"I've been wondering about the Altinnians, too. There's a *regulated* stream of them, almost in a straight line, right across the Purasan northlands. It's like they were a river we had either to cross or let carry us away."

As they passed through a broken archway, Conley's hand rested on an upright, support while she negotiated the slippery stones underfoot. It was wet, *she's going to dry it, wipe it on something!* He calmed with expectancy, *her thigh perhaps? Her chest?* She pulled a rag from her pocket, used that. Another anticlimax.

Roween was still looking at her feet, avoiding the fallen blocks. "It sounds real stupid, but I think... No, I'm imagining it."

"You suspect our presence and the stream from Altinn may be related? Someone deliberately ousted them and drove them all this way to try and sweep us up?"

Roween blushed. "Well, I might, it's just a thought, not really likely or anything, its chances of success would be too small for anyone seriously to attempt it..."

"But there's no harm in staying here until it blows over, in case it really is a trap?"

"Well... It's — you're so noticeable, so pretty, if anyone had your description..."

Conley stopped, looked over her shoulder. She flicked back her hair, so soft, so light. Porett was beginning to hate himself for his indulgence. "*I'm* so — ? Sorry, didn't mean that, I'll run with your theory. How long do we wait?"

The lingering ache of his impotence had grown too much.

"Two weeks enough?"

He unlinked.

* * *

"You think you have enough to find them?" he asked from the comsphere.

"Derelict monastery, northeast Purian country, in Ansle's refugee stream. No problem, you know that."

"You want me to contact Ansle, find the precise route the Altinnians are taking?"

"No, I'll do all that when I supersede you."

"Best get it over with, then." *I'm going to die.*

"I'm already making the gestures..."

Chapter 29

Arranged on the large relief map in front of Justan were some twenty-seven comspheres, placed in positions corresponding to the locations of his field commanders. To the side lay four more, among them his priority link; these were for longer-distant communication. Suspended from the ceiling, with an overview of the whole tent, was the last of the ensemble: a security monitor, in order that the royal bodyguards could undertake The King's continued surveillance without being a distraction. It was to this all-seeing comsphere that Porett initially attached from his com-3.

He looked around. On a table behind Justan lay further maps, papers, details. A large colourboard rested on an easel beside the entrance, and at it stood General Nolley — or, as she appeared these days, Queen Mitya. Porett had seen her this way already, but was still impressed: Farmer had cut an excellent likeness. Nolley was coping well, too — she was the same height as Mitya, so no problem there, but her hair was cropped whereas the illusion's was regally long. This meant the figment wasn't tied to anything natural, so couldn't shadow reality's behaviour, would look false when it didn't flay out if she turned quickly. No-one else was in the room, but chairs, cups and pads of notepaper clued that there'd be staff called for later, probably to maintain the map.

At least in Nolley Justan would have a good tactician to advise him, which is more than he would have had with the real Mitya. She'd known even less about warfare than Porett, although she *had* been prone to occasional flashes of inspired flair; perhaps she *could* have swung a battle with a well-observed comment? He'd never know.

Justan was pretty much guaranteed to win this one anyway. It wasn't going to be the complete stupefying blow that everyone had been hoping for, because the enemy still had a sizeable army of Western Voths tied down in central Purasan, and that would need to be defeated separately. However, intelligence reports which Porett had snooped in on earlier suggested that the Messenger was throwing everything else into battle, including as-yet undrilled hordes of religious fanatics. If Justan could neutralise those today, that would amply compensate him for missing out on the Voths; if not, he'd have a huge problem with them later once their training was complete.

"Has it started yet?" It was his real-world self asking.

"Soon, I guess." The connection was one-way; his words weren't heard by The King.

"How's it looking?"

He lifted his virtual hands. "No-one seems to be panicking, even though we appear to be outnumbered two-to-one. Most of the opposition are irregulars, though, from what I can make out, so maybe that's why our lot are complacent."

"Could be. I'll let you get back, then." He tapped out.

The comsphere-Porett returned to his observations. Justan was bent over the map, studying it intently. He'd unquestionably have preferred to wait until he could draw on the full power of the Estavian regiments before tackling the Messenger, but the timing of this battle had outwardly been forced on him by repeated, calculated enemy incursions across the River Erva. As it was, the only representatives of the democracies that Porett could mark were the archers and charioteers from Akrea's otherwise splintered army.

Justan *would* win, however, because he had something of immeasurable benefit on his side: magic. It was known that the Messenger did have a few renegade magic-using personnel, but nowhere near enough to make an impact. The King, however, had something like sixteen units of highly-trained specialists at his disposal, three of them at double-strength, plus two special operations squads of elite, prosthetic-intensive mercenaries, *and* a close-quarters spell-combat group. The only problem Porett foresaw was the potentially suicidal tendency

of the wild, strongly-motivated, Message-frenzied mobs, which might make victory more bloody and protracted than was strictly necessary. Still, the more crazies that were manked, the better for it the world would be...

He looked over Justan's shoulder at the scale model. The Erva ran basically south-north, with Justan's people on the east bank. It channelled into a valley between two small, flat-topped hills, the western one signed as the location of the Messenger's headquarters. Porett didn't suppose the Messenger himself would be there — he wasn't a fighter — but he'd heard Nolley mention that the Holy Standard was flying aloft, all the same.

Justan's own command post was situated on a small hillock to the southeast. Between it and the northeastern rise ran the main Rhiev to Dreimen road, which crossed the Erva at a bridge in the centre of the map. As the Erva was very fast-flowing this far upstream, there was no other crossing point for days in either direction. Indeed, only because of the damming effect of the valley could piles have been sunk into the riverbed even here. Hence, this was the natural place for two adversaries to meet: whoever held the bridge stitched the whole southern theatre. That was the reason Justan had been obliged to fight, despite his having withstood all the Messenger's previous attempts to goad him into invading prematurely; just why the Holy Army was making a battle of it now, though, when defeat clearly loomed, Porett found inexplicable.

In addition to his hill, Justan had two other natural features to his advantage, both areas of woodland. The larger one extended across the south of the battlefield, from near the river up to the mound where the command tent was pitched. The smaller wood part-straddled the northern ridge.

What made all this interesting to Porett was the fact that it would be the first battle for over twenty years involving magic. In Justan's planning discussions with his campaign staff, to which Porett had contributed by comsphere, there had been the expected extremes: complete, unimaginative caution versus lunatic, impossible experiment. The King had taken the middle ground, using well-tested spells and artefacts to complement his existing forces, but with a few fanciful extras thrown in for later assessment. He had been realistic about his dependence on magic for a victory, but also stressed that without sufficient regular troops its effects would be rendered utterly inconsequential. This had all satisfied Porett from a business standpoint, as established equipment was manufactured by established firms; politically, though, he was far more pleased by the fact that Ansle hadn't even been officially informed of the pending battle, let alone invited to express an opinion on its management. Justan was using the MSR as if he'd paid for it himself.

Porett found himself somewhat concerned over the fate of the Davian contingent in the coming encounter; he felt uncomfortably responsible for their predicament. Justan would almost certainly want them to take heavy casualties, so that they'd be incapable of effective response when they learned of the death of their queen. As it was, their cavalry did look safe enough between the hill and the road, but Justan's body was obscuring the centre of the map where the infantry was likely positioned. Porett switched to the field comsphere they were using, reconnoitred.

The portents were bad. Not only was the Davian infantry disposed on the road, but it stood at the very front, with the clear goal of advancing across the bridge and storming the Messenger's centre. If the enemy commander was stupid enough to allow this, then the Davians would inflict much damage and split the opposing forces in two. Porett felt that improbable. The sensible approach, advocated in the scant handbook he'd read a day earlier, would be to pull back when the Davians attacked, send cavalry round their flanks, and encircle them. He turned back to the overhead comsphere so as to assess Justan's response to such an eventuality.

After a while, he realised how it had been anticipated. Judging by the presence in the south of the more mage-biased of the two special operations units, magic would be used to ford the river while the Davians were being massacred, and the opposing cavalry could then be attacked from behind. This same group of cavalry would inadvertently shield Justan's advancing warriors from hostile arrow fire as they made the crossing, and his own flanks

would be protected by heavy cavalry which (the presence of a closed comsphere indicated) was concealed in the nearby wood.

Justan continued to study his deployment, immersed, preoccu-pied. Nolley was frowning at the colourboard. "Why do the Purians call their light infantry 'gnats'?" she asked, suddenly. Porett delighted in the romantic, Davian roundedness her voice had been given.

Justan didn't look up. "When the Estavian empire was at its peak, there was only one kind of foot-soldier. Everyone at that time spoke the same form of Estavian, imposed on them by their conquerors, but, following the imperialist factions' loss of power and the subsequent withdrawal of the Estavian legions, the language branched: each nation often invented its own words for new concepts. What we generalise simply as 'light' and 'heavy' units were named in other ways elsewhere. As Davian queen, you'll be aware that your poetic countrymen use the terms 'fleetmen' and 'strengthmen'; the Purians have 'gnats' and 'wasps'". He scribbled something on a notepad to his right.

"Their javelin fetish..." She picked up a sheet of paper, began checking it against what was written on the board.

Justan's movement gave Porett a chance to assess how the main forces were arrayed. He could see that bringing up the rear behind the Davians was the Muraki heavy infantry, by reputation the best regiment in either army. Justan wouldn't want to risk it needlessly, so it'd probably advance only to the bridge, holding there while the Davians did their work, then hitting hard when its time for triumph came; it could also prevent the Davians from spontaneously retreating if they realised they'd been snicked up.

Visible support was from Svalan, Vothic and Akrean archers on the northeastern hill, where they'd have a good view of the bridge and of the Messenger's command post. Porett himself had suggested that the archers have magical back-up, to supplement their arrows with other missiles; Justan had acquiesced. The whole group was protected, more conventionally, by the Soatian light cavalry; this shared the flat-topped hill with them but was ready to sweep down if things were going well, to follow on behind the Davian cavalry presently waiting between the hill and the road.

On the left flank, south of the bridge, the two divisions of Muraki light infantry were masked behind an illusion of trees, with Muraki archers further back. The Messenger's scouts would know something was amiss, but hopefully not its precise nature. This had been one of Farmer's ideas, and although Porett had expressed doubts as to its feasibility, it did seem to be working rather well. Illusion technology must be getting ahead of him, he'd maybe gobble a few papers next week, catch up a tad.

Under the cover of the archers, the main assault troops could advance to the river. Once they'd crossed it — how, exactly, Porett didn't yet know — they'd be able to clear a path for a second wave of Svalan and Galurian foot soldiers. Support would come from the inferred heavy cavalry hidden in the southern wood; more, unhidden cavalry and auxiliary units were held back behind them, lest the Messenger's forces breached the lines. The Akrean chariots were alongside the road, ready for a winning charge when the time was theirs.

Artillery came in the form of stone-throwing ballistas northeast of the smaller wood, with a second group located in a ruined fort forward of Justan's headquarters. Heavy, magic-driven catapults were with them, the spellbinders having started casting the necessary gestures the previous day so as to have them prepared in time for the battle. Porett was particularly proud of the fact that it was his company's sequences that Justan had selected, over those of Magicorp: although half a percent longer, they had a much broader safety margin; this meant that miscast-correction was easier, and that the chances of an accident were close to zero. Magicorp's alternative was so brittle that a lapse by one mage could have heaved the whole unit.

"I don't see why they haven't put more archers on the hill," murmured Nolley. "They have those cavalry units instead."

Justan looked over to the section of the model that represented the enemy ranks in

question. "We're supposed to think they're expecting to fall on anyone foolish enough to cross the bridge."

"But why aren't they to the south of the road? Why aren't all the archers on the hill? That whole southern area is practically devoid of horse troops, there's just one unit of Western Voths way back over there." She pointed to the southwesternmost part of the table.

"Yes, that's been worrying me, too." He tapped on his notebook. "There are two groups of Purian light cavalry, lined up between the road and the hill, that don't seem to be doing anything; besides, the Purian heavy cavalry is holding back on the road, also ready to charge if — when — we cross the bridge; it's all too unbalanced."

Nolley stared closely at the positions, the Mitya illusion perfect as she furrowed her brow, thought. "What if the horses were a screen, to stop us seeing something back here, behind the hill?"

Justan raised an eyebrow. "It's a possibility I had considered, but what units are they missing?" His eyes swept across the map. "The Northic group is facing the Davians, the small Vothic contingent is split between the hill and that far corner. Also on the hill are Heran archers, with more down by the river, opposite the Muraki trees. We've covered all the cavalry divisions. Irregulars, well there are three masses of them: Northic on the hill, Purian and Heran in the southwest. So what's not there that should be?"

Nolley shook her head. "I don't think it's a simple misdirection trick, there's definitely something afoot. I've been doing some calculations, and it's possible that the units we're seeing have been skimmed, are a tenth under-strength, with the cream lying in wait behind the Purian cavalry, ready to surprise us."

"Could be," Justan mused, "or they might have more untrained troops." He shook his head. "My dread is that it's the rest of the Western Voths..."

The general thumbed her chin. "I'll find out." She turned to leave.

Justan returned to the three-dimensional, Agritech-modelled miniature battlefield, tapped a comsphere. "Send in operations, it's nearing time to start..."

* * *

The first volley of zipped rocks landed smack in the middle of the Northic horde on top of the Messenger's hill. The mass spread out to avoid being flattened, and people now obstructed the range-finders for the Messenger's own ballistas. Porett found their nervous lack of discipline somewhat amusing: irrationality, the essential component of religion. A second magical missile hit just slightly further south, and panicked the Heran light cavalry into breaking ranks. The Soatian archers opened up on the Vothic mounted knights now waiting just in front of the Herans, and the Messenger's own archers responded. Battle commenced.

By the time the Davians reached the bridge, there was a gap opening up before them. The Northic infantry had taken punishment from Akrean arrows, so when the Davians had released their spears they'd fallen back under the onslaught. Their own archers were better at closer quarters, but still wasted flights across the Erva to try and break up the Davian advance.

Justan's command centre was alight, some comspheres open, others glowing for attention. Unobtrusive assistants continually moved models as the latest information arrived from observers in the field, updated the positions to reflect reality. Hurriedly mocked-up black figurines indicated the suspected Vothic army in the northwestern corner of the display.

Porett sped from comsphere to comsphere, here with the Akrean archers, there with units of the MSR. The excitement was immediate, compelling, even though he wasn't at risk. He found himself rooting for the Davians more and more, but during lulls he did keep skipping back to the now-open Galurian cavalry sphere — their commander was the

handsomely attractive Lady Zovia of Zovia, and she'd mounted her com-2 on her saddleknob.

The King tapped in, Porett reacted, heard him tell the southern special operations team to start moving out of the woods as soon as the camouflage spell was ready. Risky: a full cam took three days to cast, had only fifteen minutes' duration; it did afford almost perfect invisibility at mid- to long-range if the terrain was right, but that still wasn't 100%.

Justan signalled his other special ops to descend into the valley. Porett span to their sphere for an explanation, saw it: there was a rope across the Erva, must have been rigged the night before. Makeshift, but it saved waiting for the southern fording spell — if that was indeed what Justan had arranged.

In the centre, the first Davians were now across the bridge, fanning out to make room for the heavier troops. Porett watched with mounting glee — they were making rags of their Northic foes. The two masses of archers on their left had now redirected their aim even further away to the Muraki longbows, with whom they had begun exchanging arrows across both the river and the tree-disguised infantry. Porett wanted to go two-way, encourage the Davians, let them know someone cared, couldn't.

The artillery continued to pound the Messenger's hill, harrying the ill-placed cavalry and growing ever more accurate. The magical rock-throwers in front of the smaller hill hadn't flicked anything yet, the long lead-in time for casting making synchronisation difficult, individuals having different gesture-rates. Sometime in the next quarter of an hour, Porett estimated. And then —

"Yes!" he suddenly heard himself yell, as a huge mop of a Heran was kicked into the river.

A small squad of Uscaran mercenaries had been found underneath the bridge, Justan ordered them killed, no reason. Had capture been their intention? Their real goal some kind of disruption behind the lines? Porett aborted, returned to the oversee comsphere, sought a picture of the battle as a whole. It seemed that the enemy horse groups were remaining in place, except for the southwestern brigade of Voths, which was steadily circling the restless, irregular throng of Heran serfs, was moving round alongside the more orderly Heran archers. So the action was still in the centre, then. He tripped back just in time to see the follow-through Davian forces strike. *Hot! Go!* Like a poker into snow!

The Northic bows fell back, as he'd predicted. How long before the cavalry counter-charge? Ten minutes? He switched back to the command tent, caught the tail of an instruction to the illusion-shielded Muraki infantry, "break and scatter for the river." *Why — ?* Oh, the Heran peasants would move to face them off, hinder the advance of the Vothic cavalry, give the Davians more time. Clever. So Justan maybe *didn't* want them wiped, then? His ghost-heart surged hope.

The southern special ops' com-2 glowed, he slid to it unhesitatingly. They were at the Erva, watching the Herans move away on the opposite bank. Five minutes it would take to complete the icers, and they'd still be under camouflage at the end of it. *Icers! Of course!* Justan told them to go ahead, and to patch through to the Galurian cavalry when it neared time for the charge from the woods. *Charge?*

The northern specials squad was across the river, positioned in the valley, unseen, below the Western Vothic archers. They were unpacking what looked to Porett like satchels, removing the components of a small ballista, assembling it. Some were carrying the ammunition — pebble-sized shots, bottled in water to stop them from sticking together. *Sleep shots?* Neat idea: once catapulted into the air, the water would separate off — they'd disable anyone they touched.

Back to the Davians. The Northic heavy infantry was holding them, at some cost. Probably both groups were wondering why the oncoming Murakis had stopped at the bridge. Porett wavered: it would be simple for his other self to cook a Justan figment, order the heavies to advance. Simple, yes — but outrageously stupid!

Behind the Northic line, the Purian foot soldiers were moving aside, ready for their cavalry to charge. Porett bounced to Justan, saw Nolley ordering the second artillery battery, " — concentrate fire on the road beyond the Davians, delay the answering assault as long as possible." If their magic-controlled rocks were now on stream, that meant a couple of usefully accurate lobs were likely. He willed them to splat a particularly mean-looking Northic sergeant, who'd earlier come close to splintering the young Davian coms-op.

The Muraki archers, positioned behind their light infantry and no longer protected by the illusion of a forest, were nevertheless still taking down large numbers of Herans on the west bank. Shaft after shaft found its mark, but the disorganised mob was making no attempt to shield itself. Then again, Porett concluded, with the number of people it contained it could probably take the losses.

Things were looking good. The opposition was relying on runners, flags and horns for communication, couldn't react as quickly to events as Justan's own forces. The King could soon have his southern troops across the river and routing the Messenger's followers at will, they wouldn't have time to throw up any defence. Porett felt confident. He was sure, now, that the Vothic army from the north had mustered behind the veil of curiously stationary Purian horsemen; victory here would be total, would leave all the Holy Empire defenceless. *Oh the possibilities for Porett Technologies!*

The Davian comsphere was aglow, searing for Justan to answer. He had Nolley take it as Mitya, her soothing, Vadessa-accented voice an antidote to suspicions of betrayal.

The word came through, the Galurian lancers had left the forest and were beginning their headlong charge towards the river! The view from the specials' sphere held Porett tight: the mages were in the final sequences of their icemaking spells, slowing and speeding up their gestures to coincide casting, achieve maximum effect. The leader glanced around, nodded, and simultaneously they released the magic. Porett leapt to an observer's com-2, watched as a sheet of crackling ice flashed across the Erva, digging into the banks, anchoring itself as it expanded. He held his imagined breath as moments later Zovia's Galurians hit the surface, rode over into the heart of the incomprehending Purian horde, skewered it out.

The sound of horns went up, he could hear them even from back in the tent sphere. Justan signalled the Muraki infantry south of the bridge to make their crossing, relieve the Davians, the slower, heavily-armed Svalans following up behind. Javelins joined the arrows hailing down on the Herans as his orders were obeyed. Porett was gripped: the planning, the execution...

Back in the centre, the Purian heavy cavalry was charging through the ranks of Northic infantry, Followers trampling their own so as to deal final death to the crossed Davians. *Damn and damn and damn!* The day would doubtless be sung of as a glorious episode in Davia's proud history, but to Porett it looked a hideous sacrifice. He closed his eyes. Or was it? Considered objectively, the Davians *had* attained an outstanding foe/friend casualty ratio, and they'd still have their cavalry at the end of it, if not their infantry. But the treachery, the *injustice*.

His attention was seized again by events. The enemy's Vothic archers on the hill were reported as neutralised, the combined efforts of Justan's own Voths' longbows and the sleep shots. The northern section of river was now reasonably safe, and a magic squad was ordered down to back up the special ops team with a cluster of remote binders. Porett wanted to see how these would turn out, whether the enemy had been taught how to break them or not; he resolved to call back in maybe five minutes, when the mages would be ready. Meanwhile, because the missile battle across the valley had gone so well, Justan was moving the Soatian auxiliaries round, ready to assault the enemy base if the specials could knock the fight out of the remaining, Heran bows. They almost certainly wouldn't be reinforced in time, and the surviving Davians could make good —

"Ta-loss! Ta-loss!" A chant was going up across the river. "Ta-loss! *Ta-* "

Every comsphere went dead. Porett was left hanging in nowhere, instantly cut. He

flashed red in panic, brought his other self racing to tap in.

"Something's happened, I've lost contact, am I visible?"

"Yes, have you tried a reconnect? Did you feel anything?"

"Nothing, no, no pain, it wasn't her, I'll check what's affected. You raise Justan's secure link, make sure it's not just me."

The Porett in the physical world dashed off for Caltra's com-2. The Porett in the com-3 began his scanning of the spheres...

* * *

Six hours later, magic returned; it was as if it had never gone. Porett had ascertained that the blanket was effective over an area extending no more than a few hundred paces from the Messenger's troops — even Justan's main field hospital a little way up the road had been free of it. The scenes there had been madness, the mages desperately cutting wound-sealers to staunch the flow from limbs that had lost their prosthetics, nurses slapping white gel substitute into open tears of flesh.

The moment he felt the hospital comsphere re-establish its link to Justan's tent, Porett diverted there too. Justan was seated alone in the glow from a stick-fire, tossing a piece of modelling fabric onto it; Nolley was just coming through the entrance folds, carrying some papers rather awkwardly. Her Mitya visage was back in place, although a little flickery below the right elbow.

"Now I hadn't expected that." The King rubbed his chin, nodded towards her. "So magic wasn't broken here, merely suspended."

Nolley looked down at herself. "Uh." She faltered, adjusted to the reimposed Mitya meta-voice. "It must have been back only moments — are the comspheres working?"

He turned, but peered beneath the table. "Your prosthetic is alive again, how charming. I don't suppose it'll last very long, but at least you'll outlive it." He looked into the hospital's com-2. "Not like the pitiable devils who had them stuck onto unhealed stumps."

She straightened, then relaxed, rôle-played again. "The Heran prisoners told us everything willingly. There was no need for force, they *wanted* us to know, they revelled in it." She passed him the sheaf of notes.

"I'll read the details later," he answered, tapped at a light-set. "What's the gist?"

Nolley was blinking in the sudden glare, seated herself. Porett surmised that she quite enjoyed the informality with Justan that Farmer's illusion permitted, although she must have realised that the anti-magic bomb now furnished a legitimate reason for Mitya to be dead: *anyone* might have a secret pros...

She answered. "Well, it seems that the Messenger informed his entire army, everyone, that Taloss — their goddess of war — would protect them from magic. They believed him, and he was right."

"Conclusion?"

"They're telling the truth, but we don't know the mechanics of how he did it. However, we do know that magic is involved — it's not supernatural. We *can* discount godly intervention..."

Justan sighed. "Would it be quicker if I read the notes, or are you eventually going to tell me?"

Nolley squirmed, uncomfortable. "The signal for spells to stop, the call for Taloss to

intervene, was the smashing of a comsphere. The person who broke it was Giquis."

A pause. "So, that's what happened to the old rogue..."

* * *

Over the course of the evening, Porett built up an account of what had ensued after the devastation smote.

Initially, Justan's front-line units had been able to hold their ground, despite the lack of sorcerous artillery support. However, the Messenger's troops had acquired the morale of justified faith, and had poured in to kill with a frenetic insanity.

Justan had used his mounted bodyguards as couriers, to communicate orders to his army. Porett wasn't sure whether this was a prepared contingency or reaction to events: it certainly hadn't occurred to *him* that the com-2s would fail, any more than he'd imagined an earthquake might open up the ground beneath Justan's tent or something. Whatever, the back-up communication lines had worked, and The King had been able to pull back all his forces from across the river while the ice lasted, holding the eastern bank until the enemy could no longer follow. Maybe half of the Davians had made it.

A few of the archers brought down from the ridge to provide cover for the evacuation had been switched to using pitch-fire on the river ice. Although the heat would indeed help break up the artificial crossing, the main purpose had been for the smell and smoke to spook enemy cavalry units. By all accounts the plan had succeeded: although a good many Heran irregulars had still got over, they were speedily diced by the waiting Svalan swords. Two of their chiefs were captured for questioning, and it was from these that Nolley had obtained the Taloss story that Porett had heard her convey to Justan.

After the ice had become too treacherous even for the Message-inspired Herans and Purians, activity had concentrated on the bridge. Being open, it had been increasingly difficult to hold against the forked perils of a sky full of arrows and blindly determined waves of quick, shortsworded skirmishers. Justan had realised that the only two ways that the battle could end were either by the enemy's capturing the bridge, or by the structure's complete destruction; the latter was plainly his favoured result. He'd therefore set his axe-wielding Galurian auxiliaries to the task of felling trees in the southern forest; the Akrean charioteers had dragged the unstripped logs over to the river and rolled them from the bank, whereupon they'd floated downstream to lodge under the bridge supports. After three hours, the Erva had been effectively dammed; its waters had then risen, and two hours later had burst. The already ice-weakened struts could offer nothing, were swept away. At that point, the Messenger's trumpets sounded for the last time, and his forces withdrew. Shortly afterwards, magic reappeared.

Paradoxically, Justan's reputation among his troops had been enhanced by all this. His quickness of thought and inability to panic had limited the damage inflicted on his army, and the enemy *had* been kept from taking the Erva. The King had accepted publicly that this was a defeat, but to those of his soldiers who were convinced that they were going to be shred-ripped by maniacal Followers it was something of a miracle that he'd actually saved them. Plus, while the majority of the country's military-magic experts had been fruitlessly debating possible causes of the catastrophe, Justan himself had been concerned with the practicalities of rescuing two thousand Muraki foot soldiers and four hundred of his finest Galurian cavalry from the maw of death. What's more, he'd done it; even Porett was mildly stirred by the achievement.

* * *

Next day, the freshly-merged Porett watched as Justan mounted his new stallion, a gift from the Lady Zovia; his previous horse had had booster muscling in its shanks.

After the battle, The King had ordered Chancellor Ansle to convene an emergency meeting of the Academy's theoreticians, to estimate the likelihood that something like this might happen again. Porett had just spied in on the reply: yesterday's events had probably been a one-off. Whatever trick it was the Messenger had played, he needed the symbolic rejection of magic by one of its major figures to use as ignition. He therefore couldn't do it again in future without another one.

Porett had reached a similar conclusion himself, but didn't pre-empt Ansle's committee by telling Justan in advance. Besides, he fancied that The King also had more than a vague idea of the basis for what had occurred, and had arranged the conference primarily for Ansle's ego's benefit so as to ensure continued support for the MSR.

Nolley rode her warhorse up alongside Justan. She no longer sported the Mitya illusion, Porett's predictions in that area having been precise in their accuracy. Neither did she have a new prosthetic, although he'd listened to her arranging a preliminary appointment at N/Clinics pending her return to Cala.

She saluted, left-handed.

Justan didn't turn. "Next time my forces raise their swords," he said, "it will be immaterial whether magic works or not. The Holy Army has suffered too many casualties to advance again in earnest for some time, yet in a few weeks the Estavians and Akreans will be ready to combine with the home regiments to outnumber the Messenger's depleted band by a factor of two. This loss has at least bought me the advantage."

Nolley concurred. "I'll have the command assessment finished by tomorrow, but it's looking like you *will* have enough quality to colonel the unassigned Estavian regiments."

Justan raised his hand, looked down at the boy holding the comsphere. "Tap that out now and take it away."

Chapter 30

Recoil. Now she was awake, eyes wide, sweating, gasping for breath. It was moonlight dark, her mind was a confusion of images, her mother, a table, herself, a breaking rod. *Breaking who?*

"I think you're sickening for something." Roween was sitting up, leaning against a weatherworn column, braced against it almost.

Conley laughed, sharply. It hurt. "Just the dream again, Ro, sorry I disturbed you."

"Haven't had much rest anyway, bad cramps; something I was expecting, though, normal. What about your cough?" She peered across the half-illuminated cloister. "You got a temperature?"

"A slight flush, that's all, often happens after a nightmare."

Roween half-rolled to her knees, made her way to the mage. Gems of perspiration glistened in the semi-gloom, and no cosmetic spells could entirely mask her red-rimmed eyes. Roween touched her own forehead with the back of her hand, then felt Conley's. The difference was startling. "You're burning up, Con! What have you got that'll help?"

"Don't worry, I'll be — " she strangled the end of the sentence, cleared her throat, tried to suppress a coughing fit, failed.

" — a wreck if you don't get treatment. Riding around for weeks in the rain and the wind, wouldn't surprise me if you had pneumonia. Shall I fetch your notebook?"

"Blue cover, twine-bound," she emphasised the 'twine' involuntarily, a nasal hum as she fought back more wracks. "It's an in-house MedSpell librar — " phlegm.

"A blue book, yes." Roween was on her feet, over at the saddlebags within moments. She found it alongside Conley's other booklets, wondered how many of them listed spells, what other transcriptions she was carrying. There was a sudden, thudding crack from behind her; she froze, listened. *What was that?* Silence, now, except for Con's wheezing. *Probably masonry falling, forget it, no time to worry about that at the moment.* She returned to her stricken friend. "It's not very thick," she stated, apprehensive, holding out the notebook. Conley didn't take it.

"Ro, I can't gesture, I'm so cold." She was shivering, aglow with fever, almost whining between the chest-freeing explosions that were now rising every few seconds. Roween hurried back to the horses, fetched her greatcoat, draped it about Conley's shoulders.

"Try and keep warm, these things come in waves, it'll ease off soon, you'll stop shaking for long enough to cast a cure." *If there is one.*

Lying back, Conley drew herself into a huddle. "My head's aching, too," she murmured, softly so as not to provoke a further attack. "This has come so quickly, can you find, in the book?"

"Everything will be alright, just try and rest. Trust me."

* * *

Half an hour later, Conley had coughed herself to sleep, and Roween moved to the centre of the courtyard where there was more light. Her horse whinnied.

The notebook was printed in very small letters, she strained her eyes to read it. It had been written by a physician, was organised by groupings of similar complaints with brief descriptions, occasionally a small drawing, to describe the condition each spell addressed.

There then followed a gesture sequence written in a shorthand of some form, probably referring to elements of a medic library that Conley presumably had memorised. After the main sequence, variations and splices for treating particular subtypes of the affliction were listed.

There was very little about pulmonary illnesses. For the most part, the text covered basically physical ailments such as broken or twisted limbs, torn muscles, cuts and internal wounds, some surgery, matters relating to childbirth. There were smaller sections on poisoning, dentistry, certain cancers, and symptomatic mental disorders like insomnia and concussion. Nothing at all on communicable diseases — the preface mentioned a second volume that dealt with those. Roween checked, Conley didn't have it.

The best thing she could find that might help was hidden in the section on toxins. One of the options available when handling food poisoning gave gestures for bringing down a high temperature which could apparently arise from ingesting certain types of fungus. Roween felt she could probably weave it in with a general antiseptic spell, there was one listed at the end of a section on treating infections arising from open wounds and surgery. However, she didn't know what the segment abbreviations meant, so was unable to do anything about it until Conley could advise her. She decided it would be better to let her companion sleep, returned to her side.

It was then that she noticed the click-well, splintered under the heel of one of Conley's boots.

* * *

Roween opened her eyes just as the sun was almost high enough to strike the small fountain tinkling in the courtyard. *I hadn't meant to doze off!* She turned to Conley, anxious. The young woman looked crashed, wheezing and coughing as though awake, yet still asleep. Her blankets, Roween's greatcoat, were damp with perspiration, and her fine hair was stringy, sticking to her face. Roween felt a sudden coldness, spreading out from somewhere inside.

Conley was very, very ill.

Chapter 31

Porett had decided to do some sightseeing. The first two days after his arrival in Taltu were spent at East/Trad's imposing offices, in meetings with senior management and middle-ranking people from Sales. The next day was occupied entirely by a trade delegation representing Estavian components-manufacturers, and the two days after that were taken up visiting his newly-acquired warehouses and distribution centres. Both of the evenings on the visit days had been set aside for one-on-one talks with the most talented few of the individuals he'd encountered on days one and two.

Today, though, the executives he'd brought along from Cala could handle things. He needed some time off from boring business, and when you're in one of the great cultural centres of the world you may as well concede *something* to its tourist attractions.

Taltu did not have a major river, only a sad trickle that merited no bridges boasting more than a single arch. The Taltuers made up for this oversight on the part of their city's founders by constructing a long, tree-lined boulevard that furrowed from the former bear-ring in the north down to the High Cathedral in the centre of the old town.

They called the street the Heavenly Course. Since he was staying near the bearing, now a covered theatre for staging epic musical dramas, Porett had decided to walk its length into the heart of the city, where ruins and reminders of Estavia's glorious imperial past were everywhere. As he strolled, however, he found himself increasingly impressed by the later-period buildings lining his route. They were tall, well-kept, and elegant. The upper floors were expensive apartments; ground-level was a gallery, a coffee house, perhaps a small shop selling sweetmeats or exquisite porcelain dolls from Berean. In one section, set slightly back, wood-panelled antique emporia lent a gentlemanly, almost bygone character to the roadside, yet they didn't seem out of place. Further down, a row of classy restaurants was opening ready for late breakfast, their names written large at the base of their grand facades. Such signs of wealth were so pervading, so different from his native Cala, that Porett could barely believe Taltu was a conquered city.

And everywhere, there were trees, huge elms and limes, cherry trellises, their leafy bowers turning burning red with the onset of Autumn. Well-tended flowerbeds lined the broad, sheltered pavement. Here and there were tame birds, wood pigeons, even peacocks; Porett watched a weathered old man making up small packets of seed, a cluster of children bubbling around him. Strange statuary lurked in the shade, earnest artists sketched arboreal scenes, the whole avenue was full of the true-life minutiae that make first-time experience of a great city such a joy.

Although few people would have supposed it, Porett's interest in Taltu for itself was honest and genuine. He wanted to see the statue of King Piatr not simply because it was the foremost surviving work by Tol Savna, "the greatest sculptor who ever lived," but because it was so magnificently detailed, life-like and composed. Even the representations of it he'd seen had caused him to feel it could speak, silently, yet with a stunning eloquence imbued by the immense skill of its creator; it said that Piatr was an honourable and just man, but one who, when he found it necessary, was capable of being absolutely without mercy of any kind. Close up, the effect would be awesome. *Frightening even after twenty centuries.*

These days, people could make illuso-copies of the figure, of course, but their own attempts at original works were invariably lacking. *What if Tol Savna were alive today, with magic at his disposal? What masterpieces could he create in a fraction of the time it took to work the marble King Piatr?* Porett admired craftsmanship, yes, but what really impressed him was the way that some works of art could drive an emotion straight into the heart, without having any apparent means to do so. He hastened his pace, eager with anticipation.

In a pouch hanging from his belt was the com-3. He'd taken it with him, rather than risk leaving it untended. As his stride quickened, it swung out wildly, thudding into his thigh every step. He slowed down. His other self was negotiating with the Crown Office, arranging an

audience with Justan when he came to Taltu next week; they'd originally been due to meet today, but The King's post-battle analysis schedule had taken precedence. Porett rested his hand on the bag to steady it, and noticed a slight green reflection. He peeked inside; the comsphere was glowing.

* * *

It was some time before he found somewhere secluded enough to allow him to talk to his com-3 without arousing suspicious stares. The place he chose was a small square, just off the Heavenly Course, with an ancient column mounted in the centre, topped by a pewter owl. There was inevitably a story behind it that he could read about later in his guidebook, but for the moment he ignored the monument and positioned himself in a narrow gap between two buildings. The faint smell of freshly-baked bread wafted by. He half-opened his leather pouch, peered at the comsphere, tapped in.

"It's hard to talk in the open, what do you want?" Whispered.

"Small thing first, the meeting with Justan is on for a week tomorrow. He's due back in three days' time."

"Lots of people to see, I know how he feels. What else?"

"I tracked down Vyval Reeve, he was wounded at the Erva. He's in Cala, recovering."

"Damn!" Porett's voice had grown louder, he strove to lower it again. "What has he told Ansle? Anything?"

"Nothing, as far as I can tell, we can trust him; but Ansle already suspects he was on the C-3 project, it's only a matter of time before he proves out what they were working on."

"When he does, the very least he'll know is that you exist. Might even contrive to swap the com-3 for a com-2 and illusion himself to look like us." He paused. "We'd better fix up some protocol so we can be sure who we're talking to."

"Some ally..." said in unison.

* * *

Inside the High Cathedral, Porett knew he was distracted. He was gazing on some of the most accomplished works of art in civilisation, visually striking, serenely executed, and yet he may as well have been staring at empty walls, his mind was awl with ideas. Minutes earlier in the Resdav Collection, housed in a squat, oval tower outside, he'd seen a painting called "The Desire of Being" by some Davian artist who'd died two hundred years ago. It depicted a pale young woman, resting on a mound of cushions and furs; her wrists were cut deep, and rich pools of blood had formed on loose sheets of satin. Yet as she lay dying, there was a faint smile of contentment on her lips, for in a mirror behind her could be seen her soul, descending into the body of a handsome, sleeping man. When Porett saw it, a thought flashed across his consciousness, so strongly it was almost physical. It described almost exactly his experience in the com-3 when he'd linked to Conley, so sexually charged that his then-self had asked to be overwritten rather than merge back an addict. Being as one with another person was what some people, himself perhaps included, desperately wanted! In the painting, the woman had killed herself to achieve it, if only for a brief moment. He, however, was able to do it at will. Could he produce something that would allow other people similar facilities? It could out-sell happy shots!

There were other possibilities, non-pornographic ones that might have more mass

appeal. Linking to someone climbing a mountain, skiing, diving from a cliff, anything exhilarating, might draw an audience. Visiting faraway places, actually seeing and touching famous sculptures, ancient books, viewing magnificent paintings in private collections. Listening to well-known people, apparently talking right at you; more down-to-earth uses — making sure your children are safe, or having them attend school without leaving home. Military applications, intelligence-gathering. Barely had he thought of one possibility when the next pushed it aside. Could such general-purpose linking be implemented?

He'd lost his most gifted researchers when the prototype com-3 spell had lost colour and blown away the entire lab. The new people were smart, and the com-4 would be a sturdy, reliable product, but they lacked the visionary imagination of their predecessors. One of the original team had been on vacation when the disaster hit, though, thus escaping death. He'd been responsible for the internal comsphere environment, ensuring that the captured mind had a ghost body to control while imprisoned in the bauble. *He'd* know a way to get round the Elidia-syndrome breathing problem without inducing sleep. But would he work for Porett Technologies again? Perhaps, now that life in The King's army had suddenly lost its gloss...

Chapter 32

Ansle was surprised that he missed his daughter so. With Chewt dead, though, he found himself totally lacking anyone with whom he could discuss anything remotely of importance. Conley would have served his purposes exceptionally well: smart enough to notice discrepancies in his projects and to make sensible suggestions, but without the resourcefulness either to counter them or to turn them to her own advantage. Sincere, trustworthy; the ideal sounding board.

He needed someone like that at his disposal now, if only so he didn't waste time and effort implementing ideas that were just *too* audacious, *too* daring. That scheme to arrange Roween's capture by the Messenger, for example... He'd been taken at the outset by its boldness, its clarity, its cleverness, had only *now* begun to doubt the likelihood of its actual success... But then, under the circumstances, he could hardly have sought his daughter's opinions on *that* particular enterprise anyway.

In the folk tales that he'd read as a child, wizards had always seemed to have a familiarity with which they could conspire. Sadly, however, current technology wasn't yet up to fictional level, and there was no known magic that could deliver sentient life forms into existence out of nothing. Thus, he might instead be reduced to talking with his *brother*, in the laughably tenuous hope that someone as completely absorbed with Ca-Atlan coffee futures as he could possibly have any opinion even vaguely worth expressing on a non-related subject. Of course, conferring with Lord Sennary was *sometimes* productive, despite his being an employee (albeit one entrusted with certain knowledge that ordinarily Ansle would not have disclosed). Sennary, however, was somewhere in the wilds of Estavia at the moment. The only other candidate that came to mind was Porett, and *he* was disqualified by reason of his total avarice for power.

Ansle leaned back in his chair. This was exasperating! He needed a *confidant*.

He picked up the letter again. A *letter*, mind: Justan hadn't discussed the matter by comsphere first, he'd just *ordered*. The fact that he'd re-used general Nolley as a messenger in no way compensated — besides, it was likely intended as a slight to Nolley, lest she nurture any lofty designs after her success as ersatz queen; that Justan hadn't simply disposed of her by now probably meant that he felt she was too good an officer to lose, might later be of use. Ansle rubbed his chin, frowned, then he smiled a little. Yes, perhaps Nolley *could* well be of use — but not to The King...

Justan's letter said, simply put, that under the strain of the war effort the Ministry of Agriculture had grown too large, and that its head, Count Feathe, had determined it necessary to split the organisation in two. Ansle had been appointed as first Minister of Supplies, and details of his duties would follow.

In fact, Nolley had brought these "details of duties" with her: four enormous, Uscaran silk-lined boxes stacked full of books, manuals and ledgers. It would take several weeks just to *read* them all.

That, of course, was exactly what Justan required. Ostensibly, Ansle's "promotion" to The King's advisory cabinet was to quash "fears being voiced in public" (of which Ansle, naturally, had heard nothing) that the Academy was "somehow involved in Mitya's death". *Very* Justan-cute. In actuality, Ansle was being subjected to an unstaunchable inundation of important (so he couldn't refuse the post) but confining (so he couldn't do anything else) work. He would be obliged to remain in and around the home countries to exact taxes, order production, and arrange supplies for Justan's conquest of the Messenger's empire. Day after day of endless fun...

The first piece of information Ansle sought from within the boxes was his budget. Thirty million clicks; large, but with much of the first year's expenditure already committed. His immediate staff numbered forty-five in Cala, with another two hundred scattered about in

various agricultural and industrial centres. In addition, there were over a thousand menial accountants upon whom he could call to perform all necessary numerical work and to keep track of the huge volume of data that would need to be maintained.

The second thing he'd looked for was the extent of his powers. Harder to define, but they appeared wide. The ministry had been put together mainly using staff switched out from Count Feathe, but their functions under Ansle would be different: Justan had decreed a new system, founded on a revision of the Estavian Unit Model. In this, individual tax collection and basic government would continue to work on the feudal principle, but commercial companies were to be treated separately. Ansle readily accepted the compromise: he'd never thought that shared ownership fitted smoothly into the old set-up anyway. Sometimes, yes, a noble *would* assert dominion over a company, but it was unusual that a business actually paid fealty. Even in cases of total ownership by single individuals, rarely were believable accounts published, and any profit levels they did announce were without exception impossibly low. Ansle's new office was to act as The King's representative in such matters, ensuring that large businesses did not have free rein. Although the Estavian Unit Model was apparently viewed in Estavia itself as an aspect of democratic government, Justan's revised version had, in effect, the same rôle with regard to companies that lords had to their vassals: law, taxation, obedience. Ansle's spirits lifted: there was tangible power here...

He spent almost ten seconds considering his new responsibilities. As first holder of the office, there were no precedents that he had to observe, and Feathe would never have tolerated deep-rooted factions that might pervert decision-making from below. Ansle could therefore do whatever he liked — well, within reason: directors of a baronial-level ministry, unlike genuine aristocrats, *could* readily be dismissed.

He decided, then, to establish a tight, yet shallow organisational framework. This would minimise dissent among his minions, and ensure that control and the flow of information would follow a simple hierarchy with himself at the top. But, beyond that act of initial management, he intended to do no ministerial work personally whatsoever.

Of course, Justan *ought* to have a major problem in justifying why the post hadn't gone to a peer, or at least to someone with a knowledge of either economics or military logistics. It wasn't as if the position had even been advertised. Perhaps he intended it to be *very* short-term, a mere couple of months, while he used Ansle's comparative inactivity to achieve other ends? Yes, well, that was obvious! But what "other ends"?

Ansle folded his arms. No, he did *not* like it. For the moment, he was merely being distracted, with real power being dangled as bait so his energies over the coming few weeks wouldn't be directed in ways that The King might find obstructive. However, if Ansle wasn't *very* careful, Justan might use the opportunity to appropriate some, or even all, of the Academy power base...

So the first test would come when the Academy's General Council determined a successor to Chewt as deputy chancellor. If Count Feathe, as Justan's representative on the Council, could nevertheless be persuaded to back Ansle's preferred candidate (whoever *that* might be), all could yet be well. Otherwise, with The King's favoured choice as deputy, life would become uncomfortably dangerous.

Ansle re-read a snatch of Justan's letter. "Count Feathe's request that the Agriculture portfolio be split has been approved." It was definitely untrue: the tenacity with which Feathe fought for his ministry was famous to the point of legend, and that he'd willingly *agree* to a break-up, let alone *suggest* one, was completely unthinkable. Therefore, Justan had dictated it. That meant Feathe would be seething with anger at The King for tearing half his ministry away, and might rather welcome the opportunity to take a little revenge when Ansle offered it him.

And at least Ansle's own "promotion" required that Justan keep him informed concerning matters of state. Unlike the last time, the *next* occasion that a battle was due to be fought Ansle would *have* to know in advance so that supply lines could be changed. Knowledge of the army's future location was highly sensitive; it could be used in many different ways.

Indeed, merely knowing where the army *wouldn't* be was sometimes enough...

Ansle dropped Justan's letter in a drawer, removed some headed notepaper from another. He took a quill, began to write.

"My Dear General Nolley..."

Chapter 33

Conley opened her eyes, saw sky. She raised her head slightly, realised it was rushing like a cavalry charge, glanced around. A young woman with short, dark hair was sitting cross-legged a short distance away, scribbling notes on loose scraps of paper, staring intently in a book. *Roween?* She seemed to hear movement, looked up.

"Conley? You're awake?" Joy, disbelief in her words. She was by her side in a moment, one hand supporting her head, the other rotating the bundle of clothes that served as a pillow.

"How long have I been unconscious?" She was surprised to hear herself, voice so weak, low-sounding from the mucus in her throat. She coughed, attempted to clear it. Pain tore deep within her chest; she must have been hacking all the while she'd been asleep.

Roween looked concerned; strange, too, with her new-cropped hair, the Akrean bleach mercilessly sheared away. Her crossed eyes were red, bloodshot, like she hadn't been resting enough. "Six days," she replied.

Conley closed her own eyes, so weak, everything hurt. "How bad am I?"

Silence.

She half-raised her eyelids; Roween's held tears. "That bad?"

Roween nodded, lowered Conley's head to its resting place. "You have an infection, both lungs I think. You're coughing blood, you can't keep down food, and you're running a cinder-hot fever." She sniffled. "I don't know what to do, Con."

Conley turned her head to face her companion. There was a sound in her ears, like a hand-bell, never seeming to end. She felt giddy again. "What are my chances, Ro?"

More silence, then Roween, uncertain. "If we find a mage, they're good. I've decoded that spell-book, cooked something that should arrest the fever, burn it out, take the fluid off your chest."

If she can do all that... "And if we don't?" *Find a mage?* Everything looked so blurry.

Another pause. "There's a Message temple, they may have a healer..."

"A what?" She tried to rise, failed as her arm buckled back. She noticed for the first time that she was no longer in the ruined monastery. "They'll take us, turn us over to the army. Imprison us, torture us." She felt so cold. How had she been moved? Did she remember a sledge? Roween's handiwork. She'd slept through it all? She was so hungry, tired, very tired.

"Perhaps. You'd rather die?"

Darkness fell. Did Roween kiss her forehead?

Chapter 34

"Taloss ... causes death, but she is not Death."

"Yet my life was hers to give, my lord." Giquis was lying face-down in the marble hall, counting on having read the situation correctly, of having been right to return.

"She ... is generous," his voice was almost wistful. "She will aid the Message again."

"So she let me live that I might call her afresh?" *Insurance!*

"You have submitted once ... to her power." He sniffed, rabbit-like. "It cannot be you ... a second time."

But of course. "You told me that Justan would be *allowed* to invade, yet you had your armies stop him..."

"Ah, Giquis, my wise ... counsel. You do not listen!" He giggled, paused, giggled again.

"You *will* let him through, but not just yet? Erva Bridge was only a demonstration, to show him what you can — " Realisation. "No — not to show *Justan!*"

"Taloss has ... assisted us. Now we shall repay ... her kindness."

"You have allies! This was for *their* benefit! You must have made the plans months ago!"

"Plans ... what use are plans?" His chiming laughter seemed to hang in the air, lingering, never quite dying away. "Gods make no ... plans. Gods exist. Gods change things."

"But Messenger! How can I be effective as your adviser if you keep from me things of this magnitude?"

"How ... indeed?"

Nothing, then he heard footsteps, felt a grip on each arm, was lifted upright by two of the guards. He held his head bowed low, but not so far that he couldn't see the Messenger's spindly hands, watch for further signals.

None came. The guards released him. He'd survived again.

Chapter 35

Out loud, Justan read the handwritten tourist sheet Sennary had used for directions, three clicks from a child scribe outside the barracks. "Set atop a hill in the centre of Taltu stands a classical building of white limestone, clad in marble. A thousand years ago, the Palace of Dudru was the seat of the greatest empire that the world has ever seen. Two centuries later, it ceremonially became the Chamber of Dudru, a crucial national forum for debating matters of both practical and moral concern, a nursery for budding, flowering democracy." He passed it back. "And now, an emperor occupies it again."

Sennary refolded the paper, said nothing; he'd never met The King before, had to be cautious.

Justan tapped softly on the throne's arm. "Chancellor Ansle informs me that you are an excellent officer, well deserving of a colonel's commission with a prime Estavian regiment." He smiled. "Why?"

Sennary felt his stomach knot. "*His* words or mine, sir?"

Justan's reply was to open his hands.

Heavy breath. "Ansle's knowledge of military matters is weak. He has no conception of the command difference between a squad of mercenaries and an entire cavalry regiment. All that ever interested him in this regard was the chance, through me, to gain control of part of Estavia's army."

The King glanced to the small table on his right, picked up a scroll with a red band encircling it. He looked back at Sennary. "Given a free choice of all the Estavian regiments, which would you most want to lead into battle?"

He swallowed. "With respect, sir, I'd have to be insane to *want* to lead men into battle."

Justan smiled again, wider, handed him the parchment. "Citadellian Light Horse: they're the best I'd yet to allocate. Look after them."

Sennary felt unusually hot, muddled, mumbled some misplaced words of thanks, incredulous. He removed the retaining ring, read the authorisation. "This is", head shaking, "undeserved."

Justan grunted, folded his arms. "A related matter: are you aware how the Estavians organised elections?"

He was thrown. "Aware? I, well — I know that everyone over a certain age had a vote, with extra votes for their children, and — "

"That's correct," interrupted, "and even comparatively recently men had supplementary votes for 'their' women in a similar fashion." He leant back into time-faded, scarlet, Talian velvet. "The number of people enfranchised increased steadily over time, following a series of so-called reforms. Two hundred years ago, for example, no-one could vote unless they owned property in Estavia with an area greater than that of Dudru Square — the one outside this palace."

"And now, they can't vote at all." Sennary immediately regretted his words, but Justan merely grinned.

"Next year," he replied, "they can have their say once more. If you wish to know more, I *can* explain why."

"You must be busy, sir, I don't want to — "

Frowning: "Now that's the second expression of obsequious humility you've exhibited since we met! I don't require it, so please desist. Had I not the time for an explanation, I wouldn't have offered to give one." He relaxed again; Sennary's face was red, mouth still

agape. "So: I assert that the Estavian model of democracy is essentially worthless. Underlying the whole system is the idea that everyone should have an equal voice in government, and that therefore a vote is a powerful thing. Initially, when there were few votes, indeed it was; successive governments, however, have gradually extended the franchise to almost every citizen. Each change was dutifully touted as 'more democratic' than its predecessor, thereby increasing the Estavians' moral superiority over 'out-dated' feudalists like us. But of course, the more votes there are, the less influential each becomes. Eventually, all individuals are equal only in their insignificance."

Sennary realised he'd crossed his arms, straightened again. "So you're saying that the real power within their system is held by parliament?"

Justan shrugged. "Parliament's facility to enact laws is ultimately defined by its ability to enforce them. If I control Estavia's army, I castrate its parliament. Not that it really matters." He put his hands behind his head, stretched. "Are armies run democratically? No — even the Estavians aren't that stupid. Or commercial companies? Only at the shareholding level, and then but nominally, if at all. Estavia was really managed by its industrial corporations, with most shares passed down hereditarily; it's not as if parliament actually *had* the absolute power that democracy presupposes it should."

Sennary was uncertain as to how he should respond, wanted to probe but didn't have the rank. He settled for redirection. "There must be a tempering effect, surely, in that companies are moderated by parliament's laws, and parliament in turn is judged by the people."

The King sighed. "At root, it's all inconsequential. Democracy is a dream-figure, a surrogate for equality — as, too, incidentally, is religion. Is the purpose of the Message really *so* different from that of the Estavian parliamentary system?"

"You'd allow the Message, *too*?" He didn't even attempt to conceal his horror.

"An existing apparatus should not be dismantled in haste without first examining ways by which it can be profitably re-used. Perhaps the Message *should* be encouraged in those countries where it had been established for centuries before the Messenger began his work? With no unified priesthood to oppose change, repacifying the faith shouldn't prove problematical. As for Estavia: so long as Estavians carry the hope that democracy will be returned some time in the foreseeable future, there should be no difficulty in bending most of them to my immediate needs."

"If there was dissent, you could logically combine Estavia with Akrea as a single democracy; the parliamentary power blocs wouldn't traverse cultures very easily, so they'd all spend their time squabbling over selfish differences, no single group having a workable majority."

A shrug from Justan; Sennary assumed that meant he'd already considered the option. "There are many possibilities, Lord Sennary, all of which need to be studied. I notice that you haven't yet asked me what any of this is to you."

"I'm talking unprepared; I felt you were more concerned with what *I* am to *it*."

The King nodded. "A good answer, although it doesn't entirely do me justice since I grant you the option of choosing for yourself whether to participate in my scheme or not. What I'd *like* you to do, if you're willing, is organise your troopers on pseudo-democratic lines: allow them a vote to determine their immediate superior. It's an experiment: if it succeeds, we have a way of breaking the hold that the traditional officer class has over the army; furthermore, the common soldiers will perceive it as a democratic advance, and may respect us for it."

"If it fails?"

"Your regiment will be an utter shambles, and to prevent the rest of the army from going the same way I shall be obliged to dismiss you in very public disgrace."

Sennary scratched an earlobe. "This would just be the once, though? Elections wouldn't be regular?"

"Correct: were voting a frequent occurrence, the officers would corrupt like politicians. On a maiden ballot, the chance is excellent that individuals will vote honestly, and for people with a genuine aptitude for command. Repeating the exercise some time later, however, there would be less freedom: factions would have arisen, advocative campaigns organised, and people would be selected for the policies of their affiliated groups, rather than for their basic ability to lead."

Sennary was about to speak, smiled first. "I was going to suggest that it might not be wise to break the established order, but then I realised that my own appointment has been made for similar reasons."

"And your concluding that fact vindicates me! For too long, the same clique of families has bred the officers of Estavia; a similar state of affairs has pertained in our own, and in every other country. This has resulted in a sterility of thought, a lack of innovation, and an infuriating resistance to progress. I *did* alleviate the situation in my own armed forces by fast-streaming officers of authentic quality, but new blood is still sorely needed. The Estavian regiments provide me with an opportunity to introduce it."

He rubbed the back of his head, not wanting to shake it. "I can't deny that I'm impressed by the depth of your analysis, and — without meaning to sound falsely humble — I do recognise that this is a singular honour you do me." He closed-mouth smiled, nodded. "I am, therefore, willing to accept your proposal; I'll organise ballot papers as soon as I assume full command of the Citadellians."

Justan raised a hand. "Not yet, no. There'll be a battle soon, a crucial one, and any restructuring will not have had time to settle. Afterwards." He clapped his hands, once. "Now, I understand you bear a communiqué from Ansle of Malith."

"That I do, sir, yes." He cleared his throat, mapped the message into his mind. "The Chancellor asked me to tell you that when you meet Lord Porett tomorrow, expect to be asked to release a mage called Vyval Reeve from military service. He was injured at the Erva, and is entitled to be invalided out, but Ansle doesn't want him to leave the MSR until he — Ansle — has discovered something about his past."

"Sounds important." Justan touched his fingertips together, mused. "Why didn't Ansle tell me this himself? Why did he require a courier?"

"I think that's part of the story. He warns you not to use comspheres for anything that you don't want Porett to hear. In the meantime, he's organising a message-carrying facility to run with the supply routes that he now maintains."

Justan grinned. "Tell me, Lord Sennary, what *exactly* is your relationship with Chancellor Ansle?"

Sennary paused before speaking; Justan had agents, would already know the substance of it. "Professional only. He hired me to do a job, for which I'm still under contract; I am at his disposal at all times, excepting where his instructions conflict with military or legal duties."

"And what is this employment for which you have been engaged?"

"He wants me to locate and return his daughter, Dr Conley of Malith, after she has obtained certain details from her travelling companion, one Roween Sage."

"And these details are?"

"I was explicitly instructed not to tell you."

A snorted laugh. "What Chancellor Ansle doesn't appreciate is that your mutual contract only has meaning in the context of law, and that I *am* law."

Sennary chose. "She has a spell whereby she can negate magic. Ansle wants the spell, as

does Conley."

"Interesting. The Messenger would appear to have something similar — possibly a spell, although perhaps some exhumed artefact of a lost, ancient manufacture."

"So it would seem." *What the life, open up.* "Thing is, sir, Ansle doesn't behave like he cares all that much about Conley's safety. She's in Messenger territory right now; I could have brought them both back to Cala, but he insisted that I was only to do so if Conley had the spell. He's even told me outright that he *wants* them, her, captured."

"Did he say why?"

"He's hard to work out. He doesn't have the depth of vision of," he glanced aside, "of you, for example, sir. He gets ideas for schemes, and plays everything to make them work, but he doesn't see things coming. He's smart, but superficially so. I'm yet unsure as to whether, underneath it all, he *knows* he really isn't the kind of class practitioner he needs to be in his political circumstances."

Justan was nodding. "A shrewd assessment, Lord Sennary. Nevertheless, the chancellor's penchant for long-term plans of unexpected potency is something to be respected. Why do you think he wants his daughter in the Messenger's hands?"

"He says it's," he frowned, raised a cheek. "Well, it could be anything, but I rule out his merely desiring that she be killed — he does seem to be fond of her in his own way. I wondered at one stage whether he faked Chewt's death so as to cover himself, and that really *he* was — is — the Messenger's implant in court. If that were so, it would then click that he'd sent Conley off to be the next Gigus, the Messenger's touchstone for killing battlefield magic a second time. Having met her, though, I'm convinced that she'd never co-operate, she's so in with magic that she just *wouldn't* publicly reject it, under any circumstances, no matter what they did to her. Or to Roween." He felt his skin prickle. *Or perhaps not to Roween?*

"This Roween: does she really have a magic-blanking spell, or is it speculation?"

"She has something, that's for sure, I've seen the effects. Awesome, immediate, permanent."

"Does its potency extend to artefacts? Perhaps Chancellor Ansle is using his daughter as a lure, and expects this Roween to destroy the Messenger's antimagic device."

"That's the impression he gave me, yes."

Justan shook his head. "Even if they are captured, and even if one of them can blank magic, who is to say the Messenger's craft won't be the stronger? If it is, Chancellor Ansle's daughter will surely die. Yet even assuming they do succeed, there's still scant chance of survival, although at least the Messenger's authority might never be considered divine thenceforth. Short odds, large stakes, unpredictable rewards." He paused a moment. "But Ansle of Malith is arrogant enough to take the gamble: he doesn't have the edge to realise just how great is his chance of losing." He interlocked his fingers, touched the tip of his nose. "I think he *did* know the name..."

Sennary hesitated. "There's one other thing, your majesty: Ansle's not the only person interested in Roween's spell — he has an alliance of convenience. Conley's an employee of Porett Technologies, and Porett himself has the only known tag on her, is in on what's happening. I can find out more this afternoon, I'm meeting him in his hotel; he has some state-of-the-art kit for me, should help if I need to pull anyone out."

Justan cocked an eyebrow.

Chapter 36

Extravagance permeated the very fabric of the building. Porett's suite was extensive, luxurious, and elegant, yet it was strewn with clutter: boxes, large and small, papers, spellbooks and manuals, carved wooden components of odd, dismembered constructions, half-open containers smelling of bananas. Sennary was surprised; Ansle had implied that Porett was almost powered by tidiness.

As the guard left, Porett appeared from a doorway at the far end of the room, rolling down a sleeve. "Welcome, Lord Sennary," he smiled, held out a hand. "Please excuse the mess, but my rooms are doubling as a warehouse at the moment, don't want the Estavians getting their hands on some of the stuff I brought from Cala."

"Expensive warehouse..." Sennary followed his host through a link door to a smaller area that appeared to be his office. There were other unguarded exits, too — had he taken the entire floor?

Porett offered Sennary a chair, but sat on the edge of his desk himself. "Can I get you a coffee?" he asked, reaching for his com-3.

"No thanks, I had one in the lobby, arrived early."

"You should have come up," Porett adjusted the band on his pony tail as he spoke, "we could have had more time." He leant his head back and shook it a couple of times.

Sennary took out his new com-2, tapped it against Porett's 3, kept his eyes on the man. He wondered whether the old-style hair and the beard were kept through conscious intent or unchanged habit, as part of the uniform of a breed of cutters that were now all but extinguished under the restraints of corporate managers with no room for flair.

He remembered his prepared small talk. "I believe you know a cousin of mine, Roenna of Vasnau."

Porett leant on one arm. "I never really *thought* of Roenna as having relatives! Haven't spoken to her for, must be three years, is she still pottering about in Lord Calter's labs?"

"Yes, I was in Svala four or five months ago, dropped in to see her. She hasn't changed, still cadging manuals and pre-war magic books, flicking out gestures as you talk."

Porett smiled, wide, a little wistfully. "That's her. She once told me her name meant 'insight-seeker' in Old Davian; rather suits her, don't you think? She's half Davian herself, isn't she?"

"Yes, her mother was my mother's sister; their side of the family helped out mine a lot when I was young."

"Well, remember me to her the next time you meet up." He rose to his feet. "But now, to business, I don't have much time these days..." He went to a neatly-stacked collection of boxes in the corner. Sennary guessed he was meant to join him, did so.

Porett took a carton, started opening it. "I wasn't sure what you'd need, so I concentrated on high-fly gadgets you won't be able to get elsewhere. Most of what's here is samples for The King to look at, show him what's possible if he doesn't go flat on magic." He pulled out a dished disc, about a handspan across. "If we'd used this kind of zip at the Erva, we'd have diced the enemy well before their antimagic cut in. Tell me what you want, I'll have it packed, you can take it tomorrow."

"Gives you time to tag it?" They both grinned. "Fair by me! So what's that in your hand?"

Porett stroked his beard, idly. "Flash thrower. Top's metal, underneath is glass. Inside, there's dozens of tiny little light sets. They won't burn until they touch the edge of the disc. Don't last long, about thirty seconds, but when you throw the whole plate, it spins them out to

the rim, they make contact, and you get a blinding light. Puts it right where you want it — not like light-primes, only good close-up. Safety catch on top."

"I could maybe use one of those, yes."

Porett pointed to another box. "You'll need a pair of what's in there, then, antibrightness lenses. In battle conditions, they'd be better worked into a helmet visor, but I guess you don't want to wear one of those all the time. I have some old see-into lenses too, somewhere, let you look through soft things, take a peek at what's inside. Beat most illusions, too."

"I'll skip on those, thanks, heard of a surgeon in Bay Town who lost his eyes that way, they can rot you."

Porett shrugged. "Do you have a use for shots? I have some happies, they're not MedSpell but they should be fine. I also have some sads and some sleeps, you never know when you'll need them." He tore a strip of wrapping paper off a brown parcel, teased a shot pack from inside. "These are special: combustion shots. Slap them onto anything, they flare up, set it on fire."

Sennary was a little wary. "So why haven't they gone up already?"

"Well when I bought East/Trad, I got my hands on their flux spell at last, coated it on these wrappers. The whole surface is constantly moving beneath the shot, the reactive side never gets a chance to settle, can't detonate."

"I'll take some of those, then; shots are always handy."

Porett raised a finger. "You like shots? I have all sorts, haven't had every last one tested but you're welcome to whatever you want. There's one particular black-fac specialises in emotions: as well as happies and sads, they do fear, bravery, despair, all marked on the individual shots, I'll throw in a pack."

"Love and hate included?"

Porett spread his hand, rippled it twice. "No, those are too directed, you can't be in a general state of hatred, you have to hate something in particular." He started pulling at another carton. "There's this other outfit goes for mental faculties, they have these really potent memory blocks, you can't remember anything that's happened for days, sometimes weeks before the shot was applied. You can also get hear-to-listen ones, they don't always work, but when they do the user can't make sense of words, they just seem like meaningless sounds." He withdrew a small roll of waxy paper. "Now, on here we have truth shots. One of these slapped on you, you can't lie. Evade, or fail to answer, yes, but not actually *lie*. Problem is, it takes about an hour for them to work, and the victims know what they are soon as they try and say something false. Unpredictable duration, too, minutes to hours."

"Well, just give me a broad selection, they don't take much carrying." How to dampen Porett's enthusiasm, get him onto the less esoteric?

"Sure. Now, what else do I have, yes, point-armour. Nothing over the normal, well, except it's fireproof, but it's made of lighter material, you should be able to put it under your plate, just for a bit extra protection."

"Good thinking. Are these things costly to produce?"

Porett rocked his hand. "Not as much as you'd think, mass production, about eight kilogestures each. I have a couple of weapons, though, they're uniques at the moment. There's an arrow, when it's fired it'll adjust its flight to hit the desired target, so long as you give it enough pull to get it there; well, and nothing jumps in the way or the target moves or something. Ninety K it took us to make it, we can probably optimise down to about eighty but I doubt we'll ever get it low enough to be standard issue. Better that mages stand by a battery of archers and guide in promising arrows when they see them."

"I'm no bowman, you better keep that. What's the other one?"

Porett smiled, irrepressibly proud, like a schooly telling his folks he'd come first in drawing class. "It's a sword — a beauty in its own right, wait until you see it. Just *don't* tell anyone else about it if you want to keep it, especially The King. You can be our field tester." He whispered something to the binder on his desk, tugged at a drawer, and carefully removed the most magnificent longsword Sennary had ever seen. Immediately, he ached to take its hilt.

Porett knew, but teased. "Light as a snowflake, we've put a floater on so it weighs no more than a dagger. Flux on the blade, keeps it clean, has a ten-minute light-set built in, it'll glow if you press on the stud at the end."

"It's a dream! May I..?" Porett passed Sennary the sword. Its grip was perfect for his hand, so easy, airy as a breeze. He swung it with a swiftness that surprised them both. "Hot, Porett, this is the sweetest steel I ever held!"

"There's more besides," smirked. "What I've told you, that's maybe fifteen K gestures, the plain sword itself took longer than that to make. There's another one-twenty K of zip in it." He took the blade, carefully, pointed to the edge. "You know how they make these so sharp? They like fold the hot metal over, reheat, fold again, and keep doing so as many times as they can. Takes patience and skill to strengthen the whole length. Normal, good-quality weapons, they have maybe four folds. Once-a-century, top-class, master-crafted, they can just maybe reach twenty. This one has nine folds, but between each fold we put a breaking spell on it, like what they have in those Agritech rods the peasants use on cattle. By exploiting folding, we got around the usual problem where follow-up spells of a kind already imbued in an object don't take."

Slowly, Sennary lowered the hilt, rested the weapon on the desk. "You're telling me there are *nine* breaks in this blade? Anyone it strikes will be dead almost instantly, the slightest knock, the tiniest nick, armour or no armour..."

"That's right." Porett folded his arms. "You'll need it, though: I've lost my tag on Conley, you'll have to find her without that kind of help."

"Wait, no, let me get this clear. People who have been skilled in swordplay for thirty years, learnt their trade the hard way, fought in battles, one-on-one combat, it's now all for nothing? Any fool who can beat their guard once, touch them with any degree of force anywhere, leg, arm, will kill them outright? All their accumulated knowledge and experience will be utterly worthless?"

"Correct. Spell techniques advance inexorably; people who don't run with the trends are left behind, outdated, superseded. That sword represents the leading edge in military science. What do you think?"

"I think magic is moving too fast..."

Chapter 37

"Justan R," he wrote, and handed the contract back to Porett. Porett passed him the second copy; he checked it, nodded, signed it also.

"I'll have my bankers release the funds immediately, sir; they should be available for your use early tomorrow."

Justan said nothing, beckoned to one of the mages standing discreetly against a wall; he gave her the contract, and bade her leave along with the others. Porett watched them depart.

"So," said The King, "even after splashing on East/Trad, you still have a hundred million clicks on deposit. The magic business must be very profitable..."

"Well, I have it until tomorrow, anyway!" Porett grinned, wished he'd not done up his top button, hidden beneath his beard anyway. "Most of the money is Estavian, I've sold off a number of my subsidiary concerns; Estavians are eager to buy into the home market of their new rulers."

"They were keen enough *before*. Perhaps I should have confiscated their banks, as well as their major manufacturers."

"I think you were wise not to; economic chaos would have followed, you couldn't have sold off anything else you took as spoils."

"I can dispose of very little this early even as it is. Otherwise I wouldn't need to borrow from you."

A smile flickered across Porett's face. "Well if you don't want to repay it, just make sure you never defeat the Messenger. Then the deal will never close!"

Justan laughed, politely. "With those new toys and patented spells of yours, I doubt we could lose even if we wanted to — not unless the Messenger finds a way of levelling magic permanently."

"I agree — so long as you continue to give the impression that your conquest will stop with the Messenger's empire. If people think you might go further, they'll react. I'm hearing worried voices from trading partners in Talia, and everyone knows the Chaenish city states are concerned. The Panavian Northic countries are even talking seriously about resolving their inter-clan rivalries and forming a military alliance, and recently, I saw an advertisement for founding professors at a new magical school starting as far away as Berea, of all places. You may soon have more enemies than just the Holy Empire."

"All these things are known to me, and our ambassadors are working to allay such fears."

"Well they're not succeeding. At first, the big players were happy to see you take on the Messenger, it saved them from having to do so themselves, gave them an idea of his strengths. When the democracies fell to you, though, it tripped the international alarms. If you can break the Messenger's army in the next month or so, there'll be nothing to stop you sweeping across the north, swallowing the Lowlands whole before Winter sets in. Even with their ancient form of magic, Chaen's fragmented forces will be so outnumbered by Springtime that their defeat will be inevitable, and a campaign against Talia could begin in the Summer."

"No, my ambassadors and legations are performing adequately. The great nations of the south *are* mobilising their armies, but it is the Messenger who gives them cause, not I. As for the north, the Lowlanders in particular seem to fear no threat of invasion — not that they know what fear is, however, being a nation of complete cloud-heads. All I require of my diplomats is the prevention before Winter of the formation of a grand alliance; by then, we will be unstoppable. Even if Talia sent all its legions into Chaen, by Spring we will have sufficient force of arms to attack on two fronts. Three years from now, we'll have an empire larger even than Estavia's at its height."

Porett frowned, puzzled. "Larger? You'll take Ca-Atl, or the Westlands?"

A shake of the head. "No, I refer to Elet; a thousand years ago, its people were as barbaric as the Guels, the Estavians never bothered to conquer them. Now, they seem a little more prosperous, perhaps worth losing a few conscripts invading."

Porett slipped his hand beneath his beard and loosened his collar. *That's better!* Was he putting on weight? He never used to have this problem. "So you are indeed intending to continue advancing beyond the Messenger's empire?"

Justan put both hands behind his head, leaned back, smiled.

"Doesn't it worry you that there may be an uprising at home while you're hacking in distant lands?"

"Not in the least," Justan yawned, "I have my best commander, General Nolley, stationed there both to deter and quash any baron-inspired troubles; also, Chancellor Ansle's new job has the dual effect of both keeping the population well fed, and the Academy subdued. There'll be no unexpected attempts to overthrow me."

"Ansle, yes, I've been having some trouble with him of late." Why was Justan half-smiling?

"If you're expecting me to overrule him and release Vyval Reeve from military service, you'll be disappointed."

Porett felt suddenly cold. Who had warned Justan? His com-self had been patching in to the secure ... *Sennary!* He chuckled. "The fact that I've just loaned you enough money to pay your army for months to come makes no difference?"

Justan leaned forward, grim, an icy menace suddenly about him, enough to cause Porett to shy back involuntarily. "Remember that I am your king, and that everything in my domains is ultimately mine. I took a loan from you because the consequences of sequestering the money were less desirable than borrowing it with no interest other than granting you lordship over Estavia's main northern port. You only offered me access to your corporate funds because then your company accounts wouldn't look quite so fraudulent when Chancellor Ansle's new ministry came to investigate your tax affairs. Do not attempt to use your temporary position as my banker to influence me in other matters. If it were public knowledge how my wife died, no-one would condemn me for taking whatever actions I chose regarding your business. Or your life."

Porett's face was drained of blood. His earlier conceits, that Justan could be played as if he was husked, had simply melted in the heat of reality.

"Why exactly did you kill Queen Mitya, Lord Porett?" Justan leaned back again, the ancient throne creaking as he did so.

"To force you to find a buyer for East/Trad," he heard himself explaining. "If you wanted the company to do something for you, you had to install new management and give it a massive cash shot. Selling was your only real option. Magicorp were still preparing their offer, and you'd moved so fast that there was insufficient time for any of the new consortia to issue anything even as solid as a prospectus, let alone organise a bid."

"There were other ways to put that kind of pressure on me. Only Porett Technologies and East/Trad make wrap-pouches; wrap-pouches are necessary to ensure the army has fresh supplies. If you'd stopped production, burnt or flooded your factories perhaps, I'd have still been pushed into selling off East/Trad earlier than I would have liked. No, Lord Porett, you had another reason for resorting to murder."

Porett was squirming inside, tried to appear calm. What would happen if he didn't tell Justan? Could he bluff it? *Buy time, think.* "As far as the world is concerned, Mitya died at the Erva like so many others with prosthetics. Can't you just leave it at that? You wanted her dead anyway, you even ordered it."

"I know you had been in contact with Queen Mitya for some time prior to her death. What did your discussions concern?"

How could he know? Did she tell him? He was guessing, no proof. *What if he did have proof?* Lying would be a really bad way to react, in that case. *Half-truth, see what he knows.* "I concede that I threatened to kill Mitya if she didn't use her influence on you to remove Ansle from the Academy and replace him with a board of governors from industry. When she refused, I carried out my promise. Control of East/Trad simply determined the time and the method."

Justan narrowed his eyes, folded his arms. Porett could almost sense his gaze drilling into him. He considered flicking out an illusion, make himself look more composed, Justan's mages were gone. Or were they? What illusory guards stood hidden beyond the range of his see-into lenses?

"Not enough, Lord Porett. A man like you wouldn't throw it all so easily. You'd put on more pressure, a minor injury perhaps, to show you were serious, maybe try bribery or blackmail. You wouldn't straight away execute her; no-one in your position would. Besides, you're Ansle of Malith's nominal confederate."

Porett spread his hand on the table, looked at it, tapped with his forefinger a couple of times. "Very well, I'll tell you. But not everything, not yet, there's still some testing to be done." Heavy breath. "Mitya, in some ways she was naïve, but she was courageous. She'd have done anything to save Davia and the Davians from being destroyed by what she saw as your imperialist ambitions. She wanted to know how magic could be used to prevent your army from storming the world, gave an example of what she meant. It really stung me, *brilliant*, a dance of an idea. I knew I couldn't let her walk around with something of that magnitude in her head, I had to have it for myself. So I had her killed."

Justan tipped his head back a little, looked down his nose. "Greed. Greed for power. Yes, that clicks."

"No!" Porett surprised himself with his adamance. "Not greed for power, greed for," he faltered, trying to phrase his feelings. "I just needed to *implement* it, it was so, so new, I hadn't come across the concept before, it was, well, so *original*, but I could see in my mind just how to spell it." He shook his head, defeated. "I just *had* to cut it."

"And you won't tell me what it was?"

"No, I can't; it may not work out, I don't want to commit myself to producing something I might be unable to deliver. I'll know in maybe three months. If it cuts, you should be able to wipe an army without firing a single arrow. Maybe a whole population."

"Tell me about it. Now."

* * *

It was good coffee, but why were these Estavian cups so tiny? Porett poured himself another, topped up Justan's when The King nudged it towards him.

"So you wanted the Academy run by industrialists."

Porett had just sipped, swallowed quickly. "There are some good people there, contracted in so they can't leave. We could release them. Sometimes, even competitors co-operate if they can mutually gain. It wasn't just me pushing for it, Magicorp were, MedSpell, others. We had an understanding. We had shopping lists, ready for the share-out."

"I heard nothing. Were their efforts to persuade me as unsuccessful as yours, or were they setting you up for a fall?"

"I had more reason to push hard, there are some theoreticians that would be low

priority for other companies, but whom I foresaw would be essential for a future project of mine. I'd have been able to buy them all out, no opposition."

"Philosophy of magic."

Porett twitched. How many spies did Justan ... *Him again!* He sighed. "So you know about Ansle's daughter and her little friend?"

"Lord Sennary had the grace to inform me of the details when I spoke to him yesterday. You've met him?"

"After he spoke to you, yes." *As if you didn't know.*

"Did he mention his earlier meeting with me?"

"Not once. I just showed him some of the samples that I brought for you, we talked a little about a cousin of his I know, and later we may have had a few words about Ansle and Conley, but that's it really."

"Good, good, it's as I expected. Well your wishes regarding the Academy may well come true, in a way. The Academy is not the centre of magical research it once was. Corporations and individuals have set up their own laboratories now, focusing on specialist applications, and the Academy is no longer pre-eminent in most fields. It does serve a useful purpose in that it formally teaches the magical arts, however it is grossly oversubscribed. It may be that with sufficient grants from industry, a second college could be established, using members of staff transferred from the Academy."

"Splitting the power-base, yes, I see."

"There are other benefits. A more industry-oriented college would draw in general commercial research contracts; the Academy habitually turns away application-specific work because reliance on such projects poses a threat to academic freedom. The new establishment would also have a higher class of student; the Academy accepts only the self-financing, but there are a good many clever yet poor people who might attract company sponsorship for their fees, thereby raising the overall standard of attendees."

Porett finished his coffee. "I'd support such an institution; it sounds an excellent idea."

"I'm glad to hear that, Lord Porett, but the suggestion is not without its problems. Any new establishment of this kind would need the provision of certain basic resources. A campus, dwelling halls, lecture theatres, and, most awkwardly, a library. We only have one magical research library, that of the Academy. If it was divided, neither institute would flourish; if it was taken from the Academy, then the Academy would fold, leaving but one magic-oriented education centre again."

Porett was about to suggest laboriously copying the books, or even sharing them, when a vague memory stirred. "Isn't there a library in Elet?"

The King examined a fingernail. "The Elets have a deep dislike, a hatred, of foreign ways. They do not exchange ambassadors, and hardly trade. It's difficult to tell from the outside anything at all that goes on in their country. However, they make no secret of having a vast central collection of books from all over the world; perhaps they hope to show to themselves and to civilisation that they are no longer savages. They may even be right."

Porett wasn't listening, was staring at a golden rose carved into Justan's throne. What his superseded Conley-linking self had said, it clicked. He suddenly knew exactly where the pair were heading.

There was a knock at the door; a courtier half-entered, gave Justan a signal, left.

"Time is almost up, Lord Porett. Is there anything you wish to ask me before you leave?"

Porett snapped from his daydream. "Ask you? Yes, there was something, now what was — Altinn! Ansle went to a lot of trouble to squirt its population out across the Purasan

homelands. Did he tell you why?"

"It was part of some plan of his. As evacuating Altinn was a good release valve for some of the defeated Estavian units, I allowed it; it cost me nothing to do so, and Ansle had an idea that it might somehow hasten the demise of the Messenger. Whatever, he is now in my debt. Lord Sennary seems to think the immediate intention was to arrange for Dr Conley to be captured."

"That's *certainly* the case, Ansle told me himself, but it's *why* he wants her taken that I don't understand. The spell doesn't prove."

"I agree. Even if the Messenger were, by some mysterious means, to crash as a result of her capture, what gain is there for Chancellor Ansle in that? Does he expect to win favours from me that can compensate him for the death of his daughter? No. There's something else that's driving him, and I've an idea what it is."

Abruptly, Porett realised. "Gigus," he said. "A finish to it all."

Chapter 38

But it wasn't a cell, it was the women's quarters, that's what the moon-priest had said. Yes, they did happen to be the only two women within the temple complex, and yes, the door was indeed locked from the outside — only to spare the acolytes from temptation. *How considerate*. But no, it wasn't a cell.

Roween looked at the bare walls that imprisoned her, wondered yet again how long it would be before someone came to take her away. She'd already tarried too long, dawdling in the ruins, put herself behind time for the rendezvous. *Now all this*.

She shook her head. She was deluding herself. Her plan was trashed, events had overtaken her. Too many possibilities, she couldn't cope. The only way she'd ever leave this place would be on a death cart.

Despair wooed. She closed the book she was reading, the Lonicon, sacred text of the Message. How thoughtful of the priests to provide a copy. *Depressing*.

Conley was still sleeping, as she had been since they'd arrived. The temple healer had immediately recognised her complaint, it was caused by the bite of an insect, swampland. Incubation period, three or four weeks; Roween reckoned it was the marshes near Dreimen. The cure was regular doses of special herbs and roots, mixed and taken as an infusion. Roween wanted to sneer when he told her — they were always "special" herbs, it made the healing arts seem more mystical. Probably only one of them was doing the job, the rest just colouring and the mandatory evil taste.

Something had worked, anyway, Conley was over the fever, sleeping like a babe. The simile made Roween smile; yes, a babe, with herself as mother. Feeding her, washing her, changing her, keeping her warm. Crying for her.

She wandered over, took a brush from the table. They were allowed a few of their belongings, but not many. No spellbooks, she'd buried them in a wood a day's walk away, along with half of Medreph's rubies. The remaining ones she'd let them find, except for four. Those, she'd swallowed.

Kneeling down, she took Conley's hair, began to smooth it. Silky, fine, gossamer when the light caught it, and yet she'd used to hue it! Some women would contemplate murder if it could give them tresses like Conley's, but she herself took her good fortune for granted, wore a figment! Roween sighed. Even if Conley went bald, she'd still steal men's glances beside a short, cross-eyed plainface. *Ask Lord Sennary*.

Conley began to stir, Roween didn't react at first, but then she realised, hastily replaced the brush.

"Con?" she ventured. *Original...*

"Anya?" Her voice seemed distant, slurry.

Anya? The keyboard player? "It's me, Con, Roween, you've been ill."

Taking some effort, Conley opened her eyes, squinting from the light as it beamed through a slat window high on one wall, picking out dust like specks of ground diamond.

"Don't try moving, you're too weak."

"Roween? I thought I was in, I don't know where I thought I was. I feel so woozy." She blinked, slowly.

"Probably something in the potion. We're in a temple of the Message, I told you I was taking you here, remember?"

"I don't know where I thought I was..."

"Can you move your hands? Gesture?"

Too late, she'd gone again.

* * *

The healer had returned shortly afterwards, smiled insincerely, given Conley more medicine. When he'd left, Roween had put a finger down her friend's throat, brought it all back up. A sleeping draught to keep her harmless until the soldiers came.

She was awake now, but still lying down, Roween shining her hair, looking bored, a dreary, uninteresting scene for the benefit of anyone observing through secret peepholes.

"I memorised the antifever spell from your MedSpell library," whispered Roween. "You can cure yourself now, no need to rely on their herbs."

"How long is it?"

"Just over two thousand."

"You memorised two K gestures? That's impressive." Her throat was still raspy, even when speaking hushed.

"I was working on them day and night, deciphering the shorthand. They're structured, I only had to remember eight major segments and some twiddly bits gluing them together."

"Well let's start on it, I don't want to have to depend on those infusions. I feel a little stiff, whisper the gestures slowly at first, until I get used to flicking again. We have plenty of time."

* * *

"Con, why did you break the click-well?"

"It was some kind of special tagged, how else could Sennary have found us?"

"I know it was tagged. Why did you break it?"

* * *

Roween was standing before a different moon-priest. This one seemed to have authority, was confident with his instructions to the others. It was clear that he wasn't used to interrogation, though.

"So you're a mage," he began.

Gentle start. "I know magic," she replied, "but I won't use it."

He wrote something down. "That's inconvenient," didn't look up, "you're valueless to us, then."

"That depends on whether you want to see spells cast, or cast them yourself. I'm a teacher." *Well, I am now.*

He raised his eyes. "Prove it. Explain to me how magic works."

She tried to look paternal. "It's not really that easy. Do you know anything about macro physics?"

"Inform me."

She gazed downwards, to one side, hard for him to tell where exactly. "As you wish. Macro physics. Well, we all know that the world is made up of matter and energy. Whenever people do things, they change the state of the world a little, alter some of its matter and energy. What exactly happens is described by various laws of physics. We've discovered rules for the effects of motion, heat, light, sound — all the major energy forms. Now these in turn are derived from more fundamental laws governing forces on and between objects, like magnetism and gravity. Study of one particular force, the matter-energy force — that's the one that holds something in its physical form — led physicists to develop the theory of macro physics. The worldly manifestation of what this theory models is what we call 'magic' — that's because most of what we once explained using the term in its old, superstition-loaded way, the theory now allows us to interpret technically." She looked up.

He was making notes, nodding. "Carry on."

She tried to read what he was writing, couldn't, too small. "Yes, well, basically then, 'magic' is just the name we ascribe to any process which changes the world by manipulating the matter-energy force in some way. If it uses some other force, we use another word, 'magnetic' or 'kinetic', say, or 'electric' for the one you get when you rub amber. 'Magic' just covers one set of related physical laws, that's all."

She waited. He said nothing, reached the bottom of the page.

"Is that enough for you?" she asked, nervous.

He glanced up, pursed his lips a moment. "You've explained what magic is, in a way, but not how it works."

"You want me to go into more detail?" She sighed. *Well, if he wants technical, he'll get technical.* "So, every physical presence in the world is either matter or energy. Rocks, lakes, people, light, heat — they're all physical presences. Each such presence has a force radiating from it, the matter-energy force, which, as I said, is what holds the presence in its physical form. When matter changes into energy or energy into matter, it's because of a change in the matter-energy force. So that's the force's main function, then, to stop everything from turning into light."

"Why light?" interruption.

"Because that's the purest form of energy. They've done experiments, you want me to give you the references?"

He frowned.

Roween had immediately regretted the remark, felt unsettled, tried to regain her train of thought. "Well the interesting thing about the matter-energy force, from a mage's point of view, is that it's focused, but only weakly so. Also, it doesn't diminish with distance; it extends from every physical presence to infinity in all directions, just it's stronger in one of them. Normally, its orientation is random, it could be anywhere, and it moves about arbitrarily, a bit like the stalk on a cherry spun into the air. There are, though, certain things you can do to align the force relative to some local point, as with making a nail magnetic by placing it next to a lodestone for long enough. An aligned force is what we call a 'focal matrix'; creating and modifying such things is the purpose of gestures." She paused for breath.

"And this focal matrix: how does altering it change an object in the real world?"

Try keep it simple. "A matrix is a manifestation of an object — or, more correctly, of the physical presences that make it up. Alter an object, and its matrix changes; alter the matrix, though, and its *object* does. The matrix of an object is the way its physical make-up is projected, in terms of matter and energy."

"Do you consider thoughts as matter or energy?"

That old chestnut? Well at least it shows he's understood... "The question is unresolved."

Personally, I believe that thoughts are what arise when the matter that makes up the brain has the right sort of internal energies. By altering the energies, you can change — or eliminate — thoughts." She smiled, ironically. "I can't give you anything deeper, how magic fine-tunes the required alterations. I'm not a biomancer..."

He closed his notebook. "I have sufficient information now. You may leave."

She was taken back to Conley.

* * *

The cell door opened, framed a huge man in flowing, black, star-flecked robes. He pointed at Roween, "Come." Conley was playing sleepers, Roween tucked a blanket around her, followed the priest.

She was led along the corridor, down some steps, out into a courtyard. There was no-one with him, but Roween knew she wouldn't get far if she bolted. He wore a sword, and the metal stars on his belt looked removable, designed to be thrown. She followed him into an older building, down again, underground, to a dimly-lit chamber. He locked the door, waved her towards a rickety chair, seated himself behind an unadorned desk.

"Do you know what I am?" he asked.

Roween nodded. "A star-priest, unattached to any of the twelve Holy orders."

"Do you know what I do?"

"You're a magisterial inquisitor. You rule on interpretations of the Message."

"I represent the Messenger in matters which do not fall entirely within the domain of any one sect."

"If the Messenger wishes information from me, surely the task of obtaining it should fall to a priestess of Kesk?"

He ignored her question. "You impressed the moon-archpriest enough for him to refer your case to me. It is as well for you that he did, otherwise you would undoubtedly be dead."

"I do doubt it, but proceed." *Be enigmatic, seems to sway them.*

"Your companion is a mage. Her father is Ansle of Malith, chancellor of the Academy in Cala; he is the world's leading authority on magic."

"If you say so."

"This much is known to us. Why she is in the empire of the Followers is not. Tell me."

"Ask Chewt."

She thought he'd flinch, but he didn't. "Chewt is dead. We have other spies. Why are you on Purasan soil?"

She thought as much: Chewt had been turned by the Message, Ansle had found out, killed her somehow, made like it was he who was dead. Fooled the Messenger into misleading the Estavians. *Smart, but not so smart.* Didn't he care how his daughter would feel if she heard the rumours? Thank the skies Sennary was discreet!

"Let's make it simpler, then. Your name?"

"I look after her."

"I *know* that! I know exactly *what* you do — "

"I'll wager! In an all-male monastery, you're not exactly going to be short of volunteers to spy on us, are you? Not with *her* looks..."

He rapped a knuckle on the desk. "Flippancy. Well if you don't wish to answer freely, so be it. I *can* force you. I have drugs that will wash your mind of all resistance. I have poisons from Ca-Atl that will pain you so much, you'll plead for a fatal dose, just to be free of their agonies. Or I can give them to Conley."

Vacuous threat; he wouldn't touch Conley, she's too valuable. No qualms about hurting a scruffy nobody, though, might even enjoy himself. *How can I become significant, worth keeping alive?*

He made to stand up. "Very well, if you refuse to tell me who — "

"Enough! I wish to see Lonalon." She tried to sound used to being obeyed.

The star-priest narrowed his eyes. "You call him by his godly name. That he left that behind when he descended to our Earth and wore the torus. He is the Messenger now."

"Lonalon is the name he should have kept. He brings false tidings. He is no Messenger." *The one advantage of skewy eyes is that people can't tell when you're death with fear inside.*

Her questioner was scornful. "You blaspheme!" Not entirely the right tone, though. Even through his accent, there was something about him. A wisp of doubt? Macabre interest? Perhaps — but was there enough to save her?

Time to try it. "You know who Conley is, and I know who you are, but you *don't* know who I am."

Arms folded. "Tell me."

Pitch it over his head. "Return to Lonalon; say his half-sister wishes to speak to him. Our father is angry." She turned her back on him. "I will talk with you no more. Go."

* * *

"And he believed you?" Conley was astonished.

"Course he didn't, but I hooked him. At least I'll be drawing breath for a while yet, until he figures what to do."

"Someone will be coming for *me* anyway, he'll pass the problem upwards, perhaps to the Messenger himself. He might be intrigued enough to indulge you."

"It's what I'm hoping, yes. I just wish I knew what I'm going to do when they push my bluff. Think I'd better have a closer read of that Lonicon..."

Chapter 39

"It's very good of you to spend so long with me, Chancellor, I understand you're a very busy man these days." He was shorter than Ansle, thin-faced, early forties. His swirling Soatian moustache was greying, but the rest of his hair was coal dark — spelled that colour every morning.

"I *have* much to do, yes, but not through choice. When anything permits me to leave my ministerial duties for even a short time, I seize my opportunity."

The moustache twitched. "So, I'm your excuse for a day off!"

Ansle smiled, looked over to the window. "Unfortunately, Nic, if you're appointed deputy chancellor — and Count Feathe assures me that you will be — then I'll be robbed of excuses for weeks to come."

The waiter arrived with the soup, vegetable broth.

* * *

"That was excellent," Nic nudged forward his bowl, dabbed his mouth. "Better than the refectory used to be — has it improved any since I left?"

Ansle shrugged. "It's improved since I took the position of Minister of Supplies." Both men laughed. "You've been gone for *how* many years, now?"

"Fifteen — well before you made chancellor. I could have stayed, but it was too stifling; I wanted to be free to pursue my work without pressure from above."

"Well I'm glad you did decide to leave; otherwise, it might have been *you* here as chancellor, interviewing *me*." He smiled, smug. "So why have you decided to return to academia, anyway?"

Nic sipped at his wine. "Ahh, well now the situation has toggled. Running my clinics is a full-time occupation — I rarely get chance to research any more. Back here, I'd be second-in-command — high enough a level to work as I pleased without being continually pushed around and having unimportant administrative jobs dumped on me." He sipped some more.

"What would you do with your chain of surgeries, if you were offered the post?"

"I'll be selling them in any event — they fit in well with MedSpell's forthcoming diversification into services. I'll stay on in a consultative capacity."

"That sounds an adequate arrangement. So I'd better buy some MedSpell shares before the news becomes public!"

* * *

"It was an interesting seminar you delivered this morning."

Nic swallowed, spoke as he cut fat from the beef. "Well, I knew it was partly so that junior staff members could form an opinion of me; I therefore had to make it something that would impress, without being so technical as to lose them."

"Wise, yes, but I'm not sure you didn't overdo it. There was hardly anything solid in your talk, it was all speculative. Prosthetic brains: an original idea, but what *spells* are you

designing?"

He chewed, pointed to the silverside. "This flesh is deceased. Before anyone knew the magic, if people lost a limb then they wore a prosthesis — at least, the ones who could afford it did. But now, thanks to work pioneered over the last twenty years, I could turn this beef into, say, a patch of human skin. Better than normal skin — stronger, tougher. Well," he smiled, "perhaps not this piece; it's the tenderest I've had in a long while!"

"Yes, yes, so you wonder what would happen if you made a prosthetic brain, I know the *question* now, but what have you *done* about it? Have you tried any experiments?"

Cutting off more fat. "We've done some on animals, yes. The thing is, muscle and bone are different from brain tissue, it doesn't work the same way. You can't make a complex, thinking mechanism from something that previously has only been used for walking. Besides, the subjects invariably die as soon as you remove their original brains."

"Have you tried making a prosthetic from a dead brain?"

He stopped, stared at his plate. Ansle bit into the chunk of steak that had been waiting at the end of his fork for the past half-minute. Finally, Nic spoke. "No, no we haven't. It might work — we'd need to modify the connectors to bind it up, and ... no, it would still be useless, the recipients would die when we took their own brains out, no matter how quick we were." He reached for his glass.

"What if they were already dead?"

He paused as the wine touched his lips. "What do you mean?"

Ansle had almost forgotten his food. "The way *I* understand prosthetic magic, the basic segments that bring life back to dead meat are well understood. The hard parts are grafting it onto the recipient, making it look like the real thing, and fixing it up to the nerves so it can be fully controlled. That's why putting back original severed limbs, if they are available, is easier than making substitutes from pigs' trotters."

"What are you trying to say? That I should build a person entirely out of prosses?"

"No, that you should build a person from a *single* pros." He realised he was speaking loudly, people at other tables looking over, he calmed his voice. "Take a dead body: fix whatever it was that killed it; cast a prosthetic spell over the *whole* corpse."

"It wouldn't work — they'd have to make a focus."

"They're dead, how the life are they going to resist?" He shovelled a forkful of peas.

"There *were* some experiments — I remember seeing a mono-graph, between the civil wars. One of the Galurian barons tried making prosthetic rats. Gassed them, then — "

"That was before Tozhor wrote the recomposition modules, those rats probably had rigor mortis by the time they were prossed back. Died again immediately."

Nic chewed slowly, thinking, running objections through his mind. "It's easy enough to test..." He tapped his plate with his knife. "I'll do it. Animals first: if prossing enhances brain performance to the same level as it does muscles, who knows? They might end up able to talk!"

Chapter 40

"You can stop pretending to be asleep now, Conny, they finished with doping your medicine two days ago."

She recognised that voice... *Did he say Conny?* She rolled to face him. "Uncle Gigus!"

Roween glanced at the frail old man standing in the doorway, then back at Conley. "Gigus? Wasn't he chancellor before your father?" They both ignored her.

"You've grown, Conny, but you're every bit as beautiful as I remember."

She was on her feet. "Is it really you? I thought you were dead!"

Gigus shook his head. "Dead? Is that what your father told you?" A slight cough. "I was banished; in a way, however, perhaps he wasn't altogether wrong."

"But what are you doing here? Have you come to rescue us?"

She saw the sadness in his eyes. "I'm afraid not, Conny: I serve another master now. I'm here to take you to Lon's Grace, Elbienau as it once was."

Conley shrank back, mouth open.

"He's with them, Con," Roween stated, blankly. "The star-priest must have summoned him."

Gigus turned his watery eyes towards her. "I am high star-priest, young woman. I am the Messenger's prime adviser. And you, you have caused me a great deal of inconvenience. What is your name?"

"Loneskh," she ventured, uncertainly.

He laughed. "You'll have to be more convincing than that before the Messenger!" His beard rippled as he nodded, once. "Listen, both you and I know that the Message is a complete fabrication, a reworked old myth wrinkled to give hope to peasants and promises to lordlings. It is merely a temporary unifying force that binds together a scattering of tribal nations, nothing more. The Messenger may have a certain unique ability with regard to magic, but it is not in the least bit godly. So please, have the good manners not to insult me with your ridiculous pretensions."

Conley looked to Roween. She was silent.

"In time, you'll pay dearly for your remarks, I assure you. The Messenger has diverted me from a battle, so that I might bring you to him. My absence from the field may be at considerable cost to him. You will be the one who bears the price."

"Don't fret, R — " Conley stopped short as Roween raised her hand.

"Don't say it, he'll have to call me Loneskh."

Gigus spoke slowly, measured. "Tell me, Conny, what's your friend's real name? I'll find out eventually, and I don't want to hurt you."

Conley threw a glance at Roween. "No, Gigus, sorry."

He stroked his beard, then held his hand out to the right, behind the wall, out of sight. When he brought it back, he was holding a pack of Evergreen Deeps. "You want one?" he asked, disinterestedly.

Conley's eyes opened wide, she shook her head, quickly.

"They're not illusory, they're the real thing. I understood you had a fondness for them." He opened the pack, took one out.

"Roween Sage," said Roween, sharply.

He returned the shot. "Roween, yes, I see; how singularly appropriate. So that's why you didn't want me to know. The Messenger *will* be pleased."

Conley felt she'd missed something, looked over to Ro. Her expression was one of naked grimness.

Two saddlebags were thrown into the room. "Ready yourselves for travel, we leave in an hour. Oh, and Conny, I hear you're something of a fast caster these days. Lest you be tempted to try duelling magic with an old man, let me show you something." He rolled up his sleeves, began.

It was like a chopping motion at first, both hands flicking at once. Conley watched the right a moment, then realised with dismay what he was cutting: a single spell, interleaved on two hands. As one of them completed a gesture, the other was into the next, alternating. *Double speed!* It was stupendous, she couldn't even follow his flicks visually, let alone match their rate. *Fingers, palm, point, or was it a*, no, he'd lost her.

He looked surprised when Roween grabbed his wrist. "I think she understands, Giquis. No need to blind us." She released him.

He leaned his head to one side, peered into her eyes, rubbed his forearm. "Perhaps, young woman, you *are* more special than I thought." He stepped back. "One hour." The door slammed shut.

Conley waited a few moments. "What was that all about? What did he mean about your name?"

"I don't know. It's Old Davian for 'inspiration'."

* * *

"So, two-handed gesturing, neat."

Conley shrugged a shoulder. "I thought *I* was fast, but he'd just sink me. You suppose these clothes are tagged?"

"Undoubtedly. Have you ever tried using both hands yourself?" Her Akrean smock. Hadn't she thrown that away?

"Never thought of it. I'm nothing. Over the past few months, all the fanciful ideas I once had about myself have been squelched. I'm a second-rate theoretician, I plagiarise, I'm unattractive, conceited, aloof; I'm really little more than a superficial shot-head. So now it seems I'm not the world's speediest spellcaster. What's another truth to add to the rest? I amount to zero."

Roween was finding it hard to believe what she was hearing. "*Unattractive?* Con! In sixty minutes, Giquis is going to come through that door and take us to the Messenger, where I at least am very likely to meet my death, and you might well wish you could too. Stop pitying yourself, start thinking about what it is you *can* do, not what you can't." She snatched at Conley's wrist. "Try a light-prime, both hands."

"What's the use?"

"You won't get chance when we're on the road, they'll bind you. Do it, now. I need you, Con."

"Need me? You don't need anyone, Roween Sage. And no-one needs you."

She relaxed her grip. "I do need you, Con, everyone needs you. You're unique. You have to come out of this. Please, try it."

"But I'm right-handed, I'm not as fast with — "

"Con! Please, just, just *do* it."

Conley put down the scarf she was holding, sighed. She began.

Three seconds later, a 17 light-prime flashed from between her hands.

Roween whistled. "I think Giquis made a mistake when he showed you his..." She trailed off as Conley dropped another pulse, and another, and another. "Stop! you'll spark me!"

"If I practised, I could go faster," she announced. "Before he comes, I'll begin a fire-start, hold the palm near the end. I should be able to flick out the final fingers and double-point, even tied up, burn my bonds."

"He'll use cuffs. If you want to do something now, make yourself immune to those sleep draughts. They'll be in the food."

"I don't know the sequence."

"But I do."

* * *

Roween realised her eyes were open, but they ached, so much. Everything was wavy, like looking through running water. The motion of the cart was erratic, and she felt dizzy, *so* dizzy.

She remembered her panic as the moon-priests held her, forced her to drink it, threw her into the prison-wagon like she was a rag doll. Giquis had begun some gestures, it seemed so long ago now, what were they? She couldn't remember. Probably something to keep her under, he wouldn't know it was ineffective. Or he might, if he was wearing lenses, had maybe some other zip. Would her reflexes work if she was drugged out? *So hard to think*. She was feeling unsteady again, even lying on her back. Dazed, befuddled. She'd pass out again soon, she could see blackness encroaching, rings, formed at the edge of her vision. Where was Con?

No time to move, only to look, before her senses left again. Conley, slumped against the wall, arms shackled to it, head hanging low. A faint, child-like smile pitched incongruously on her lips. Two happy shots on the temple.

* * *

Battle? He mentioned a battle. Please don't hurt Sennary. Please?

Chapter 41

Sennary and the other commanders had been told where to expect the ambush, but the ranks remained ignorant, too great a danger of enemy infiltration. Justan had deliberately crossed the Erva at a highly convenient break in the Messenger's defences, which led him through onto the Purasan plains — lands pocked throughout history with the sites of countless battles. That the Messenger had lured Justan there was beyond doubt — indeed, it was so obvious that The King had stated openly that he regarded himself as having accepted a formal invitation. The only part of the festivities to be settled was the party's exact venue.

Painstaking intelligence work had finally provided the clue. The enemy generals had apparently been so impressed by Justan's Akrean chariots that they wished a similar line-breaking weapon of their own. The only source available to them at short notice was that of the barbarian Guelish tribesmen, who roamed the lands south of Elet. Advance reconnaissance units, which Justan routinely despatched to watch the Messenger's border marches, had observed the movement of large numbers of scythed chariots, and had reported the information by comsphere. To operate effectively, chariots need flat land, and the only suitably level ground on Justan's route to Dreimen was slightly east of a hamlet called Danza. The Messenger could easily have arranged for fields to be evened off elsewhere, of course, but, when they learned that Danza had been razed, Justan's agents were certain. The King's army would have to veer east to avoid marching through rubble, and that's where it would be hit.

Danza was now two hours away.

Sennary knew little about The King's tactics, but he did have clear orders: when the ambush at Danza came, he and his Estavian light horse would line up on the far left of the battle order, alongside the Davian cavalry. He wasn't too happy about that, knowing what fate befell the Davian infantry at the Erva, but, objectively, he *ought* to be well away from trouble out there. His brief was to follow the enemy's right wing if it spread out, and prevent its outflanking Justan's forces. Particularly vulnerable if that happened would be the supply carts located towards the rear — guarded only by inexperienced conscripts. If the Messenger could break the main baggage trains up or fire them, it would probably delay any further advance by Justan until the Spring. The King would obviously prefer victory now, when he was confident of success, rather than have to wait another five months while the Messenger recruited allies and subverted Estavian units with his poisonous holy evangelism. Sennary's job, therefore, was not without importance.

It was mid-morning, sunny, and the army had reached Ganeizna Green, a grassy heath where nomads took their sheep to graze in Summer. Something here, though, was plainly *wrong*. Sennary could see it, but more, he could *sense* it: the ground had been prepared — prepared for warfare. It wasn't levelled, but it had been cleared of bushes, other obstructions that might slow horses. Done in the night, then. *Our spies were wrong?* He began moving his people out to the left, didn't wait for orders.

Worse soon followed. His field comsphere glowed, information: scouts, sent on ahead earlier, were reporting the rapid appearance of huge troop concentrations in the south and west; others could no longer be contacted. Battle position, immediately.

Concerned, Sennary shielded his eyes from the glare of the sun, forgetful of his antidazzle lenses, peered towards the horizon. Coming into view was a wide line of cavalry, cantering, arrogant. *It's a real ambush!*

But there was something else, he felt the dread. Not just the location, but the enemy, far too...

The horde was drawing closer, its massive size becoming ever more frighteningly apparent; there were maybe thirty or forty *thousand* of them — *five times* the number Justan could muster! Yet the Messenger could call on even fewer, perhaps only four thousand cavalry at the most. So —

Morale crashed, as the fact that the Holy Army had allies impacted on the minds of Justan's invaders.

Sennary was trying to make out banners. Where had these reinforcements come from? How had they escaped detection? By sea? Yes, he could see Panavian Northic battle-standards. And those silken flags — they looked *Talian!* How — by river, yes, of course, ferried in on wide barges along the Schaaldt. Or maybe overland, through secret passes? The Guelish chariots would have diverted Justan's spies, attracted them further to the east, yes. *Damn*, if the chariots were revealed deliberately, the Messenger *meant* Justan to expect an ambush at Danza all along. *What carnage has he plotted for us here?*

Justan rode out in front of the army, no behind-the-lines safety of a tent this time. He was shouting orders, pointing, encouraging, rebuking, until eventually, slowly, his stunned soldiers reacted. The lightest infantry pulled ahead, faced off the bulk of the Messenger's cavalry, ready to harry it with javelins, slings, shortbows. Heavier units waited immediately behind, with more holding steady further back, guarding, ready to plug holes. Justan's mounted brigades were already split into two groups: Sennary's on the left flank, Zovia's on the right. Sennary could now read The King's strategy: the army would advance diagonally and to the right, Zovia leading the way, in an effort to leave the level ground, reduce the effectiveness of the enemy horses. And The King had just *thought* of that? *Hot!*

The Talian general realised what was happening too, moved to circumvent the action. The Messenger's line began to curve, as light cavalry units swung round on the left to engage Zovia. Sennary yelled a few supportive words behind him, to stay in line, look out for traps — concealed spikes, pits to disable horses. *Wait and watch*. Then, it started: the enemy charged.

It was too early for serious magic, helplessly being timed for an ambush outside Danza. Some mages did have offensive spells priming, ready for this kind of emergency, but precious few. Not enough to make a difference, Sennary assumed, pessimistically. He was wrong.

When the first back-up loosed his zip, the effect on the rest of Justan's troops was one of complete astonishment, followed by a torrent of hope. Sennary stared in amazement as, one after the other, three crimson projectiles arced, comet-like, into the air, exploding above the advancing Talians. Liquid flames rained down on the Messenger's allies as they strove to control their panicked mounts, fire searing into their flesh. Only a fraction of the wave was affected, and the assault continued with unabated vigour, but it was enough to hint at possibilities. Although to the enemy the missiles were just the first of many expected magical attacks, to Justan's zip-aware soldiers they were absolute stunners: no-one had seen anything of their like before — this was a *new* weapon! What other secret spells were waiting to be unleashed? If they could just hold long enough to find out...

Sennary smiled; so Porett had brought The King listings as well as trinkets.

Zovia's cavalry took the brunt of the charge, but Justan had already brought up heavy Akrean infantry behind it. Skirmishing was now inevitable, but the sheer weight of Talian numbers meant the Galurians would be pushed back unless they had the foot soldiers to shore them up. Moving the Akreans in had necessarily exposed defences elsewhere, though, would pull the focus away from the right flank.

Suddenly, from the middle of the enemy line, the Guelish chariots erupted, wheels swirling vicious blades, singing to war cries, drivers naked, daubed in red clay. Sennary gaped: *stupid!* Another trio of fire-hailing missiles shot in their direction, but fell behind as the barbarians accelerated towards Justan's light infantry. Sennary could hardly see what was happening, heard screams as people were trampled and scythed, but the defenders were well drilled, opened ranks, let the attackers ride through, speared them from behind. He looked over his shoulder, saw some had penetrated to the open centre, but they were being taken out by the conscripts guarding the supply wagons.

The Guels had clearly served their purpose, had been neatly disposed of so they

wouldn't need paying. *What kind of man is this Messenger?*

On the right wing, the Talians were stretching the line to their left, trying to use their superior numbers to outflank Zovia, or, if she spread to stop them, to thin her defences until they self-breached.

It was then that Justan, having picked up his royal horse guard elite, charged out to Zovia's left. It happened so quickly that Sennary didn't at first realise what was going on. Suddenly, he saw it — the Talians had extended themselves too far in their efforts to encircle Zovia, and there was a weak point in the Messenger's line. If Justan could —

The King's lancers hit with the power of a tidal wave, sweeping aside unwary Northic tribesmen, smashing them to splinters. Inspired by their king, all of the Muraki foot regiments surged forward, sucking the other heavy units with them, to assail the opposing cavalry. The sky was whistling with arrows, slicing down on the enemy horses, felling their riders, death with feathers.

But the enemy's right finally reacted. Hoping to catch Justan's infantry from two sides, the Purian general threw his own cavalry into attack. Sennary raised his arm, signalled engagement. *Our turn now.*

He met the first Purian with his spear, thrown. Barely time to draw his sword before the second was on him too. A clip to the head despatched her, and then it was combat on all sides. His enchanted blade swung, slashed, cut, sparked oblivion to rider and horse alike. Bodies tumbled to the ground, there was shouting, movement, screaming, everywhere the red of blood.

He sheared a Purian sabre as it swished towards his head, dealt its owner a counter stroke that sent him dead to the floor with a sharded skull. *Steady, no need for power blows.* Another attacker to the left, twist round, parry, parry again, shield up, hit the knee, hear the death-yell.

There were too many of them, his Estavians were being bunched back into a tighter and tighter knot. Only auxiliaries behind, *if the Purians break through they'll massacre, can't give them any more ground. Where are the reserves?*

Zovia must be holding on the other front, what about Justan? Pursuing the shattered Northic force. *Hot, it's getting rough here, there are Herans in with the Purians now, they'll do for us.*

"Lord Sennary, some Voths have broken through the Muraki line, they're attacking the supply carts!"

"Leave them, we have to hold here. The reserves can handle it." *If there are any! The Akrean chariots are still back there, maybe they can do something? Can't let these Purians cut through us, whatever.*

Another, Heran, crazy eyes, killed a lieutenant already. Using an axe, hacking down, shield it aside, lunge. Damn, another, stand in the saddle, swing diagonally, he'll parry, but his horse will buy it. Arrow, hell, where did that come from? Point armour took it. Hard to tell whose blood is whose, nothing hurts, just aches.

"They're breaking the Davians, sir!"

"Pull back further, keep packed, don't expose the Davians' rear." *How long? Ten minutes before we're totally swamped?*

A searing white light skimmed the heads of the Purians, paining Sennary despite his lenses. Horses reared up, dazzled like their mounts; combat degenerated; confusion. Sennary glanced about him, slow, like in a dream, saw everyone, foe or otherwise, reeling in the panic of their personal darkness, hostilities suspended in blind terror.

Justan's cavalry tore into the Purians with the ferocity of blood-raged wolves. It was slaughter of the first magnitude. Those who weren't spiked as the charge struck were trapped

immobile between the two walls of horse, unable to manoeuvre, waiting their turn to die.

Eyesight was returning, but Justan couldn't use another of Porett's discs at such close quarters. Sennary was able to see The King now, radiant in his golden panoply, downing the enemy with his ultra-grade swordplay. Justan was uncanny, his bravery was raising the entire army, a marvel. The battle had caught his followers flat-footed, but they now saw their leader as a man of such courage and genius that it didn't seem to matter any more: they were going to *win* this one!

Sennary began to push forward, forcing his way through in front of his Estavians, trying to rally them to him, following Justan's example. If The King were wounded at this stage, the enemy could regain the initiative, counter-attack. His Technologies sword hissed relentlessly, swathing a path through the muddled mass.

Those Purians who could were fleeing, the Holy Army bleeding them in profusion from this open wound in its side. There was one such unit penned in, doomed, their commander realised it, ordered them to risk all to take out Justan. Sennary saw him point, knew that The King didn't. *For love, they might succeed!*

He discarded his shield, battered to crumples anyway, Porett's transparent metal wasn't up to standard. Reins in one hand, longsword in the other, he started his drive for Justan.

Desperation beaded his brow, he was taking some hits, mainly pokes on the left from Herans as they tried to leave the field. Justan was still unaware of his peril — Sennary shouted, but the mayhem dragged his voice to the ground. He spurred his horse, pressed onwards.

Justan looked up, saw Sennary signal, twisted, raised his shield, glanced an arrow over his shoulder. A captain slid forward to guard his rear, and The King turned to face the oncoming Purian death squad. Sennary drew alongside, and for the first time thought of his own unit, spared them a look. They were routing the remaining opposition, making progress through to join him: he'd have to cover Justan for maybe sixty seconds.

He never imagined a minute was so long. Time and again, the cornered Purians attacked, heedless of their injuries, knowing they were dead anyway, intent on snatching Justan with them. Repeatedly, Sennary or The King cut them down, fighting as a pair, backing one another, speaking no words. Sennary flicked a sword aside as it sliced towards Justan's neck; moments later, The King's speeding blade deflected a mace blow that would have turned Sennary's shoulder into mash. There were notches in the zipped sword, it seemed to be losing its crackle, but Sennary didn't care, he just held on, grim, trusting his Estavians to arrive. *No time to think, just to kill.*

* * *

He couldn't understand it, where was the next one? He looked around. Davians, Galurians, his Estavians, where was the enemy? Justan faced him, cool as frost, said, "Mop up," and reined left. He disappeared, took the royal guard with him.

* * *

Afterwards, Sennary learned that the melee on the right flank had been going indecisively, until the MSR had finally brought some shortcast magic to bear. Illusions at first, to frighten the horses, then some kind of metal-freezers Sennary had never heard of before. That had broken the deadlock, the Talians had cracked, and Zovia had minced them as they'd fled.

The magnitude of the day's events were clear to him in the abstract, but emotionally

were just beginning to hit. The Messenger had thrown *everything* against The King, bolstered by expeditionary armies from the half dozen other powers of any significance. They'd planned a perfect ambush in minute detail, sprung it with devastating surprise, and yet had *still* lost everything. There was no force now to stop the victorious invaders. By winning this battle, they had won an empire.

Or rather Justan had. His warriors knew it, his officers knew it, the civilians knew it. Without his leadership, they'd have been utterly crushed. The Messenger was clever, without doubt — he'd really hit them with that sudden attack — but *he* was a thousand miles away, scheming in cowardice, letting others fight his battles. Justan was right there, on the spot, out in front, valiant and deadly. The opposition had no-one to match him, were doomed, dullards defeated by flair.

From thenceforth, the nations dubbed their king "Justan the Great." He professed not to like it, but he didn't decree against the practice, either.

* * *

Evening: Sennary was strolling back from the MSR section of camp. He'd remembered Ansle's words a while back about meeting some caster called Vyval, so he'd dropped in on the regiment as he was passing. It seemed Vyval was dead, an accident during the fighting. Trying some kind of new body-wrecking spell on the Talian commander, blew himself away. Transcription error in the spell listing. When he found out, Ansle would instantly assume Porett was somehow responsible; after some consideration, Sennary also tended towards that particular view.

Justan stood before him. "Lord Sennary, the battle is now won, but there is still much work to be done. Until the Messenger is dead, there is a danger that the Holy Army will regroup, and go underground; it could attack us forever when we least expect it, and refuse to allow us peace. I must therefore march on Elbienau, to drive the Messenger from his capital. I will consequently need three marshals, to secure our new territories: individuals who can dig out resistance, deal with corruption, and enforce a *just* set of laws — ones not based on the whim of religious proclamation. I want leaders who can help the people of these ravaged lands recover from years of tyranny. Lord Sennary, I would like you to be one of the three."

Sennary blew out: he had *not* been expecting this. It was clearly Justan's way of rewarding his bravery in the battle, but still, a marshalship was a highly prestigious appointment, and Justan's choosing Sennary over other candidates could probably harm The King significantly. *But am I even qualified for the post?*

"You don't have to accept immediately; think about it."

"It is a great tribute that you pay me, sir, but, if you don't mind my asking, I need to know who are to be the other two marshals?"

Justan held his hand to the side, began walking; Sennary followed, next to him.

"You will be marshal of the Purasan plains, between the Erva and the Tiszenta. Lady Zovia will control the Northic, Purian and Nairadi homelands, between the Tiszenta and the Meck. West of the Meck goes to General Falker."

"I see. So I have usurped General Nolley from a position that should rightfully be hers."

"Nolley can remain as protector of my kingdom in Cala; the garrisons are intensely loyal to her — she recruited most of them personally. *You* have the qualities I need to subdue the Purasans without provoking them into revolt. Remember, the Messenger only conquered them after much blood-letting, so you have a hard task before you to ensure that we do not have to resort to similar tactics. However, I think it is a job for which you are ideally suited. Nolley will have to wait a while longer before returning to more active duties."

"Until you've defeated the Lowlanders?"

He looked away, paused. "And why do you say that?"

Sennary squirmed. "Well... I thought..."

Justan faced him, arms folded. "You thought that since I chose you in General Nolley's stead, I must be looking for an excuse to be rid of her for a while. Searching for an explanation as to why I would desire her absence, and not knowing the woman yourself, you drew on numerous barrack rumours you've heard and composed a hypothesis in the following manner. It is well known that General Nolley has been in the army all her adult life, and that her abilities have usually placed her alongside people several years her senior; also, she is clearly dedicated to her work. People commonly suggest, therefore, that she has had no romantic experiences with men, and that were someone of sufficient stature inclined to take an interest in her she could be easily manipulated. As the Lowlands are reportedly stuffed with princes toting sacks of potent aphrodisiacs, it would accordingly make sense to avoid sending her there. Thus, if I'm purposefully keeping her from the front, then sometime in the near future I must intend to attack the Lowlands."

Sennary was open-mouthed, eyes wide. "That... is correct." *Magic?*

The King smiled. "You don't have to show you're clever by making bold statements torn from the far end of your reasoning chain — if I want that kind of clever I can get it by the cartload from the colleges. There are other qualities I value much more in my commanders: integrity, bravery, and *flair* — especially while under pressure. You have all these in abundance, and it is for *this* reason that I have offered you the position of Purasan marshal."

"In that case, sir, I am honoured to accept."

Chapter 42

"Allow me to congratulate you, Lord Sennary. From mercenary to marshal in less than six months."

"Thank you, Chancellor. I admit, I myself am somewhat surprised by my sudden good fortune."

"You're certain that it's *deserved*? There's no-one manipulating your circumstances for their own ends?"

Although the comsphere image was small, Sennary could easily tell the extent of Ansle's sneer. "As it happens, I'm not convinced that other people couldn't do a better job, no. But I don't think I was chosen by Justan for any ignoble reason, and I certainly don't think *you're* up to arranging it."

"His majesty indeed knows best. I'm sorry my question was rather undiplomatic, but I did have to be," hesitation, "be sure. Now, do you have the parcel?"

Sennary held the comsphere to it. "Opening time?"

"Yes. Inside, you'll find a wooden box. That's right, take it out. Now unless those caravanners are completely incompetent, it should contain an unbroken sheet of what looks like smoked glass."

Sennary removed the lid. "Yes, it's packed with sawdust, but there's a pane of glass here."

"Remove the glass, empty out the sawdust. Good, now, glued inside the box is a wooden ring. Stand the box so the panel with the ring is on the bottom."

Sennary put down the comsphere while he moved the box; Ansle turned away, avoided looking at the distorted image. "Done. There are grooves on the open edge here where the lid was. The glass slides into them, right?"

"Yes, but first stand the comsphere on the ring. Then place the glass."

Sennary shrugged, obeyed. The sphere was dark inside the box, but he could still see Ansle. However, when the glass slid in front, the image vanished. Instead, all that remained in the com-2 was a greyish mist; he heard nothing from it but a sound like Winter wind. He lifted the pane. As the bottom edge passed in front of the ball, that part of the picture which it no longer covered returned to normal. Some kind of encryption device, then.

"I see it works, Sennary. Now, drop the glass again, and I'll reciprocate at this end."

Sennary did as he was told, watched the foggy sphere until an image appeared, starting at the top.

Ansle smiled. "At last, we can talk without Porett's eavesdropping!"

"This glass, it illusions everything that passes through? And yours illusions it back?" He nodded. "Smart magic."

"Not *really*, just a case of ensuring it was random enough to make accidental decryption impossibly unlikely. So, to business. What do you know of Conley?"

"No more than I've told you. I've no idea where she is."

"I do: the Messenger has her. Giquis was not at Ganeizna, yet his presence there would have been the Messenger's preference — even if only to contribute to the demoralisation of our army. Giquis must *therefore* have been attending to other, more pressing business. I believe that someone found her, that Giquis saw and recognised her, and that he is at present having her shipped to Elbienau."

"He could be dead by now, then; he's an old man, he can't travel well."

Ansle scoffed. "He's hasn't died, believe me, I'd *know*. He's alive, he remains the Messenger's premier advisor, and he's taking Conley to the capital. I therefore expect the Messenger to be either dead or discredited within the month."

"If Giquis hasn't simply killed Ro. Roween, I mean."

Ansle twitched. Sennary couldn't make out details too well in the darkened box, but he seemed to have spiked a nerve. "That *is* a possibility, in which case my plan will ultimately fail. It is of no great importance, I have others."

He sighed, unimpressed. "I thought you and Porett were supposed to be allies in this? Why these makeshift boxes? What does it *matter* if he hears? And how does he do it anyway?"

"It matters because I am unilaterally ending our pact: I gain nothing by the alliance's continuance, whereas he gains all. Besides, I could hardly allow him to hear me tell *you* to kill him."

A pause, then a laugh. "You want *me* to kill *Porett*? He just gave me the best sword that was ever made, loaded me down with cratefuls of zip, and is anxiously keen to help however he can! Why do you want me to kill him?"

"That's *my* business. Just *do* it."

Sennary was shaking his head. "You'll have to do better than that, Ansle: my new circumstances mean I don't have to stoop to assassination any more. *Not* that I ever offed civilians anyway."

"No, you've risen now, haven't you? You have power. But how much would your new command be worth if there were no supplies? No food, no money to pay your soldiers, no weapons, no clothes, armour? I, too, have new responsibilities, and I can make your job *very* difficult. There's always the good general Nolley waiting to replace you."

"If you think *that* trick will work, you're mistaken. Justan would crucify you if he found out, it'd be just the excuse he needed. Try again."

Ansle rubbed the misting glass with his sleeve, he was sitting too close, clouding it with his breath as well as his magic. "As you wish. Ask yourself this, then: if Porett resorted to killing a queen to gain control of East/Trad, what is he prepared to do to destroy Magicorp? You think he'll let Conley *live* once he has her magic-smashing spell? Not a hope!"

Now it was Sennary who twitched. "You have a point there, Ansle. But why should I care what happens to Conley?"

"Ah, but you *do*, don't you?" Ansle smiled.

Sennary didn't say anything, not immediately. Then, slowly folding his arms, "Why *do* you want him dead? Don't tell me it's to save Conley, because I won't believe you."

"That *hurts*," spat, so sharply that Sennary almost believed it, except for the indecent speed with which the chancellor regained his composure. "There *are* other reasons, though, yes. In my official capacity, I've been looking into Porett's affairs. Porett Technologies is much larger and more powerful than I think even he realises. I want it."

"Simple as that, Ansle? Why not try for Magicorp as well?"

Ansle didn't attempt to hide his irritation. "Magicorp is run by a board of directors; they pay regular dividends and publish the details. With inter-directorial rivalries necessitating constant performance checks, they have teams of lawyers buzzing around, looking at everything they do from every possible angle. Porett owns around seventy percent of Porett Technologies' stock, and he's therefore in absolute control. Because of that, he can react quicker at the tactical level than can Magicorp, as his word has automatic authority. However, there are far fewer checks and balances on what goes on within his organisation, and it has a much shallower command structure than Magicorp; Porett himself is the only driving force. If *he* dies, *all* of Porett Technologies collapses unless he's quickly replaced by someone suitably qualified.

Magicorp is a completely *different* animal."

Sennary grinned. "Well you obviously know a lot more about management than I do, Ansle, but it occurs to me that East/Trad's set-up is unlike the rest of Porett Technologies', and that if Porett died then East/Trad's management could easily be brought in to assume control of the whole company. Porett probably thinks so, too: that's why he appointed people he trusted to East/Trad's board, and didn't touch the company's overall organisational framework."

"You're right," Ansle was glaring at him, "I *do* know more about it than you. Just kill Porett; I can deal with the residue of his estate."

"Flimsy, Ansle, as always. Look, I don't know how you intend to turn his company into Ansle Technologies, and I don't know how my murdering him will enable you to accomplish more than a small part of your goal. It's none of it my concern. However, I will certainly kill Porett if he makes any attempt to reach Conley or Roween, either through an agent or by himself. Satisfied?"

"If it's as far as you'll go, yes, I'll have to be. Oh, but there's something else: there are two of him; you'll have to kill them both."

Sennary tipped his head to the right, frowned. "That, Ansle, isn't funny."

"No, there really *are* two Poretts, it's true! His grade 3 comsphere contains his essence in some duplicate form. He can meld himself into it, share his memories and experience. The man we know as Porett has *two* existences: one inside, one outside the crystal. Did you talk to Vyval Reeve?"

"He's dead. Porett killed him."

"I know *that* — he was dead the moment I asked you to contact him — but did you actually speak before he died? Oh never mind, listen: the original com-3 project was special. It was supposed to be an enhanced com-2, different levels of call priority, that sort of thing. Porett had some of the designers write extra segments, though, for another purpose altogether more sinister. The com-3 was *intended* to steal minds. Anyone using it could, on a fifty-gesture signal, have their personality, knowledge, thoughts, copied into the sphere, unbeknown to them. Later, the com-3 would develop a 'fault' and be returned to Porett Technologies for correction, whereupon the soul within it could be removed and interrogated, or used for some other demonic purpose."

Sennary looked serious. "How do you know all this?"

"I knew *something* was strange about the com-3, and I'd put a lot of it together from empirical evidence. I found out exactly who had died in the famous lab explosion, and from that reconstructed the nature of the project that they had probably been working on, knowing their research areas. Although at first Vyval wouldn't confirm anything to me, Porett approached him unexpectedly, tried to re-employ him on some crazy *new* project. Vyval panicked, figured Porett would arrange a second accident, told me what he knew. It seems that perversely, as is common in mismagic, the com-3 they were working on wasn't damaged in the blast. It can't snaffle unwilling minds, but it *can* accept ones deliberately projected into it."

"Well Vyval was justified in panicking, anyway. Porett may be a laid-back, over-aged student cutter on the outside, but he's diamond-hard steel within. You think the lab blow-out was deliberate?"

"No. Members of the communications team, who were kept uninformed of the secret segments, put in some fancy extras themselves. They *thought* they had plenty of colour play, but in reality were perilously close to losing it. One red too many, up they went."

"I see. This is taking some believing, Ansle..."

"Well it doesn't matter how *sceptical* you are, just make sure that when Porett dies his com-3 is smashed to pieces."

"Very well. If I kill him, the comsphere goes too."

Ansle breathed out, long. He looked as if he felt like he'd maybe won something here. "Sennary, I have to go now, I'm meeting my new deputy. Take the glass out of the box — I have the only matching decoder. Don't let anyone else see it, if you can avoid doing so. Porett *will* know of its existence, as his mind in the comsphere can listen in on other comspheres, intercept the messages. Our conversations, however, will be nonsense to him. He'll *suspect* my commitment is failing, but won't *know* it."

"I understand. Oh, before you go, who's the new deputy?"

"Professor Nicvia, from N/Clinics. An old friend."

Chapter 43

Roween limped down the corridor, endured the persistent poking of a spear-tip between her shoulder blades, wished she hadn't slept on her leg. Someone had taken her out of the cart, cleaned her up, even trimmed her hair with scissors — neater than her own clumsy dagger cuts.

She didn't like the clothes, though. The skirt was far too short, the leggings felt itchy, and the high boots had clearly been designed to follow some esoteric fashion, not for comfort or utility. As for the blouse, well, it was better than just a halter, though a pity the arms were the wrong length. Then there was the colour, all black...

She was lucky to be wearing anything at all. The Lonicon contained a bizarre passage describing how non-believers must be prepared prior to Final Delivery (a ceremony which amounted to being given a choice between embracing the Message, or being embraced by the flames of a bonfire). So as to make the alternatives abundantly clear, there was a lot of indelible scarlet dye involved, applied to the entire body in powder form, and fixed in place by liberal quantities of a suitably inflammable oil.

Her thoughts were just turning to Conley, how *she'd* manage to look good even like that, when she was stopped before a door. The guard knocked, admitted her to Gigus's office.

She gazed around, momentarily surprised at the huge space concealed behind the innocuous entrance. Gigus noticed.

"You think my room is large? It is small compared to many others here. The High Temple is enormous. It is fortified, houses five thousand people, and yet is everywhere beautiful — alabaster windows, doors adorned with statuary, walls clad in the finest marble. Can you believe that it took but five years to complete? Such is the power of the Message."

"Such is the power of any dominant religion, Gigus. The gods may change, but the fervour is always the same."

Gigus laughed, stroked his beard. "I have brought you here to explain how you might survive tomorrow. You do want to live, don't you?"

Roween nodded, sharp, suspicious.

"The Holy Army has suffered a rout. It is in disarray. Justan will march on Lon's Grace — Elbienau as it was formerly known — and attempt to kill the Messenger; or, failing that, will try to drive him into exile. Our garrison here is large, and already peasants are leaving their fields to swell our numbers. Soon, we will have a new Holy Army, but for the moment we cannot hope to hold out against magic. The Messenger is planning to enlist the aid of Taloss, the effect of which will be to protect the city from spelled assault. We can then thwart Justan until we grow strong again. For Taloss to help, though, she must have a certain kind of sacrifice: someone known to the enemy must renounce magic before them. The higher this person's status, the more Taloss will assist us."

Roween's eyes were flickering across the room, as her mind raced through explanations. "Conley," she said, intending to buy herself more time; it wasn't needed, she deduced the mechanism almost immediately thereafter.

"Yes, dear little Conny. If she doesn't agree, we kill her, and then we kill you."

"So you want me to talk her into doing as you wish?" Coldly.

Gigus smiled. "No, Roween, because if I were to let you converse with her you'd make her even more intransigent. Consider this: she must be very fond of anyone who would travel this far into danger with her; by our putting your continued well-being into her hands, we trust she will see the benefit of performing the small task we require of her. After all, it's not as if deep inside she's really rejecting magic, is it? By agreeing to our little charade, she isn't *really* compromising her ideals. It's just a token, she won't actually *mean* it. And of

course, we haven't told her what will occur once she obeys, she thinks it's just some pre-battle ritual to please non-existent gods."

Roween rubbed her thigh. "Once, you could perhaps have manipulated her in that manner, yes, but she's more principled these days. You may be surprised."

"So might you be. That said, it would greatly damage our attempts to sway her were you to be prematurely dead. I doubt she'd fall for an illusion: she'll need to know you really are alive, that you remain unsullied, before she consents to do our bidding; she will probably wish to question you, so as to be sure. It is therefore imperative that you are not condemned to death tomorrow when you meet the Messenger."

She flashed an ironic smile. "From my point of view, it may be better if I am." She wished she could sit down, but Gigus would probably set a guard onto her if she tried, make her stand.

Gigus scowled. "Do you believe in an afterlife, Roween?"

"No."

"Then if there is nothing for you when you die, even a few extra hours of life must be worth more than an eternity of oblivion."

She said nothing. Sometimes, she cursed herself for resorting to reason in matters best left to superstition.

"Come now, Roween, be seated." She hesitated, but found his offer irresistible. "That's better. Now, when you meet the Messenger tomorrow, he will be expecting you to claim you are Loneskh. If you do so, I'm afraid that you will die. I can't predict *exactly* how he'll react, especially since the news of his army's defeat has," a pause, "affected him. However, die you will, there is no question of it. Alternatively, if you do not claim to be Loneskh, you will live, provided that you have an acceptable explanation for your earlier behaviour. I adjudge that feigning madness would do it. The Messenger will berate me for not recognising your condition beforehand, but I feel that I'll be able to deal with his admonishment. Do you think you can pretend to be deranged?"

Roween nodded. "I know exactly what to do."

"Very well, but make sure you're convincing. Oh, and one last thing: don't look at or into his eyes. He doesn't like it."

* * *

Back in her cell, Roween was hunched over a book. She missed the key turning, but heard the door as it creaked open. Quickly, she looked up, hoped to see Conley. Gigus again. He pointed at the table, spoke to a guard, "Take them away."

Roween widened her eyes, turned to Gigus in disbelief. "These are holy manuscripts!"

"Precisely. When I discovered that you'd requested them, I surmised — probably most unjustifiably — that perhaps you may be familiarising yourself with the Message so as to attempt tomorrow to carry this pretence that you are Loneskh."

"This is a temple, I can't have the Lonicon in a *temple*?" She felt herself losing control, slowed, tried to calm herself.

"You are not Loneskh. I know exactly who you are. You're the daughter of the Academy's senior librarian."

Her panic left her; she didn't understand why it should. "Conley told you?"

"No, your name told me."

"My name? You mentioned that before — you remember my name from ten years ago?"

He laughed. "Of course not! No, but I do recall a cross-eyed bookfetch girl and a miserable, servile, uninteresting bore of a librarian who prided himself for being something of a scholar. That he in no way approached being competent is what furnished me the clue."

"He's a good, wise man, he tries, he — how can you *say* those things?"

"Roween isn't a common name, rather it's made up. Your father chose it, didn't he?"

"Well, I think so, he..." She was confused, what was Giquis saying?

"He probably looked through an ancient Davian text, had some pretensions of giving you an artistic-sounding name."

"It means 'inspiration'."

Another laugh, louder this time. "The Davians used the word in that sense, yes, but its roots are deeper. 'Ro' means insight, 'ween' means someone who provokes, or causes. Therefore 'roween' means insight-provoker, or insight-inciter if you prefer. In times past, when a Davian created a work of imagination, it was customary to dedicate it to the 'roween' who was its inspiration. Now, were your claims to be Loneskh given a wider audience then you might indeed inspire certain types of misguided individual — inspire them into rising against the Messenger. Thus, when I first heard your true name, I found it singularly appropriate. The joke is, 'ween' is the masculine form; you should really be called 'Roweena'. Your father searched around for an old name, something which was different that he could knowledgably expound upon when people were foolish enough to ask whence it came. He probably thought to impress with the depth of his scholarliness, but all it ever showed in truth was the reality of his inadequacy."

She didn't know why she should, but she felt like she was going to cry.

The guard was waiting patiently with the books, although labouring under their weight. Giquis noted his plight, beckoned him to leave, smiled patronisingly at Roween. "They don't teach classical languages nowadays. A great pity..."

"Caethoc laelegen."

"Eletic is not a classical language." He closed the door, locked it.

Chapter 44

Within the comsphere-3, Porett waited. He knew Justan's call was due soon, but wasn't exactly sure what the time was. Late in the day, anyway. He could ask his real self, though it wasn't as if the information would be of much use; knowing the time doesn't make it pass any quicker.

He checked the usual comspheres for traffic, there was none. He even looked in on Ansle, curious if the encryption glass was up, but there was nothing cutting. Not surprising; few people would still be making calls now, out of office hours. He could maybe risk hailing Caltra at home, see if Liddy was getting any better, but he then couldn't switch to Justan if the royal call came through in mid-conversation. Well, not without alerting Caltra's suspicions.

Suddenly, the shell around him glowed green. *At last, something to do.* Mightn't be Justan, but even a bored buy-talker trying to sell magazine subs would break the monotony. He opened the line.

"Hello, Sir Porett, and how are you today?"

"Fine, your majesty, and you?"

"Busy as always. I can't talk for long, I'm out in Brasna — one of the Nairadi countries — we're just fording a river before making camp."

"You could have called earlier, I wouldn't have minded."

Justan smiled, amusedly, knowingly. "I chose this time for a reason, which I'll explain later. First, however, I have some good news for you. The Messenger's army is effectively broken, so I see no reason to delay investing you as Lord Porett of Trilith. I always pay my debts. Congratulations."

Porett grinned, he'd been hoping for that, why he'd been anxious. "Thank you, your majesty."

"The three castles remain mine, but you may administer the harbour as you see fit. My armed naval vessels have their own facilities further down the coast."

"I'm very grateful: Trilith opens onto the whole of Panavia and the west, it's a gateway used by merchants from nearly every nation. Its harbour gives me easy access to a huge new market."

"Someone has to have the barony, it may as well be you. I trust you will use the title to a greater degree than you did your knighthood." He stopped a moment, waved disparagingly at someone Porett couldn't see, it was getting dark.

"I have news, too, your majesty. The matter we discussed..."

"Mitya's plague? You have results?"

"Some, yes. We've tested the carrier magic, and it works. First, we set a matrix on, well, a lab rat at the moment. Every thirty minutes, the matrix pulses, and any other rat within about two paces picks up a copy. From then onwards, it will act as a generator itself. This way, the magic is swiftly propagated throughout a population."

"Good. And the affliction itself?"

"We're still bundling on that. The most promising version at the moment is a form of decomposition, where the victims start losing particles at a set rate, and after a time they've lost so much that their cell structures break down. Their bodies can't continue to function, and they die. There are quicker methods, but we can't see how to tie them to the carrier. This way works because we can make the matrix itself decay, taking real matter with it."

"I understand." He looked as if he did, too. "Can you limit the effect to a specific group of people? Or could we all die once it is released?"

"We can localise it to a species, but not to a race or a nation. I have some people working on a matrix-jammer, though, to stop it from pulsing if it becomes a problem."

"Get that working on the rats before trying *anything* on other subjects. I also want something to arrest decay in those infected — stopping contagion is no use once you've caught it."

"I'll see what I can do."

"Very well. Is there anything else you wish to tell me?"

"Nothing that *my* administrators can't sort out with *your* administrators. Oh, you said you had a reason for calling when you did?"

"Yes, Porett, that's true." He cleared his throat. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but you're in Taltu, are you not?"

"I am, yes."

"I made my connection just after sunset."

Porett felt uncomfortable, there was a thought stirring in the back of his mind, something about environmental mimicry... "Yes, I noticed it was darkening up at your end, I can hardly see you now."

"Whereas *I* can still see you perfectly well, even though you haven't activated a light set since we began our chat."

Hell, how am I going to explain this? "Oh, that's because this com-3 has an enhancer built-in, your majesty; if the light level drops below a standard threshold, it amplifies whatever there is to bring it up to a reasonable viewing quality."

"So when dusk fell, your comsphere increased transmission brightness to account for it. Clever."

"I like to think so, yes."

"So can you explain to me why it is that when I look through your office window I see that sunset in Taltu has not yet occurred, even though it has now done so in Brasna? By my reckoning, I'm so far west of you that darkness should have fallen in Estavia at least an hour ago. Or are you telling me that your enhancer makes the night sky look blue?"

Porett closed his eyes, groaned inside.

"Lord Porett, enough. Destroy that model 3 without delay."

Chapter 45

At least the Messenger would be seeing them both together. Roween had been fretting for Conley, imagining pressures that Giquis could subject her to, the kind of drugs, magic, he might employ. Physical abuse? Sexual? *Not his style*. Or perhaps a psychological approach. Final Delivery?

She felt nervous. She'd been waiting for, what, two minutes? The door in front of her was tall, white-painted, gold-handled. She'd looked over her shoulder once, but one of the guards had used his gauntlet. She didn't try again.

She could hear footsteps behind her, four or five pairs maybe, mailed, in step. Also, metallic heels, sharp, like the noise her own boots had made when she was marched here from her cell. Two guards drew up in front of her, over to the left. A shadow appeared behind them, next to her. She spared a glance — Conley. Magnificent, dressed like her but a class apart, a *league* apart. Seeing Roween, she winked. Roween nodded back, paid for it with another cuff that jarred her head, pulled at neck muscles.

Giquis walked past Conley, turned, addressed them both. "Ladies, I want this to be brief. You both know your parts. Play them, and you will be out of there in ten minutes, with perhaps another five before I join you. Make a mistake, and Roween at least will be very dead, very quickly. And remember, don't look at his eyes. It's *especially* important." He smiled. "Are you ready?"

"Ready," said Conley, smartly, holding a clenched fist in front of her. Roween registered it as uncharacteristic, realised it was to show her there were no chains. And... *Good girl, Con*.

"Why," she asked, "shouldn't we look at his eyes? Is he about to lose his lenses?" *He'll know it veils a message, but not its content*.

"Because if you do, I cannot save either of you." He bowed, and faced the door. The guards in front stepped aside; Roween felt something sharp in her back. Giquis knocked, pushed at the golden handle. The sharpness jabbed: *follow*.

She watched Giquis walk, head bowed, into the vast, sparse chamber. She and Conley followed, eyes down. Giquis stopped, they did likewise. Roween listened, waited for the door to close behind her, looked up.

Seated before them on a raised, ebony throne, sat a pallid man, lean, hair tousled in uneven curls, bony face, lips thin and drawn. She could have laughed. His eyes diverged.

"You!" he shrieked, voice shrill, pointed at Roween. "You dare to view the eyes ... of a god!" Strange, lilting pause.

Giquis had turned, was staring at her in disbelieving anger, confusion.

"Enough, half-brother." *Play-act*. "Your vanity betrays the profoundness of your degeneracy." *Confident, be confident*. "I am Loneskh. Your mother is the spriss of my mother. Our father is the one-god, Lon. He is angry with you. Very angry."

The Messenger's eyes were darting from side to side as one, then the other, lined at her in a lunatic fury. "You lie! You blaspheme! You are not Loneskh! You have seen ... my soul! You shall die mortal, you

Giquis was surprised, turned to face his god, avoided eye contact. "Messenger?"

"No!" shouted Roween, before he could be ordered, so loud, such a scream as it pierced the echo of his question. She ignored the mage, pointed directly at the Messenger. "You recognise me, Lonalon. You know who I am. You came here against our father's will. He allowed you to stay, hoped you would mature, return of your own volition. But you have spread evil, you have corrupted the Message!"

She waited, gave him chance to make reply, he said nothing. Was he staring above her?

Yes — like there was something there, something he alone could see, and it was talking to him.

She continued. "You have told impressionable humans that things exist to change. A debasement! Your 'message' is the folly of Lona's world. But this is Eskh's world. Things do not exist to change, they exist to *be* changed. Your mother sent you here, to reclaim this place from *my* mother. Lon knows her frail deceit, and it is time to end it."

Giqus had moved to one side. Roween didn't dare switch her gaze away from the Messenger, but could tell he was flicking, two-handed, couldn't make out the gestures.

"I deny you!" The Messenger was standing, but didn't leave his pedestal. "You ... do not exist!"

"Loss comes for you, Lonalon: you will century in Wul's otherworld." She extended her left arm, pointed at Giqus without looking, watched as the Messenger glanced over to him. "Your servant seeks my death by magic. Shall I make it easy for him?" She withdrew her hand, formed a focus. "He cannot harm a goddess."

"You foolish..." Giqus growled, his once-grandfatherly demeanour now consumed by vengeful rage. "You've holed everything! But now, you've made," he checked as he made the final gestures, "a mistake!"

He held the palm of his left hand towards Roween.

In a comsphere-3 in Taltu, Porett lost consciousness.

"I am Loneskh," Roween announced. "You, half-brother, have renounced your godly name. You call yourself 'Messenger'. So be it. You are no longer Lonalon. You are mortal, now." She turned her back on him, closed her eyes with joy when she saw Conley, right hand immobile, pointing to the ground.

"Messenger! I must have miscast, a simple error, I, my eyes are — "

"Kill her! Kill ... her!" The Messenger flailed out an arm, held his head, moaned. He stretched wide as Roween nodded to Conley, screeched out "Guards!" as she ran to the left, and froze, gripping his chest, as the door flew open, Roween threw herself into a corner, and Conley spat him the seventeen hundred and eighty-sixth gesture of a remote binder.

The soldiers slid to a halt as their god-emperor staggered towards them, wide eyes bulging, face sheet-white.

Giqus sprang at him, caught him as he swayed. "They don't have your focus! Wrist your way out of it! Do this," gestured, "*keep* doing it — no, *do* it, you mad — it's a motive releaser!" The Messenger was sobbing, just sobbing. Giqus snatched his hand, "like this, again, again..."

Roween had walked quickly to the throne, calmly as she could; she seated herself in it. The guards were transfixed by the Messenger, could only watch. He was crying, silently, as he slid from the arms of his mage, like a melting snowman. He stopped at his knees, turned, held out his hand to Roween, then smiled strangely for a moment, collapsed. For the first and last time, Giqus looked into his master's eyes. He coughed a short laugh, glanced behind to Roween, then back to the body on the floor. He laughed again, longer.

"I am Loneskh. Lonalon, your Messenger, is dead. Leave us. Tell the people of Lon's Grace. When you return, I will be gone." The guards didn't move, she rose. "You have witnessed the death of a god, little men. It is your function to speak of what you have seen to others. Do so, and you will live a hundred years. Fail, and join your misleader in the otherworld. Now go!" They glanced at one another, dropped their spears, fled.

It seemed to echo silence.

Giqus spoke. "Fires of hell, Roween Sage. You *planned* this."

"And more besides, wise one." She smiled.

At once, he turned to Conley, began a sequence, both hands flicking with blurring speed.

Immediately, she copied, cutting a spell of her own. He grimaced, caught she was using his technique, realised she was the faster. Slowly, helplessly, the ex-chancellor looked over to Roween, despair of the inevitable in his eyes. And yet...

Suddenly, he wasn't there. Conley was so surprised she almost didn't clap out, remembered in time. "Ro, he's — a secret door? My vision, I couldn't see his — "

"No, it was magic, there's a tang, I don't recognise it, it's not quite right..."

Conley was looking around, a lever or something. "There was a bang, maybe he threw random, hoped to take me too?"

"Gods, Con, let's begone!"

* * *

The red glow beyond the ridge was Elbienau as it burned, smoke rolling across the gazing moon. Roween and Conley had ridden hard, left that wailing city to purge itself of grief.

Their clothes carried a significance, people had shied away as they'd run down corridors of the Messenger's great temple. The horses were black, too, Conley had found them, ready-saddled; she'd released the others in the stable, thought to delay their intended riders.

Roween had led the way. West, through grimy streets, dark with the rot of poverty, out into the fields, across open country, anywhere but Elbienau, Lon's Grace that was. They stopped at a barn, packed with hay from the recent harvest. Roween didn't even tie her mount, she just scurried up a ladder, buried herself atop the stack inside. Conley followed, threw herself into the hay, rolled over to Roween's side.

"Hot, Ro, you were so convincing, you almost had *me* believing!" She chuckled, excited in her security.

"I almost believed myself! When I saw his eyes, it was so *perfect*, there's probably a prophecy somewhere foretelling all this!" She giggled, Conley joined her.

"When you began to run, I could hear the guards opening the door, but I had to hold back, let you cover distance so you wouldn't knock my spell."

"When I saw you holding that point, I was so relieved, I couldn't look round earlier, I was just *hoping* you knew what I was going to do." She began to laugh.

"I didn't know, I hadn't any idea, I only made the gestures because no-one was watching me!" More laughter, tears. "They told me they were going to kill you, Ro, if I..."

Chapter 46

Roween awoke, jerked; her head was lying on Conley's shoulder. She moved away, quickly — too quickly: Conley stirred, wheezed, "Is it morning?"

"Yes, I think so." She clambered for an internal ladder. "I need to use a pot."

"Your back is covered in bits of hay."

"Gives me something else to itch instead of my legs."

"I had that problem, it's some kind of substitute for silk they used to make the material clingy; turn your tights inside-out, they've been brushed soft that side."

"Really? I'll try that." She was on the external ladder now. "The horses are still around, that's good."

* * *

It was a modest river, but the banks were steep and awkward. There was a bridge, of course, but beside it stood a small, stone building: a checkpoint.

"Do you think they'll be looking for us?" Conley asked, low. They'd dismounted, were in a hollow on the side of a small hillock.

"Everywhere," whispered Roween. "News will have spread as we slept."

"If we could get out of these clothes, they're so noticeable..."

"Close up, people will *always* notice us. You yourself know how easy it is when you're looking for someone with eyes like mine."

Conley half-grinned, foolish. "Well back home you're unique, everyone else gets fixed. Hereabouts, there'll be — " She registered Roween's weary gaze. "Not many anywhere, right?"

"Covering my face would just be suspicious. Oh well, we can't get across here; we'll have to try rig up something further downstream." She made to stand.

"Wait a minute," Conley took her shoulder, nodded to the checkpoint. "I can take that out, easy."

"How many people are inside?"

She shrugged, "I don't know, it's small — no more than a dozen, maximum."

"And how many of *us* are there?"

Conley sighed. "Oh come on, Ro, I can do for them on my own, they'd run from light-primes!" She peered out of the hollow again, sought signs of activity.

"Not when their god has just died they won't. We're Messenger-killers, they'll already have invented a score of stories about our evil magics, our false ways, it's their holy *duty* to try destroy us, whatever the cost, whatever we throw at them. Hot, anyone who takes us will be set for life, a saint!"

"There must be something we can do, they'll have food in there, clothes."

"Dark-primes, that's what you want. I could stand those..."

"*Dark*-primes?" She cocked her head, puzzled.

"Like light-primes but — "

"I know what they are, Ro, I *discovered* them!" Irritated, "I mean, what *use* are they in this context?"

"Light spells convert a little matter to a lot of light. Why light? Because it's the purest form of energy. Dark spells convert a lot of energy into a little matter. What matter? The purest form."

"Which is?"

"I don't know what it's called, but I do know it's a gas and it goes bang when ignited."

Conley turned, grinned. "Now I like that idea! It would attract attention, though, the noise."

"I don't think it'd be too bad if you centred the spell *inside* the building — we'd hear it here, and I'd probably smell it, but it wouldn't travel miles. The main problem as I see it is we'd need an awful lot of light to get a worthwhile amount of gas, probably why no-one's really used it offensively before."

"How many 17 light-primes worth?"

"I'd guess at... Oh." A laugh. "Millions! Silly idea, sorry."

Conley was staring downwards, eyes unfocused, knocking her knuckles together. She nodded, looked up. "Why not just transmute matter directly, a bit of wall or something? Why mess about making it from energy at all?"

"What, with a standard transmutation segment? But if you don't follow it with a target matter sequence it remains in its original form, and no-one's discovered gestures to signify anything explosive yet, not that I know of."

"Theoretically, there's a dual light-prime that you can cast *on* light, and likewise a dual dark-prime you can cast on matter. That would convert matter directly to this gas of yours."

"Yes, but they don't prove. For the dark version, the main seg is way red, the glue to the tail is colourless though the red will swamp that, but the rest is green, there is some red in it, oh but we can forget the glue, we'll be recursing on the first seg, and on the way out it'll only be repetitions of the tail, so no need to stick them to each other. But that still isn't enough, it all falls down, no colour predominates. The same applies for the light version, except there it's the main segment that's green and the tail that's red."

"In Rhiev, you told me how to make any spell provable: pad it with palms until it's biased to blue."

"But..." *Why not?* She smiled. "Well I have to admit it, Con, you're a genius!"

Conley blushed, looked to one side and back, head lowered. "I wouldn't say just because..."

"It'll need a fair number of cycles, I'm just thinking, maybe half an hour's worth?"

She raised her eyebrows. "That many? And then there's all the palms, it'll be an hour before I'm finished. You'll need to keep a verify count on the way up so I know how many to — " She stiffened, looked beyond Roween, put forefinger to lips, listened. Slowly, she crouched, slid back down out of sight.

"Something on the road?"

"A wagon, do you think they'll see the horses?"

"Do the gestures."

"I'm telling you, Con, you're one short."

"We agreed at 1,000, didn't we?"

"Yes, and since then you've done 998, if you include this one."

"I've done 999. Look, there's an even number of gestures in this spell, and I always start with my right hand, so I should be holding this last palm with my left. In that case, why is it with my right?"

"Maybe when you started off from 1,000..?"

"I'll *tell* you why it's my right, it's because you can't count, that's why."

"You could have only done 997."

"Life to this, Ro, I'll *show* you, watch." She released the palm, pointed to the checkpoint.

The force of the blast blew out an entire wall, brought down a good part of the roof.

Roween was lying on her back, blinking. "Hell, Con, that was *loud!*" She shook the dizziness from her head.

Conley was surveying her work through the descending dust with obvious pride. "999, see? They must have had a candle burning in there or something."

Roween shook her head again. "We overdid it, that kind of damage... Let's hope the bridge is still intact." She sat up. "The horses! Have they bolted?"

"I'll have a quick — ", tiptoed, "no, you tied them well enough, they'll soon calm."

"We'll take them with us, we won't have long to look around before locals come to investigate..."

* * *

They guessed at six bodies in the first room, one outside who'd been on guard. There'd be others, they knew, where they hadn't looked yet.

"It's the efficiency of it that scares me most. An hour of gesturing, seven people burned skinless."

Roween was close to tears. "Gods, Con, it's getting worse, what's *happening* to us? I didn't even *think*, I was bound up in the spellwrighting itself, I forgot what it would *mean*. Those were real people, and we killed them — we didn't even bother with *token* agonising over it."

"We couldn't do much else, we couldn't stun them, put them to sleep. We *couldn't*." She looked away, coughed. "The smell..."

"If I feel this bad about seven innocents, what's it going to be like when..." She fell silent.

Conley had spotted something, wasn't listening. "In the passage — lockers I think, and they're metal."

Roween followed her, treading carefully to sidestep still-smoking straw strewn on the ground.

Two of the locker doors were torn off, the rest readily succumbed to blows from a mace Conley took from one of the bodies, hard to tell what gender.

Roween had found a bag, was stuffing it with anything that looked useful. "We don't

have much time, we can look at this lot later. There's clothes enough, non-uniforms."

"I'll find where they did their cooking, there ought to be something there that'll keep." She pulled back a smouldering partition curtain.

"Don't be long, I want to leave soon as possible."

"Me too..." She stepped through.

* * *

An hour later they were in a wood, off the road.

"It's no good, you must be too short to be a soldier."

Roween began to unbutton the shirt. "This would almost do as a dress if it wasn't for the sleeves. Still, least *you* found something." She reached for her blouse, hanging on a broken branch.

"The cloak didn't look too bad, you could wear that."

She sighed. "Black, though. Without something coloured to go underneath, I'd still look like some kind of night demon, it'd..." She stopped, frowned, suddenly pensive. "What else was in the bag?"

Conley shrugged. "Loads of stuff, useless mainly. Let's see, soap, hairbrushes, a razor, scissors, a catheter, I think there's a mirror, some pens... Just personal bric-a-brac, really."

"Shave my head."

Conley looked up. "What?"

"Cut off all my hair, then use the razor. Where are the scissors?" She knelt down beside the bag, began to rummage.

"Are you crazy? Stop that!" She pushed her backwards, took the bag.

Roween rebalanced, put her hands on her hips. "If I can't look like someone they don't expect to see, maybe I ought to try look more like someone they do."

"Someone *bald*?"

"That's just to be different, to stand out. No ordinary woman looks like that, but a goddess, well..."

Conley rested her arm on a low, looping branch. "And you think shaving off your hair will make people think you're Loneskh? Why do you want to *do* this to yourself, Roween?"

She stood up, turned away, turned back. "Well what do *you* suggest? We can't go blowing the damn out of every Follower we pass, we'd *deserve* to be caught, executed. But if we used their beliefs against them, turned their loyalties in our favour, we might get through this alive. Ask yourself if the *real* Loneskh would have any trouble."

"There *is* no 'real' Loneskh!"

"Con, as far as the people here are concerned, she's real as rock. Look, their religion has lost its central pillar, it's collapsing, an entire faith — they need something to provide support, quickly, to show them that they haven't built their lives on falsehoods. They're desperate to believe; all they need is a little evidence, their hope will do the rest."

"It'll never work. Inter-god feuding? Yes, why not, it happens every day... Ah, but 'Why are you riding around on a horse, instead of flying?'"

"Oh we'll think of some story, Con, but you get the idea?"

She ran her fingers through her hair. "Well we can try it if you like I suppose, we can always revert to our original tactics if it doesn't work out." Roween was smiling. "I don't like this razor job, though — there's some make-up in the bag we can use instead, lip and eye colours."

"There is? Good, the more extreme the better! Where did you put the scissors?"

"I said *no* to the scissors, Roween — if this whole plan flops we don't want you even more strikingly conspicuous than you are already."

* * *

"Hot, this is fantastic."

"I know, Con, you keep telling me! How much longer will you be?"

"I just have to touch up this whirl of crimson here... Powders *do* take longer than magic, but mistakes are easier to correct."

"I'm glad you talked me into keeping the hair... This gunge is all going to come off when I'm asleep."

"Don't *worry* so — now I've got the design worked out, it won't take me as long next time. It'll be fine."

Roween grinned, "I know, I'm just getting excited." She held her breath a moment. "Life, I didn't move just then did I?"

"No, no, it's alright, no damage done. Now let me have one last look..." Roween turned her head from left to right; Conley nodded, satisfied. "Finished."

She looked around, eager, nervous. "Where's the mirror?"

"I'll get it." Conley reached inside the bag. "Now I must warn you, Ro, you mightn't recognise yourself, it could be a bit of a shock..." She handed her it, bit her lip.

Roween stared at her reflection, said nothing.

"If you don't like it, we can try something else..."

She was looking at the sides, the eyes.

"I mean, if it's all wrong, just say so."

Roween put down the mirror. "Con, this is perfect!" She picked it up again, looked. "The way you've done this blue, all the way from my eyelids to the hairline, I'd never have thought of it, and all this pink it's, it's extraordinary! And my eyes, how have you made them look so big?"

"Just some white in the right places, black in others. I didn't exaggerate the, er..."

"The squint, no, it shows enough anyway. Oh this is unbelievable, I look so exotic, so un-me! It's like my reflection is someone else mimicking my movements."

"Well you're supposed to have the visage of a goddess, but I think it's reasonably obvious it's just painted on. Still, at least it *looks* significant. Do you think the pastel effect is better than a gloss? The gloss looked too harsh, too bright I thought; this is more friendly, but it'll dry your skin out after a while. I stayed with the reds and blues because there was more of those, enough for over a week unless it rains."

"No, this is exactly right, Con, it's better than I dreamed." She sighed, still smiling. "I look so *different*, so mysterious." She frowned, closed one eye, blew out her cheeks. "It's really me..."

"I hear your voice, but it sounds so bizarre coming from someone else's mouth!" She'd put back the make-up, was reappraising her work.

"I'll have to remember what I look like, now, try act accordingly, fit the image."

Conley nodded. "I'm glad we shaped the eyebrows, too, you look really quite attractive now." A moment, then she blushed, hand to mouth. "Oh I'm sorry, I didn't mean to imply that you weren't — "

"I know, Con, it's alright — no, really it is." She stood. "So, shall we eat before we set off?"

Hurried, "Yes, good idea. After, I can reapply the lips — I think I might just make them a bit darker, there's a creamy navy powder somewhere..."

* * *

"Where are we going, anyway? In the long term, I mean." They'd been back on the road for maybe ten minutes, hadn't seen anyone yet.

"The Lowlands," Roween answered.

"Do you know people there?"

"Some, we're meeting Medreph."

"We'll have some tales to tell *him*! So how far away are we, then? We only have food for a few days, and those bridge guards had no real money. As for where we sleep — well we've no bedding, and we'll need *something* to cheat the wind if we have to camp outdoors. I guess you miss your greatcoat?"

"I have a few rubies; we should look for a town, somewhere big where you can exchange them without anyone's trying to rob you."

"Or worse..." This part of the road wasn't paved, was more of a track, rutted by cartwheels, russet-leaved trees looming over the hedgerows.

"Capture, you mean? No: once we're out of Messenger country we can relax, they won't find us on the other side of the Schaaldt."

Conley shook her head. "That's not what was worrying me." Lots of puddles around, bad drainage. "Any woman, riding into town alone, out here. They're different people, Ro."

She was looking down at her horse's mane. "Oh I see, yes, that... Well our supplies will hold until we reach the Lowlands, and anyone we meet on the way will either ignore, worship or kill us. No sense denying it, though, we'd suffer if we were caught. If we can cross the river, well I guess if we weren't from Cala we might find trouble of a sort there — the people have a very relaxed attitude to life. I expect they'll leave us alone, though — they suspect anyone from the magic states of having the pox."

Conley puzzled-frowned. "They what?"

She shrugged, almost coyly, yet not; she looked so compelling in the make-up. "They don't have contraceptive magic. Neither did we, twenty-five years ago, and when it first came out there was a lot of, well..."

"So the pox spread everywhere, yes. But we had a cure by the end of the decade."

"A magic one, though. Out here it's unknown, they still treat us like we're infected. So they won't cause *us* problems, not that way at least. For other women it might be different, but then the same probably applies for men. Medreph told me all this first time round, he thought I was worried, but no-one else ever said anything, he may have made it up."

They rode a few strides further.

She cleared her throat. "Ro," hesitantly, "I've been meaning to ask you. Does contraceptive magic have a good or a bad smell?"

No reaction. Had she heard?

"It's just that, well, if it's bad, does that mean you have to, you know, abstain?" She felt embarrassed asking, couldn't kill the curiosity.

Three paces later, "I don't know how it smells, Con."

If it were possible to die of feeling worthless, at that moment Conley would have done so.

Chapter 47

"You seem troubled, friend Porett." Thidlic spoke softly, in that most perfect of Estavian accents, Citadellian. They were sitting on the terrace of his villa, high on Trilith's Eastern Mount, overlooking the sea and city.

"Sometimes I tire of business. It takes so much time, I wish it could look after itself, give me chance to do some cutting." Thidlic raised his eyebrows, quizzically. "Design work, I mean."

"It would be a great pity if you passed the reins to someone else, you have a marvellous gift for management. Porett Technologies wouldn't perform one half as well without you in charge."

Porett smiled at the Estavian. His face was craggier than when they'd first met, his eyes not as deep a blue, and his blonde hair had receded alarmingly. "Thidlic, you're one of my closest friends. When others from Estavia shunned my early products, you alone saw their potential, risked importing them. It's now ten or twelve years later, and we're both very rich. We could live like gods for the rest of our lives. Don't you sometimes wonder why you keep on doing it? Have you no desire just to sell up and retire?"

"Ah, Porett, but I have my art collection to extend, and that certainly keeps me interested in acquiring money. Tol Savna originals do not come cheaply!"

Porett stared out over the harbour. Ships were waiting on the tide, trading vessels, loaded with goods from ports near and far, ferries, heaving with people, yachts, pleasure boats, weaving between heavy coastal barges. "I don't know what I want."

"I think you do, but you won't face it."

"Perhaps." He folded his arms, sighed deeply.

"What's brought this depression upon you, friend Porett? You've been granted Lordship of Trilith, you govern," he waved aimlessly over the balcony, "everything you see. You even have a seat in the High Chamber, should Justan ever re-institute our democracy."

"Oh, there are a number of things that have come all at once, none of them very interesting, all of them baying for action. Justan has ordered me to destroy my com-3, and has also gone behind my back to MedSpell regarding an idea I had. I need to ship something to Bridges secretly, but Ansle has the customs officers under his jurisdiction and is watching every move I make, despite our having a co-operation arrangement. Magicorp have realised control of territory in Cala Bay Town that contains three of my best black-facs. Someone is selling confidential East/Trad research papers, my Akrean distributors are being taken over by a finance house, my bankers in Taltu want to renegotiate a loan to one of my subsidiaries, I'm being sued because some toddler swallowed a click-well. It goes on and on..."

"I have staff to handle things like that for me, and so do you. Your legal department is weak, hire more lawyers. Get some better accountants, too — you shouldn't have to worry about Taltuan bankers or finance houses seeking a short-term profit. Magicorp, well you can soon scruff them out of your black-facs: there are plenty of mercenaries around at the moment, eager to be hired. Send a few into East/Trad, as well; give them a gross of those truth shots you showed me, they'll soon find your spy."

"Yes, you're right; I should smarten up my thoughts. I'll write something to stop the com-3 from taking incoming calls, then Justan won't know it's still alive. I've checked, it isn't tagged."

"For the rest, though, it seems to me your secretary is remiss."

Porett sighed. "Caltra's good, but she's new to this, she's no Elidia, not yet — not ever. I spoke to her, you know? Elidia. I put a sound-receipt sequence onto her focal object, comsphered it, talked to her, to *her*, not her madness, told her how I felt, that I wanted her mind to return, *yearned* for it to do so." He shook his head. "Useless."

Thidlic looked out to sea. "She'll be back, in time, believe me. Have patience: let her be, and wait. Hers is not a temporary state, and the sooner you let go and accept it, all the better it will be for you."

He smiled, grimly, nodded. "You're right — again, you're right. I'll have Caltra clear out Liddy's desk in the morning, put all her things into storage. She can burn the damned focus, too; while that's around, I'll always be searching for ways I could use it to help, depressing myself worse each time I fail."

Thidlic laughed, put his hand on Porett's back. "See? Doesn't life become easier when you talk to friends?" They grinned. "Now, this cargo you need shifting to Bridges, how big is it?"

"How big?" He shrugged. "A fair size, like a double wardrobe — I don't recall the exact dimensions. It's zip, a Transfer/Disconnect box: I'm expecting to pay a visit out to the Lowlands soon, but I can't afford the travelling time and no-one must know I've gone."

Thidlic rubbed his cheek. "I may be able to help you. There is a Northic ship, the 'Free Dragon', captained by a man of my acquaintance, one Idric. It sails in two or three days for Vatnalunt, carrying spices. They could easily take your transporter, drop it off on the way. Discreetly."

"Can this Idric be trusted? It is essential that no-one knows I am at all involved."

"He's very good, I've had cause to rely on his discretion before. I recommend him."

* * *

The merging took longer than usual, he fluffed a gesture and had to start again. It happens, if you're in a hurry.

Into his mind jumped thoughts, images, feelings, all seeking a place to rest, trying to mesh with what was already there. Conflicts of knowledge or opinion, changes of focus, subsumption of skill. He'd done it often enough now, was used to it. Still unnerving, though, still a relief to be sane at the end of it, still a blessing for the half that found itself on the outside...

Pain, there was pain, brought into focus by merge-refreshed memories... He battled to ignore it, wore it down, made it tolerable, dulled. It took longer, this time, though, much longer: he *had* to find a way to stop her, before it got too much to bear.

Other recollections surfaced in the melting pot of his mind. He'd received more intelligence from MedSpell: they definitely had the matrix generator now, and were working on a surrogate — something which would ride a pulse from host to host in the same manner as his infection magic, but which would proffer itself to be destroyed in place of the intended target. There would be two viruses, one malevolent, one benevolent. His form — the decayer — would prefer to take MedSpell's form — the surrogate — instead of eating at the doubly-infected victim; the decayer would bind to magic rather than to matter. *Neat*. Justan's idea of insurance. If only he wasn't paying for it with money from Porett Technologies...

Chapter 48

Roween pretended not to notice the small figure at the top of the hill. "Gods, Con, I'm scared," soft.

"You see him too? Is he the same one as earlier?"

"There'll be an ambush soon, I know it. I won't get chance to say anything, they'll just stick us with arrows."

"He's still watching us, he hasn't called for soldiers or they'd have come with him. Someone's rousing a village."

"I hope you're right. Life but I hope you're right... They'll want a miracle, you know."

"Light-primes will have to do, there's no time to write anything enigmatic."

"Do you remember any short spells whole? Ready to use?" The figure had moved to behind a rock.

"Well there's the one I use to fix my eyesight, I don't know, some I suppose. If I tried anything too spectacular it would jitter you off, though, not unless it was far enough away like the checkpoint was — but then it would be obvious that it was me who was making the magic." She coughed.

"Can you throw together an illusion? No, cancel that, how about just a makeover? Remember those booklets that used to come with teeniemags?"

Conley smiled, thought back, sighed. "The experiments, hours in front of the mirror... I know some of those well enough."

"Here's the plan: put something together to make yourself look old — *really* old, like crone old, hands as well as face. You can do that?"

"I can do a full illusion for hands, my father made sure I learned it rote. You know I won't be able to drop the makies on command, though? I'd have to undo them one at a time or apply new ones over the top — or just wait until they cut out."

"No, what you *then* do is hold a small light-prime, say a 17 or a 19. When it seems appropriate, release it with me as the target. It'll poke my reaction, that'll clear the makeovers, and to the observer you'll be fifty years younger."

"A light-prime wouldn't — oh yes, a *direct* assault on what you're made of, I guess it would. I'll make it a bigger one, though, 101 or something, just to make sure."

"Better start now: look ahead."

Coming towards them along the road were maybe 200 people, old, young, armed with pitchforks, scythes, whatever had come to hand.

"Hot!" Conley began gesturing, two-handed, panic speed. "Not so fast, Ro, they'll see what I'm doing!"

Roween brought her horse to a halt. "Let them come to us. It'll show we don't fear them, have no cause to flee."

They hadn't paused, were still approaching, angry.

"Stall them or something, I don't have time."

"You'll make it, they're slowing."

"I've done my face, I'll go for the hands now."

They were loud now, jeering, ugly.

"I'm blocking their view, you're clear..."

Conley sliced the final segment, frantic. "This good enough?" Her horse had waited behind Roween's.

Roween didn't look. "It'll have to do. Ready the light-prime, they're closing."

As at an unseen mark, the rabble stopped, grew quiet. A man, mid-thirties, stepped forward; he glanced back for confidence, then faced Roween, pointed his dagger at her.

"You," he shouted. "You killed the Messenger."

Roween cantered her horse towards him, pulled up five paces away, said nothing.

"By Lon!" he whispered, "you're *beautiful*!"

Roween flinched, had to brush it. "So I killed the Messenger, what of it? He isn't dead."

A murmur fluttered through the crowd.

He gained courage again. "You speak contradictions! If you killed a god, you should die for your crime!"

"Aye!" shouted a voice, "Aye! Aye!" others.

There was a flash, sudden; Conley had thrown loose a general light-prime, confused them, given Roween a momentary breach in their wall of hatred.

She took it. "The Messenger is dead, it is true. But Lonalon, whom you knew as the Messenger, is not dead. He was reborn, as all are reborn in death. Your love for him was such that, even now, he is a babe in a mother's arms; weak, suckling, but fired with the spirit that drove him to spread the Message — a spirit that *will* drive him to do so again! Thirty years from yesterday: my half-brother will be known to you again, will recognise his past mistakes, will, through me, have learned, will rise, and the Message will flow until it fills the world from Galur in the east to the Golden Cliffs of Mansharr in the west!"

He gaped. "You're — you're *Loneskh*?"

People in the crowd were shying back, waried, fearful.

"Strike me with your weapon, if you disbelieve. No harm will come to me: *you* are no god."

He glanced to his friends, took a step forward, looked back again, uncertain.

"Who's *she* then?" A child's voice, questioning.

"Yes," said the man, relieved, bravado, waving his dagger towards Conley. "Who's the old woman?"

Roween laughed, loud; perhaps too loud, as she felt the sublime rush of dying magic charge the core of her body.

There were gasps from the throng before her.

She held her composure, straightened her back. "Through Eskhlon, my sister, the past is remembered. Only the bodies we inhabit are old or young: souls are eternal."

He broke, "My Lady Loneskh!" A cry, he fell to the ground, face down, arms forward in holy salute. "Loneskh, Loneskh!" he wailed, voice rent with emotion. Others followed, chanting, "Loneskh, Loneskh," louder, in unison, over and over, more people joining in, falling forwards, weeping, praising, praising Loneskh, Loneskh, the goddess Loneskh.

Roween tried to speak but wasn't heard, her voice a nothing in the rhythmic, pendulum-like incantation, the words compounding, growing, ever louder, ever more intense, "Loneskh! Loneskh! Loneskh! Loneskh!"

It was the most chilling scene she had ever witnessed.

Conley slipped a light-prime, then another, then a third before the adulation bubbled to silence. The congregation waited, heads down, obedient, respectful, expectant.

Roween paused, allowed the stillness to build. Then she spoke, clear, strong, authority embodied. "I have work to do, Followers. My time here is short, my tasks many. Whosoever among you is named Khall, arise!"

The man directly before her, the leader, stood, head bowed.

"No," she said, "the younger Khall, he who watches from the hill." Without turning, she pointed to where she'd last seen the spy.

The elder Khall looked up, torment in his face. "Please, my Lady, he's my son, he's only a lad, he's done nothing. Take — take *my* life, only spare his, please, I beg you, have pity."

Roween answered, softly, kindly. "I mean to take no life. Your son is special: the wisdom of my mother Keskh is deep in him. He sees things, knows things. Henceforth, he is my priest: do as he commands; spread my prophecy as he directs; allow his words of hope to overcome the fear you feel, you chosen ones, until once more my sibling Lonalon is known to all."

Khall was trembling, crying, joyous, his all-consuming faith absolute.

Roween wheeled her horse to the right, rode round the worshippers; Conley went left, joined her beyond them on the road.

They were out of sight before anyone dared turn around.

* * *

"For love, Ro, you let that go a bit far didn't you?"

"I was playing a rôle." She sounded shaken, looked it despite the mask. "The *power* of that religion, it's *hold*..."

"‘The Golden Cliffs of Mansharr’, fine; ‘strike me with your weapon’, I suppose so; even the Voth accent, yes, I could — "

"I didn't put on a Voth accent, did I?" Surprised, "I can't do a Voth accent!"

"It was Western Voth at that! Believe me, you sounded like you'd lived your whole life in Elbienau."

"Well, I must have got into it more than I realised." She spurred her horse on a little faster. Conley drew up alongside.

"Things were going just perfect until you started with this ‘whosoever among you is named Khall’ business..."

"Well it's a common name among the Voths, there was bound to be *one* there."

"*One*? And it's the *leader*? Come on, you're not telling me that's coincidence."

"Well what other explanation is there? You're not suggesting I really *am* Loneskh?" She giggled, forced.

"And then you pick out his son from his hidey-hole, and he's called Khall too!"

"Well..." She humphed. "It's the usual practice in these parts to name a son after his father, and it was obviously Khall's son because he was the one who fetched the villagers and Khall was in charge."

"Khall could have been some local lay priest, or a veteran from the army. And he could have had several sons, they wouldn't all have borne his name. And anyway, we didn't even know for sure it was a boy who'd been watching us, it might have been a girl!"

"Well my eyesight is better than yours, one eye, anyway... I was right, wasn't I? The plan worked, didn't it? Why are you fussing on about it?"

"I want to know *why* it worked."

"It... Oh I just chanced some deductions for effect, and they paid off. If it worries you, I won't do it again."

"It worries me..."

* * *

"Do you remember that sequence, Ro, the one that drives off the marsh sickness?"

"Most of it, I think, I don't know. Probably not every last gesture, no."

"In that case, I'm in trouble." She coughed, heavily.

Chapter 49

Ansle regretted not having marked the misting glass. He knew neither which side was the front, nor which edge the top. It took six attempts before he finally arrived at the correct alignment, Sennary sliding into view with a look of undisguised boredom.

"That's the one, now stick something on it so you know for next time."

"I will, Sennary; I'm not *completely* without brains... You'll be aware by now that the Messenger is dead, precisely in the manner I predicted?" He ran his fingers through his hair.

"Of course I am. And Gigus was his subordinate, died too — had you heard that?"

Ansle's face couldn't but display his thorough glee.

"Really popped himself well, leastwise there were no remains. You're, er, smiling, Ansle..."

He scowled, quickly. "Naturally I knew of this. A smug, pompous ass — I never liked him," dismissive. "So, have you anything regarding Conley?"

Sennary poked his tongue into his cheek, pondered. "Well, it's like this. People are very reluctant to talk about what happened, and even when they do they couch everything in religious terms. I don't get up-to-the-minute reports here, but it seems that Conley and Roween definitely escaped the High Temple alive. Their present whereabouts are, however, unknown."

"They've had time enough: they'll be in the Lowlands now — be certain of it."

"They may have made for the Lowlands, but that doesn't mean they got there. You should hope they travelled by sea." He adjusted the glass, it had tilted forward. "There are rumours of a Message resurgence in the marches — the Voths are adopting some other god from their pantheon in a backlash against the Messenger: 'Vitalists', they call themselves. It would be nigh impossible for Conley and Roween to pass through without meeting trouble."

"Trouble of what kind?"

Sennary grunted. "Say, being burned alive..."

"I see." He interlocked his fingers. "So you need to be further west, then."

"Now hold on a moment, Ansle, I have Purasans to oversee, I can't just up and leave for the Lowlands."

The chancellor looked faintly irritated. "I'll redirect supplies from the Purians to the Purasans. They *depend* on imported grain these days, and there's none coming from the Vothic heartlands any more. The price of bread will rise, and so will the Purians. Justan will send you there to help Zovia restore order."

"No he won't: he'll have me send troops, but I won't be asked to go personally."

"That rather depends on how bad the riots are, doesn't it?" He stroked his beard, smirked.

Sennary flicked his eyes skyward. "Don't you *ever* think? The consequences! Why not wait awhile? There's sure to be an assault on the Lowlands soon anyway, now the Messenger is out of the way. Things are moving very quickly: Justan will probably have taken Elet too before Winter fully sets in. The MSR are already working on the climate, he should be able to continue campaigning right up until the New Year if he needs to."

"New Year? Good, that gives me several months... Your argument is persuasive, Sennary, but I think I'll still cause the revolt; it can serve another purpose I have in mind."

"Supplying more dead bodies, you mean?" Ansle frowned, sharply. "Yes, I do know about that, and, what's more, it was The King who told me. I think perhaps he ought to be

informed precisely what you intend to do with them, don't you? Soon."

"They're only being *stored* for the moment, there's an old quarry in Altinn that I've rented. A few more weeks, and I should have the necessary magic to..." He stopped, abruptly. Sennary was no longer the trustworthy mercenary he once was; his position and authority were now almost comparable to Ansle's own.

"To what, Chancellor?"

"To use them, Sennary."

Chapter 50

Roween called them 'ceremonies'. An hour or so after sunset, she and Conley would stop at a place in the open, build a small cairn from stones, clods of earth, then Conley would lie down while Roween chanted verses over her in a sacred-sounding language of her own devising. To the onlookers watching secretly from afar, she hoped it would appear that she was performing some hallowed rite for purposes of mysterious import transcending the ken of simple, endarkened mortals.

Of course, she knew she could be slain at any moment for cutting such trash.

Time to bring today's ceremony to an end. Signalling Conley to make ready, she began her finale, her address to the heavens. She had to make this a good one — yesterday's had been a bit flat, what with Con's breathing and all. *Praise and thankfulness for life, that'll rouse them.* She fell to her knees, raised her arms, wailed.

What do these people see? She broke her sonority, injected passion into her voice, filled the night air with invented syllables. *Am I really a goddess to them?* She added joyfulness, love, steeped her words in long, emotional vowels. *Surely this doesn't fool anybody!* Now she peppered in the names, the gods — Eshk, Lonalon, Mun, Trell, Noco — tokens among tokens, sense among nonsense. *Is there anyone even listening?* Louder, louder. *Is this comedy without an audience?* "Lon!" she was shouting, "Lon! Lon! Fafta d'uonestras!"

Conley discharged the light prime, the cue. Roween feigned a faint of ecstasy, crumbled to the ground. She realised she was out of breath, panting heavily.

"You take longer every time," whispered.

"Sorry," she bolted some air, "I have to perform," more, "give them something to think about."

"Well maybe we can sleep now." She shivered. "Life but it's cold!"

"Put on an extra shirt later. You've — ?"

"Yes, I cast it while you were gibbering away just now. Don't worry, no-one will have seen me, I was careful. Not that it'll help me much, until we get the seg-order straight."

"But it *is* straight, Con!" puffed. "I reconstructed it whole, it's complete! I told you!"

"I know what you *told* me, but I'm not feeling any better..."

Roween sighed, almost voiced, pained. "Bridges: I know a doctor there..."

* * *

Conley's coughing woke Roween only once in the night, and she used the opportunity to visit the bushes: it wouldn't do for a goddess openly to appear subject to quite so base a natural need. Although sun-up wasn't for a couple of hours yet, already the air was dewy, dampening the grass, compounding Conley's chills.

Roween licked her lower lip: still cracked. They'd switched to using normal lip grease, but it hadn't helped; in fact, it might even be making matters worse. As for the rest of her face, it was deteriorating fast, she knew. She could feel the spots that were forming in pores that had been bunged for days; it wouldn't have been so bad if she'd been able to take off the make-up, put it on afresh, but circumstances only allowed the adding of extra layers. Conley was supposed to do that first thing, if she was up to it; part of a 'godly soul enters frail human body' cliché prior to departure.

Although she was seeking signs of life — smoke from hidden campfires, the whinnies of

horses — it was a while before Roween realised she could hear running water. Not a splashing stream, it was more orderly, as if it was tumbling, cascading — regularly, and some distance, like falls or large-scale rapids. *No, it's accompanied by a grating noise, a grinding...*

A watermill. A *big*, all-night watermill. A big river. The Schaaldt.

* * *

"What about the Schaaldt, then, Ro? Is it wide? How are we going to cross?"

Roween smiled. "It's wide, yes — too wide even to bridge. There *are* ferries — there'll be a small one at the end of this road — but we can't use them, they'll all be guarded real heavy. Probably shut down by the army, leastwise we haven't passed anyone come eastbound from the Lowlands."

Conley looked ahead, couldn't see far for hedges, trees. "City-bred soldiers... I suppose they're going to be a good deal more cynical than these peasant types."

"Maybe, maybe not, but no ferryman would take *you* on board anyway, case anyone catches what you've got..." She pulled up her horse. "Stop here."

Conley obeyed. "Another ceremony?" She coughed.

"No — well, maybe I'll kiss the dirt or something, yes. Thing is, though, we must be getting close now, so we ought to leave the road, nip across country. Probably best if we go for downstream, away from the mill. It'll be further to the next crossing that way, more time to find transport."

"Downstream, yes." She jutted her jaw a few times. "Life, my head's stuffing up, I can hardly hear..."

* * *

They'd cut across several fields before reaching the towpath alongside the Schaaldt.

Conley nodded, impressed. "It's ochre! Well I never knew that!"

Roween was scanning it for boats. "Its name derives from the High Vothic word for silt. So the histories say, anyway."

"Silt?" She cleared her throat.

Roween looked back to her. "You do know about the disaster, don't you? It's edge of living memory, but..."

Conley's face was blank.

"Well let's ride on, I'll tell you as we go." She spurred. "Upstream, the Schaaldt winds through wilderness, picks up silt. When it meets the Cold Sea it dumps it all as sediment, a process which, over many centuries, builds up a delta. The Schaaldt's used be particularly good: its mouth became spread flat, and the new land was so fertile that the people who moved in and farmed it really prospered."

"But there's no delta now... The disaster?"

"Ah," she was back to inspecting the distant surface. "One night, the Cold Sea reclaimed what had been stolen from it. A devastating tempest buffeted the coast, tearing away dunes and beaches, swallowing mud flats, bashing groynes and sea-walls into flotsam. For three days, the Lowlanders fought to save their livelihoods, patching holes, replenishing sandbanks,

but their actions were futile, the storm relentless."

"Yet if it had happened just fifty years later we could have climate controlled it away... That's tragic."

"No, I doubt it would have made any long-term difference, the Cold Sea would *have* to have got its way in the end. As it was, on the fourth day the rain-bogged river banks finally gave way, turned against their human defenders, allied with the ocean. The makeshift dams were washed aside from *behind*, something the Lowlanders hadn't anticipated, and the Cold Sea swept through in all its fury, thundering its way into the irrigation system, gouging out a huge scoop of land. When it was all over, tens of thousands of people were dead, towns and villages had been blended into the sea bed, and the Schaaldt had to start its work all over again. I can't believe you haven't heard this before, it's had a real effect on the Lowlanders' national character."

Conley patted her horse's neck. "Old calamities that befell distant nations aren't something they teach in magic school..."

* * *

Roween was scrubbing furiously at her face. "Has it come off yet?"

"It's ingrained, you'll need oil or something."

She glanced across the river. "Have they seen you? Wave again!"

"I'm waving, Ro, maybe, no, wait! Someone's waving back! He's, hold on." She flicked a light-prime, centred it on Roween. "I'm better long-distance without my eyes on."

In the comsphere-3, Porett's mind struggled yet again against the weight of sudden, overwhelming torment.

"What about Followers? Is anyone coming? Damn this blue stuff!"

She spared a quick look. "Hard to tell, but I doubt they'd mean us harm, they've watched us for days and done nothing."

"This'll just have to do, it's not too bad is it?"

Conley was watching the Lowlanders, ignored the question. "Someone's pushing out a fishing boat!"

"They are?" She stood in her saddle. "Oh that's wonderful!"

Conley glanced back to her, smiled, then frowned, screwed her eyes against the sun. "Are those ... people?" She pointed.

Pouring across the fields were hundreds of Voths.

Roween ducked. "Damn!"

"What do they want?"

She slid from her horse. "What do *you* think? I'm not waiting to find out!"

"You turning this into a ceremony?" Relaxed.

"A 'waving at Lowlanders' ceremony? Be real!" She was tearing her saddlebags from their straps. "Can you swim?"

Conley dismounted, apprehensive. "Not all that way..." She coughed.

"Could you make it as far as the boat?" She whipped off her cloak, laid it flat.

"I ... Are you sure they're a danger?" She began to unbuckle her bags. "They might only

want to wish us farewell — or maybe even help!"

Roween was gathering up everything loose, was tossing it onto her wrap. "Just get your stuff, we'll use this as a float."

"But if they're local villagers, don't know who we are..." She looked back, couldn't hear them yet, her head, *so stuffy*...

"Come *on*, Con! They'll be here! How close is the boat?" She glanced up, snarled. "We're going to have to swim... Give me those!" She snatched Conley's bags, threw them onto the cloak, began to tie it.

"The water will be cold, they — " She stopped, could hear them now, wild, outraged, stomach-shrinking *murderous*. She wanned. "Ro! What have we *done*?"

Roween pushed out the bundle, grabbed Conley's wrist. "We killed the Messenger, remember?" She waded in, dragged Conley, lunged for the raft. "Hold on, and kick for it!"

Conley sent herself forward, took hold, fought the rush as her body adapted to the bite of the waters. Roween was saying something, "current", "middle", but it was lost in the seething that flushed her ears.

All was hubbub, chaos. She kicked, madly, knew it was too far, knew they'd get her, knew it was pointless. Water engulfed her, she felt the weight of her clothes, the extra shirt, dragging at her, sapping what was left of her strength. Yet still she held on, buoyed by fear, desperation, the craving to survive.

Stones were splashing nearby, maybe arrows? She was paddling all she could, no idea where she was going, how far she'd come, was swallowing mouthfuls of grit-laden river, battling for air. Roween lost her grip, twisted round, she corrected, tried to hold them steady.

They must be on the shoreline now, be diving in. Her mind was filled with visions of a river blotted with people, a turbulent, amorphous, sand-like mass, soaking up the water by weight of number, sucking her towards them.

" — bees from an upended hive."

Roween was shouting, something, maybe, was just part of the maelstrom, the churn of colours, crashing, spraying, the bubbles of sound.

Someone tore at her arm! She flailed, frenzied, but he was stronger, was heaving her out of the flow. Were there two of them? Someone was thrashing out with an oar, beating someone off, she could hear cracking, submerging yells.

Her senses fused into one, then shrank to nothing.

Chapter 51

Roween recognised the bay; it was where the Schaaldt met the Cold Sea. The fishing skiff would veer left here, hug the coast the short distance to Bridges.

Everything seemed so quiet, now, so peaceful, almost serene. Conley was still asleep, but she was no longer feverish despite the dampness of her clothes. Roween herself felt almost dry, knew it was illusory, that she was numbed bone-deep.

One of the fishermen smiled at her; she smiled back. When they'd first plucked her from the water, she'd genuinely expected them to throw her to the Voths. She'd even been looking for a weapon; then she'd heard someone say that Conley looked in a real bad way and ought to see a doctor. That single remark had torn her out of survival mode, so violently it was almost physical: these people were *concerned!* After weeks of living in the penumbra, constantly alert to death's omnipresent proximity, she was suddenly released from fear's chains. *Safety!* The sense of relief had been too much for her: she'd wept, uncontrolled, freely.

What the pursuing Voths had done she didn't know. She had a vague image in her mind of a young man in an embroidered gown commanding them to leave her be, but she couldn't be sure if it was memory or fancy. Perhaps —

A half-moan from the woman in her arms snapped her into the present. Conley was real, and Conley was on her way out, steadily deteriorating through Roween's stupidity. *You don't drag people with fevers into freezing cold rivers, not if you want them to live.* Conley whimpered again. *Life, I'm so brainless!*

Her only hope was that Ihann would know a cure.

* * *

Bridges, capital of the Lowlandic principality of Seesel: even as the boat was being secured at the foreigners' quay, Roween leapt off and ran. The customs guards let her through, were more interested in what she'd left behind on the fishing vessel, contraband, magic. She hit the back streets and sprinted for the Womansway.

Ten minutes, she reckoned. Then five minutes explaining to Ihann, fifteen minutes to get back in a carriage — surely the fishermen could stall for half an hour? Conley would *have* to be checked over medically, if only so the officers could prove she was ill enough to lose rights of entry. *Gods, I hope I have time!*

She swerved to avoid a barrow, kept her balance. It was around here somewhere, she knew it! *A right, then it's on the left,* she skidded to make the turn. *What if he isn't home?*

The plaque read: "Ihann Gefson, Physician." She didn't knock, just flung back the door, staggered in. He was talking to a patient leaving his consulting room, saw Roween, froze.

"You've got to come," she panted, hardly able to speak. "I've got a friend, she's dying."

* * *

When they arrived at the quayside, the boat was still there with Conley still in it, guards standing around discussing what to do. They looked more than relieved when Ihann showed his licence, were happy to heed the authority in his voice and let him take her to hospital.

Roween gave the fisher-folk all her remaining rubies.

* * *

"So you were expecting me?" Roween bit into the biscuit, was hungrier than she'd realised.

"Sometime this month, yes," he replied, "although with all ferry services currently suspended I was wondering quite how you'd make it."

She smiled, half-heartedly, looked away.

He leant forward, touched her arm with an elegant, gentle hand; she met his eyes. "Conley will be fine, Roween, I promise. Those hospital doctors are the best."

A nod, shaky. "I know, it's just, well she means so *much* to me."

"She means so much to all of us." He sat back, sipped at his coffee.

"No, I don't mean as part of the plan, it's, well I've grown to like her as a *person*. She's a friend, a companion. I feel responsible..."

His expression didn't change. "Will that alter things?"

She sighed. "No, no, I guess it won't. It'll just make the job even harder — as if it wasn't impossible enough already."

"It *has* to be difficult, or it wouldn't work. You told me yourself, two years ago, remember?"

"'Demanding and distant', yes, I remember. But it took nearly three weeks to convince you!"

He chinked his cup on the saucer. "You *know* that you had me won after fifteen minutes, I'm sure you do. The rest of the time, you were straightening it in your own mind, telling *yourself* that this was the way to do it, that it would work."

"Perhaps I still am?" She shook her head. "I often think of my stay here, that never-ending Summer, the freedom before the responsibility, youth's last days."

He finished his coffee, nodded. "Those were good times, Roween. Safe for both of us."

"All times are good when they're passed."

* * *

So the spell she'd cooked had taken away Conley's symptoms, but not tackled their root cause. The Purian infusion the moon priest had supplied probably really was capable of keeping the illness under control but only if taken daily, otherwise there would eventually be a relapse. These Lowlandic drugs the doctors were using now would cure her once and for all, however the side-effects were horribly unpleasant, hence the decision to use narcotics.

Ihann was explaining. "She's probably over the worst of it, but she may be delirious. She could seem to say things — cruel things she doesn't mean. Just ignore them, don't hold them against her. She's had a terrible time with this illness, and it's her body's way of releasing some of the anxiety."

Roween smiled at his concern. "I've seen her that way before, Ihann; don't worry, I won't be embarrassed."

Conley was murmuring when the nurse opened the door to her room. White walls, white sheets, white vase holding the flowers Roween had sent. She looked much better than she had when Ihann had pulled her from the boat, carried her to his carriage — the last time Roween had seen her.

Ihann approached the bed. "If she was awake, she'd have scrambled vision, a piercing ringing in her ears, cramp-like muscle pains, and the sharpest headache you could ever imagine. As it is, she can't feel any discomfort, but the abnormal sensory stimuli she's experiencing may induce mild hallucinations."

Roween peered at her, timid, from the doorway. "What's she saying, Ihann?"

He held his hands open, hunched his shoulders. "Who knows?"

"Can I stay with her awhile?"

"If you wish. Come to the main ward when you're finished, I'll be with Dr Huulder."

* * *

After ten minutes, Roween was bored. It was good to see Conley on the mend, but she couldn't talk to her, tell her how sorry she was, that it was she who had caused her this suffering. Conley wasn't silent, but to Roween her words were meaningless.

"It's me, Con, Ro. Can you hear me?" Of course she couldn't. Even if she were awake, she'd be all but deaf from bells in her ears.

She waited another twenty minutes, then went to find Ihann.

* * *

On the fifth day, she arrived by herself. The nurses knew her now, were amused by her eyes in a friendly sort of way, found them endearing. She didn't know how much this was costing Ihann, but suspected he was paying in kind, doing specialist work for free in return for the hospital's treating Conley. He didn't seem to think there was anything odd about that, working all the day's hours so as to help someone he'd never met, but Roween felt deeply indebted to him. Lowlanders were almost all personable people, accommodating, easy to please, generous. Tolerant, too. *Comes of living on land still owed the Cold Sea...*

When she closed the door after entering, Conley seemed to respond.

"Con?"

"No, please, don't hit me..." Blurry, child-like.

Roween took her hand. "It's me, Con, Roween. I'm not going to hurt you. Is it the dream?"

"Dream, bad, listen, listen..."

"I'm listening, Con." Or was she addressing herself? "Are you listening?"

"No, I'm not listening." Her eyes were darting beneath her lids, but otherwise she wasn't moving, maybe breathing quicker, that's all.

"Why aren't you listening, Con?"

"I don't know, hear, I can't hear, hear. Don't hit me..." She pulled a face so imploring that Roween could almost feel her torment, real in her mind.

"I won't hit you, Con, it's Roween, I'm your friend."

"Roween, Ro-ween. I've found her, in her big coat."

At least this time she was using real words. "Roween is very sorry she made you ill."

"Why don't you love me?"

What? Roween dropped Conley's hand like it was dead, instinctive. *No, wait, she doesn't mean you, she's jumped again.* "Why doesn't who love you, Con?"

"Mummy doesn't love me, either."

Her father? But she thinks he does love her, doesn't she?

"I'm a good girl..."

Were Conley's thoughts ones her waking self dismissed? Or suppressed? *They're ones she refuses to accept.* Perhaps this was the prelude to her nightmare? Or was it simple nonsense, like Ihann had warned her to expect?

"You don't have to hit me."

"Why not, Con?"

"I just want to live..." Very slurred.

"You will live, you'll be alright." *Will live? Maybe she means...*

"No, let me be me..." Strangled, hardly audible. Her eyes stopped their movements.

From then onwards, just incomprehensible. But it had been enough.

* * *

Roween told Ihann that Conley seemed to be able to hear her, and that she was talking. He nodded, didn't ask what she'd said. He suggested it was good that Conley had spoken, that it meant her illness was burning out. Roween had her reservations, but trusted his judgement.

She did, however, persuade him to look after Conley himself during her recuperation, rather than leave her in the hospital. The treatment they were likely to prescribe so as to make recovery easier for her, although well-meaning in its motivation, Roween vehemently considered completely undesirable. Not unless Conley was fully conscious, and consented.

Chapter 52

Porett still enjoyed anonymity. Despite his enormous wealth, few ordinary people knew his face, and he could therefore pass among them reasonably unnoticed. Of course, without using face-changing magic it was clear to everyone here that he wasn't Estavian, but, when he wore his hair loose, he could readily be taken for one of the commonplace overseas visitors whose businesses took them to Trilith.

Out in the harbour was a small island, once a prison but now a garden of exotic plants. It was the wrong time of year for most of them to be in flower, but the trees were beginning to dapple the lawns with the first falls of their russet, red, golden leaves.

Porett had taken the public ferry, was now sitting on a bench beneath a tall cedar, watching the birds flocking above the haze of late afternoon. A young couple were walking along a path in front of him, laughing, holding hands, unobservant of their surroundings, wrapped in themselves. The man wore an unusual hat, tall, stiff, some new fashion. Porett felt vaguely jealous of him, didn't immediately know why. His girlfriend? No, not that, she was fair enough but... His youth? Perhaps. His carefree — no, more his *hopes*. Yes, enviable hopes: he had a life ahead of him, stretching out, time in which to fulfil his ambitions, everything to look forward to — a future full of exhilarating potential, expectancy, dreams.

What did Porett have? Wealth, yes, but with attendant responsibilities. Ideas, but no opportunity to work on them himself. No goals to aim for, aspirations, things of importance to achieve. He'd done all he'd ever wanted to do; well, all that was realistically attainable. He regretted never having married, had children, but there are some things that you just have to accept as being beyond your reach. The love of women: who was there he would *wish* to marry?

He knew the answer, but since she hadn't ever shown the slightest interest in him romantically there was no sense in his making a fool of himself bungling an attempt to date her. Definitely too late now. She'd find out eventually, if she outlived him, if she understood.

He blamed his com-3 existence for these morose reflections. It was so *boring* in there, he'd almost obeyed Justan and destroyed it. Having another self, though, it enabled him to live twice the life, do double the thinking. He cherished that. Perhaps it was proxy for the son he would never have? The son that Roween Sage grew closer to murdering every time she blew...

He considered admitting there were two of him, publicly; let the comsphere handle business, while he himself dealt with the pleasure. He sighed. It wouldn't work, he'd still have to merge periodically, to ensure that his two separate beings didn't drift too far apart. There'd be no escape that way from the tedious realities of commerce.

What pleasures *could* he pursue, anyway? Travel, yes, he wanted to see the world, experience its different cultures. So vast, so varied. So dangerous? Not to someone with his money! Taltu had been very fine, a beautiful city, treasure in the coffers of his memory. He felt he could live there, maybe, buy a house in the centre, while away his days in a café or a park, watching passers-by in the shadows of ancient bell towers, flourish-carved fountains.

It was partly his desire for the new that had led him to despatch the Trans/Disc to Bridges. He was fascinated by this strange companion of Conley's, Roween. Could she really *negate* magic? Strip it from anything close by her? How did she do it? Did she hide any other surprises? She'd *killed* the Messenger! He felt the weight of memory: how ghastly, hopelessly painful that had been...

He was confident that this Idric would deliver the box safely. He'd had it packed with parcelled sachets of spices, herb leaves tied in sackcloth; when he'd finished, the Trans/Disc receiver looked like it was their proper container. If Ansle did find out, did have some way of tracking what was loaded onto Northic freighters, then the excuse would be that Porett merely wanted to visit the Lowlands for business reasons. Or maybe even as a tourist? He'd heard a lot about the region: the architecture bore similarities to middle-period Estavian, but due to

pressures on space it was much more compact; it also used a lot of wood, from forests to the south. The people were very friendly, mainly because they lived in drug-granted moods of perpetual pleasantness. The Lowlands were everywhere famous for their painters, though. Reelf, Fandtelsch, Rudnelaan. Or was she a Heran? No, from Seesel.

He hadn't really ever made a conscious decision to go to Bridges personally, it just seemed sort of assumed. Probably it was the work on Mitya's plague that did it, he'd completed all the creative design and was leaving the uninteresting hard graft to employees. He needed something new to fire his imagination, and antimagic might just be it. Well, it was an excuse to get away for a few days, maybe weeks, an escape from running the company. Exciting — more so than he'd expected: he was actually looking forward to making the trip.

Conley was heading for Liagh Na Laerich, he knew. The library there was all the place was famous for. This Roween must have *some* reason for wanting to visit it, but what? Ansle hadn't told him everything, and Sennary was getting hard to contact, what with his promotion and the com-3's supposed destruction — every conversation these days had to go through the military exchange, from Porett's old com-2. There really ought to be a way to transfer call bindings from one comsphere to another, some *must* have been already written for the prototype com-4.

Last thing he'd heard, Sennary's men had found the tagged click-well in the monastery, smashed, not emptied of magic; not unless breakage was a side-effect. That was two days ago. Sennary was on his way to quell some riots along the Purian coast now, Zovia being occupied with simultaneous ones in some Nairadi country to the south. Odd, both food-related, Ansle wasn't doing his job. Or was doing it all too well? *Hmm, possibilities...*

His thoughts drifted back to the com-2. He'd kept it as a back-up, in case he needed to make a call while his com-3 self was busy. Only to the office, usually — most people who he had cause to contact had upgraded to com-2's themselves, touched them to his flagship com-3.

Suddenly, two disparate threads knotted in his mind. First, the Eletic library contained books on magic, probably the world's largest collection outside the Academy. Roween had said she'd blasted magic in the latter — maybe she'd found something there? He ought to try discover what it might be, but how could he send anyone to look around, under Ansle's nostrils? It would arouse suspicion, unless the spy had some plausible reason for scouring old volumes. Thread number two: one of his contacts who had a com-1, and who would never have quite got round to replacing it, was his old friend Roenna. And she loved books.

He realised that, for some time now, he had implicitly accepted the fact that his alliance with Ansle was effectively over.

Chapter 53

"So how are you feeling, Con?" Roween was sitting side-saddle on the bed.

"Better than for a long time, there's still some soreness but Ihann said that's to be expected." She smiled. "He's nice, kindly — very proper, though, I think he's mildly embarrassed when he's treating me."

"Yes, he probably is, he doesn't want to give you any wrong ideas. He's had problems with women patients in the past."

"Really?" Conley gave a small cough. "I'm not surprised, he *is* rather a looker. His hair is so *gorgeously* fair, and his eyes, his smoooooth complexion..."

Roween blushed. "He, er..." flustered, "I don't know how best to say this, Con, but he, well," *just say it*. "He doesn't like women."

Conley frowned a moment. "But he was pleasant enough to me."

"No, no," she was feeling awkward about this, shouldn't, "I mean he prefers other men."

Short silence. "Ah. I see. Does he have a," slight pause, "partner?"

"Not at the moment, no, doctoring takes up too much of his time." Conley looked a little disoriented. "You don't mind, do you Con? Some people do."

"No, just a surprise, I've never met... oh no matter, at least now I know I'm safe. It's illegal back home, isn't it?"

"No, it's not illegal in itself. There's a spell, maybe twenty years old, they found it when they were first working on aphrodisiacs. It can, well, change your instincts in certain respects. People who are like Ihann, they have to take the 'cure'. Refusing, *that's* illegal."

"I've never heard of such a spell," she tried to raise herself in bed, make talking easier, didn't succeed.

"It's not really common knowledge, I suppose they might catch more couples that way. If folk suspected what was to befall them, they'd flee to Chaïen, or to here."

Conley's nose crinkled a moment. "I don't see why they would, it seems..." She didn't finish.

"If you were in love with someone, and people threatened to take away that love, would you let them?" *Perhaps*. She would herself, already had.

Conley was nodding. "I understand. There's no law against it in the Lowlands, then?"

"Well, you'll find most countries allow it to some extent, it's just they all have low types who hate it, throw stones, start fires, so on. In Chaïen, no-one thinks it bad, there's a strong tradition of it, all open, institutionalised. Leading artists, actors, orators, they're all of Ihann's inclination. And in the Lowlands, people just don't *care* what you do. You can sleep with a dolphin and they won't blink. Gods, half the women you see in the street are probably men made up!"

"Do they have many immigrants from elsewhere, then? Chaïenish city states, Lowlandic principalities — they're only small."

"A good few, I imagine, but it's not as if the newcomers cause an increase in the population, is it? They just replace ones who have died, they contribute no offspring. When I took Ihann to you, at first he thought that you and I were, well..."

"I hope you told him he was mistaken."

"He said perhaps *I* was!"

* * *

"I told her, Ihann."

He looked relieved. "Did it cause her distress?"

Roween chuckled. "No, she was more curious than anything, I don't think she's ever really thought about it."

"There are many things regarding my country that she probably hasn't encountered before."

Roween smiled. "She's seen similar to some. I'll talk to her about them later."

"If you have the time. You realise you must leave soon if you're to meet Medreph?"

She nodded. "Yes, I know. How long will Conley be unable to travel?"

"Too long, Roween: you'll have to go alone. She can stay here until your return." Roween looked away. "To take her with you would be risking permanent damage."

"There are spellbooks in Liagh Na Laerich, with cures. She could..." He was shaking his head. "She wouldn't make it there, I guess?"

"Sorry, Roween. Three weeks at least."

Roween slumped on the couch. "Maybe I should stay, too?" Her voice was fracturing.

He smiled, sat down beside her. "You're having doubts, sweet? Be strong — you've come all this way."

Roween set her face, stone. "I still haven't told her, she isn't ready — she may *never* be ready. So much depends on her, on me, I don't know if I can carry it through." She sniffed back a tear.

He put an arm around her. "Yours is a heavy responsibility, Roween Sage, but one you've borne well these past years. It's natural, when you're so close to your goal, that you should have second thoughts; they give you the strength to chase it to the end."

She wiped her eyes with the back of her too-long sleeve. "I don't know if it's the right thing; Con, she's my friend, I didn't know this would happen, I don't think I can do it to her."

"She seems a bright one, she'll accept it. All is for the best, believe me." He squeezed her a short hug.

"Thousands will die within moments, many more in the chaos after. There'll be war, famine... Countless people — innocents — will lose their homes, their livestock. Their children..."

"But the alternative, if you fail, it's infinitely worse. You know that — you were the one who convinced *me*. You *must* carry on, Roween, it's imperative." He passed her his kerchief.

"I know," she whispered, "but I can still weep, can't I, for those I'll murder?" She sobbed.

* * *

"The Lowlands really *are* low lands, Con. The people hold the sea back with dykes, dunes, walls. The waves are patient, though. One day, they'll break through the barriers and swallow the countries whole; the Cold Sea will lap at the edges of the Eletic plateau. It might not happen for a hundred, a thousand years. But it could just be tomorrow."

"You think Justan will raise a storm for such a purpose?"

Roween grinned. "No, Con, he won't flood them out — he doesn't want to rule water — but it's not what I meant to suggest anyway. I wanted to give you some background on the Lowlanders themselves, so you can better understand them. Because they live in the constant knowledge that they could be swept to oblivion at any time, they've developed a few attitudes to life which you may find strange."

"Alien, perhaps, but not strange."

She smiled. "Perhaps. They're very easy-going, they live day to day, not worrying what the future brings. They may seem lazy, but they're not, they just don't think on quite such long-term lines as we do. Since they could be dead any time, they take their pleasures whenever they can, enjoy themselves, respect others' rights to do so."

"I see. So what does that mean in practice?"

"Well, you might see couples..." She paused, uncertain.

"Yes? I might see them what?"

Try not to blush. "Copulating in the street."

Conley's face took on a look like someone who's just realised they've wet the bed.

"Well, you did ask, Con."

"Just, just couples?"

Roween winced. "There are sometimes more, yes. They never involve children directly, but you do occasionally see..."

"Stop, Ro, I don't want to know... Call me a prude, but, well, some things..."

"It's not everyone — Ihann would never do it, for example — just some of them. They have few inhibitions."

"You really think so?" She bounced her palm off her forehead. "Are these people tolerant, or *what*?"

Roween cleared her throat. "The general relaxed atmosphere is conducive to other forms of entertainment, too. There's one which may appeal to you." She reached into her belt-pouch, pulled out a small wooden box.

Conley peered over. "What's in there?"

"It's called 'Bliss', something they would've given you in hospital if you'd stayed, just to make your time there more pleasant, help you recover. I told them not to, not without your consent, but you might want it now. It isn't addictive, doesn't have any nasty side-effects, slight weight-loss maybe, it just, well, makes you enjoy life."

She nodded, knowingly. "Like happy shots."

"Not so crude. The initial effect lasts two to five hours. It doesn't add unnatural feelings that shouldn't be there, it more like releases the good ones that were there all along, repressed. Users feel peaceful, tranquil, beautifully serene. There's also an intense empathy for others, a sense of caring, a joyous well-being that can last for days, weeks, after the first rush has passed. You'll feel confident, appreciate others, experience a bonding with them that's tender, exquisitely rewarding."

"Stops you thinking, then?" Cynically.

"Far from it. It's not like Cala in pre-plumbing days when everyone drank ale instead of water and went around with their heads at half speed; many people claim Bliss *enhances* their creativity — all of the great Lowlandic artists use it frequently. You can have unguarded thoughts that allow you to explore yourself in ways you'd never do if you were your normal, anxiety-wound mess. May even help you see through those bad dreams of yours."

"How's it taken?"

"You eat it, sprinkled on food, can't easily overdose. It even tastes pleasant."

"Have you ever tried it?"

Roween hesitated. "Whether *I* have personally used it or not shouldn't make any difference, should it? It's just another drug, like alcohol, but far more refined, sensitive. You'll enjoy it."

Conley smiled, sadly. "I know you mean well, Ro, but no thanks, really. I don't want to be a marionette any more, even if I can choose how my strings are pulled."

The flood of happiness that washed across Roween was far more genuine than anything Bliss could ever have induced.

Chapter 54

"You've done well, Lord Sennary: three days to quell the northern riots. Lady Zovia is still struggling. To what do you attribute your success?"

"I gave them food, sir, from army stocks. We have enough left for a week or so, all that's necessary before Ansle can ship us another consignment."

Justan nodded. "I'll instruct Lady Zovia to do likewise. It will take longer for fresh supplies to reach her, but she should still have sufficient stores at hand to take the heart out of the totally unexpected uprising."

He refused the bait. "How long before I may join you in Elbienau?"

"Soon, but I regret that I cannot yet be specific: greater stability is yet needed in the recently-conquered territories before Nolley's recruits can take over occupation duty from our more experienced troops. The Followers are splintering into god-specific factions, and I must reluctantly assume that at some stage they'll want to fight one another."

Sennary stretched out his hand, shadowed where the sun was glinting off the sphere. "If you're proposing to intervene, rather than let them get on with it, that means you want the army to move on soon after you have your stability. Are you backing any particular cult?"

He looked weary. "The Vitalists are strong in the west, the Children of Keskh in the north: both faiths advocate peace for the moment, and they'll probably coalesce in time. Other groups are rapidly losing their leaders... Perhaps two months from now at the latest, we can make our assault on the Lowlands and Elet."

Sennary brushed a smudge of dirt from his comsphere with the back of his glove. "My Citadellians are shaping up well. Organising them along the pseudo-democratic lines you suggested has certainly allowed the ranks to weed out unpopular and incompetent commanders, although whether their replacements will prove any better remains to be determined. *I* think they'll perform admirably, but there'll need to be a battle test before we can conclude — "

"You don't have to make a case, Lord Sennary, they'll be fully involved in the remainder of the campaign." He sighed.

"I've been thinking about the merits of installing a democratic structure in the Purasan states as a whole. There are so many of them, with inter-region rivalries, that even a single-nation assembly might be possible without compromising the greater interests of empire. By first creating elected bodies for towns and villages, the firebrands will get enough of a sniff of power to be kept busy, but only in a purely local domain. After a year or so, we could have a host of tiny states federated to your realm, all firmly rooted. If you put an Estavian or Akrean parliamentarian in charge — "

Justan was grinning. "I understand what you're saying, Lord Sennary: you feel that you're not going to be needed in Purasan for too much longer, and you would therefore prefer to return to the front as soon as possible."

"I hadn't intended it to be quite so obvious, sir. Forgive my enthusiasm."

"Done. I'll need you anyway: the Lowlandic army may be far smaller than ours but their soldiers have access to drugs specially suited for use in combat. We've obtained samples, and tested them: the results are impressive — better than anything we can yet match with magic. For a period of several hours, users are completely without fear, are uncaring of pain, phenomenally strong, and totally alert. They're worthless for days after the effects wear off, but well-timed applications of such stimulants could complicate our efforts to capture key targets. Furthermore, once we've subjugated them, the Lowlanders are likely to use other mind-affecting substances directly on us, as a further way of fighting our presence. There's a whole industry based around exhilarants, depressants, hallucinogens, hypnotics, all easily

obtainable in a variety of forms that can be administered in several different ways."

"Bad for morale, if nothing else."

"In time we will control them, we have too much power for any resistance to last more than a few months. We can destroy their factories, burn their fields, starve them, execute their leaders, even obliterate entire villages; there are many means of bringing a nation to order. However, they could delay us long enough to prevent an assault on Elet this season, which will mean a late start on the southern countries next year."

"I see, sir. We'll win, but it'll be messy."

Justan leaned back, his comsphere image shooting away from Sennary's eyes. "Chancellor Ansle may be able to help in that respect. Has he told you of his new invention?"

Sennary couldn't see quite enough of Justan to make out his expression, but he sounded unusually smug. "I know it involves dead bodies, that's all."

"Yes, well I told you that much myself. It appears he has a way of animating them."

Did he say animating? "You mean, like resurrection?"

Justan folded his arms, straightened up his frame. "Only superficially. When I say *Ansle*, by the way, I doubt he's done the work himself — he's far too occupied with his ministerial job. Someone else is the powerhouse driving the project: Ansle has merely stumbled across it and given it his patronage. Essentially, the heart of the idea is a form of modern-day necromancy, an application of prosthetic magic. He takes a corpse and brings all of it to life at once. I don't know what it has for brains, but Ansle assures me he'll have a command spell within two weeks. If tests work out, he can go into production immediately, and a month from now we'll have a regiment. We'll try it out on the Lowlanders, I think; see what good their chemical concoctions are against the dead."

Sennary was aghast. Ansle was raising the undead of nightmares, and Justan *approved!* He breathed slowly, calmed himself before commenting. "May I speak candidly, sir?"

Justan nodded. "Of course."

"I think it's a *very* bad idea." *Wrong in so many ways, where to start?* "On the practical side, there's insufficient time for trials, you'll be releasing something that you can't be sure will react as expected. What if the reanimated bodies retain memories of their previous lives? Or accumulate them only gradually, over a few weeks? And morally, I find the whole *concept* repellent. What about the relatives of the dead? People with religious beliefs? You really think that folk can cope with seeing their dead spouses walking around? Magic should be used for the *benefit* of mankind, not its debasement. If I die, will *I* be brought back to fight the living? Will you?"

"In times of war, Sennary, the normal boundaries of what may or may not be considered decent do not apply. You seem to be motivated mainly by an instinctive dislike of the notion, rather than any rational objections, but yes, there are philosophical questions regarding the ethics of imbuing life into what is dead. Until peace comes, however, we cannot afford to ignore opportunities when they are presented. No-one argues that using parts of the deceased to replace or enhance one's own limbs or vision is in any way reprehensible. Ansle is merely extending to its logical conclusion what is already a well accepted aspect of society."

Sennary was holding his temper very well, knew the consequences of releasing it. "With respect, sir, we could have peace right now if you so wished. The pressure for war comes from you, in your ongoing conquest of all civilisation. When you started, it was from a standpoint of enlightened superiority. The Messenger was clearly wrong, and we had to do all we could to stop his invading our homeland. If that meant walking all over the Eastern Voths, Davia, Akrea, Estavia, so be it. But now, with this, we are showing to the world how decadent our culture has become; some would even call it evil. We need to set limits, saying in what circumstances we should not apply magic." He wavered. "If bringing back the dead like this

doesn't lie beyond such limits, what could there *ever* be that *would*?"

Justan had closed his fingers together, was thinking. "There is something in what you say, Lord Sennary, but for one flaw. We now *know* how to animate the dead. That knowledge will not simply disappear, it's with us forever. Ansle could stop the Academy's work, yes, but someone else will carry it on, burrowed away in a quasi-legal factory deep in Cala Bay Town. If I don't myself control the legions of the dead, then someone else will. The ability to manufacture total prosthetics is here to stay; therefore, if the spell is certain to be harnessed anyway, it is far more preferable that responsible people oversee its use, rather than power-seeking psychopaths."

"But there *are* ways to keep such knowledge hidden! The gesture sequences for putting the clicks into click-wells is split into sixty fragments and — "

The King had raised his hand. "No, Lord Sennary. The click-well spell is known *not* to prove; anyone attempting to reconstruct it from partial knowledge would almost certainly fail. This spell of Ansle's, though, is the re-application of magic already widely used; it is a different situation altogether. Do you see?"

Sennary's shoulders drooped. "I concede, your majesty." *I tried.*

Chapter 55

Conley had asked for her bed to be moved closer to the window so she could watch the street-life below. At the time, Roween had joked that she might ask to be moved back once she saw some of the things that went on, but so far there'd been nothing to shock her, just ordinary people doing ordinary things. This was one of the better-off parts of town.

Her room was on the first floor, the windows tall and narrow. Outside, one of the landways ran past; like the others, it ceased to be a waterway when the Lowlanders closed the sluice gates fifty years ago and pumped it dry. Water was no longer a friend, and there were other ways to move produce between closely-packed rows of houses. Now, the landways numbered among Bridges' best defences against flooding from the Cold Sea.

Further out, poorer people actually lived in them, keeping smallholdings, so Roween said. They bred animals, mainly pigs, because the clay of the old canal beds was still too salty for most vegetables. Nearer the centre of the city topsoil had been laid, and the landways turned into parks. The one Conley could see was called the Womansway; it used to join the parallel Mansway and form the Docksway, but both the latter had long been filled in with rubble and were now paved, used as roads.

Conley found the Womansway an amusing sight at first, half-hidden trees poking up between the incongruous bridges that gave the city its name. After a while, though, it seemed natural as magic, with its own attractive charm in the bronze Autumn sun.

She saw Roween on the path that followed the opposite bank, talking to someone Conley had never seen before) while taking those quick steps of hers so as to keep up with the other woman's longer strides. At the bridge, she bade her escort farewell, crossed, looked up, waved to Conley. Conley waved back.

* * *

"So who was that you were talking to, Ro?"

"Oh, no-one really, I met her in the market, she's a teacher at a nearby school." She was out of breath, she'd walked a long way. "Here, I bought these for you while I was pining for a read at the bookshop."

Conley took them eagerly. One was an atlas, beautifully drawn but patently second-hand. Another was entitled "The Customs of Elet", printed in a rather ancient-looking font with a ragged right-hand edge to the text. The third was a novel, "Piydra's Gate", by Cassie Black. She opened it.

"The first two are homework, so you can find out where we're going and what it's like there. The third is one of the few translations of an Eletic storybook into Estavian. It's — well, read it, you might like it."

"Eletic?" Conley smiled. "Yes, I thought the author had an odd clan name, it didn't sound Lowlandic." She started on the preface.

"All the Eletic words in the book have been translated, even the writer's family name. In her homeland, she's Nuagh Casii. Colours are quite common epithets there: black, white, grey, brown, green, red..."

She didn't answer, she was reading. Roween sat on the end of the bed, Conley looked up. "Sorry, Ro, what did you say?"

She smiled. "Never mind Con. Listen, I'll have to leave tomorrow if I'm to meet Maedreg, and —"

"Maedregh?"

Her eyes flitted from side to side for a moment. "Did I say 'Maedregh'?" She looked sheepish. "Sorry, that's his name in Eletic, he Estavianises it when he's away because we find 'Medreph' easier to say. That's beside the point, anyway. I wanted to have a word with you in private before I go, and Ihann will be back from the hospital at lunchtime so it'll have to be now."

Conley put down the novel. "Sounds important."

Roween leant over, moved the books to the bedside table. "It might be, it's about something that isn't. Remember when I told you about Bliss, I said that Lowlanders take their pleasures whenever they can?"

"Yes, something about their not having a guaranteed future, the Cold Sea could flood them at any moment."

"That's right." She hesitated, nervously. She'd make a rotten mother. "Does that situation remind you of anything?"

Conley considered a moment, shrugged. "Should it?"

"When you were young, why did you use happy shots?"

A pause, a smile, ironic. "I see. *I* lived from day to day, yes, because if I looked ahead I saw nothing for me. Happy shots were a way to bring a brief flicker of light into otherwise perpetual darkness." She laughed, bitterly. "I should have been a poet."

"I know you're pretty much over that now, Con, but you still have a bit of it lingering inside, an appetite for anything that might be a boost, cheer you up. It's not as ravenous as it was before, but it's still there, still drives your impulsiveness, especially when you're under pressure."

Conley looked out of the window. "I don't know, I've changed, Ro. That spark I once had, it's gone. Time was, I'd have taken that whole box of Bliss, but now, well it seems so false, that's all. Like I've seen beyond it, and it'll never look the same again."

Roween sighed a little; she knew the feeling well. "Thing is, Con, it's why you came with me to start with. Sudden thoughts of adventure, visits to strange lands. Now, now we're nearly in Elet, you've grown more reflective, look on things objectively. Reality, time, they have a way of dulling the gloss on expectations."

Conley was watching a man pushing a trolley loaded with boxes of fish. "What are you trying to say, Ro?"

She looked down at her hand, resting on the bed. Small, weak. "Well, Con, will you stay here, wait for me while I'm away? Or will you catch a boat to Estavia and go home?"

Turning towards her, Conley smiled, kindly. "I've come all this way, Ro, I'll see it through to the end. Stubborn, that's me. Truth is, I don't know what I'll do when it's all over. There's nothing for me in Cala any more."

"Your father."

She looked outside again. "Yes, my father. He knows more than he says, he'll understand, help. I'll resign from Porett Technologies, get a job teaching or something, whatever. No more stardom, that's for sure."

"Ha!" Roween laughed. "You know, I couldn't prove you out at first, Con; I used to think you maybe enjoyed feeling sorry for yourself. After a while, though, I figured it was something deeper. Last week, I finally realised what it was."

She had Conley's gaze now.

"When you were young, neither of your parents cared much for you. Since all your friends' parents fussed their children, yet yours didn't fuss you, in your youthful innocence you

thought it must be your fault, something you were doing wrong. What else could have caused them to be indifferent? You blamed yourself. Everything came down to your inadequacy. You still react in the same sort of way now, whenever you make the slightest mistake, anything that shows you're less than perfect. You build it up into something big, say you're worthless, moan about how you're such a failure; well you're *not!* You're just making the same basic assumption you did when you were a tot. It has no real foundation at all! Don't you see?"

Conley was red, but spoke calmly. "You've read one too many books, Ro. Laying my personality on what I thought when I was young — you don't know *what* went through my mind then, you can only speculate. This is pointless." She looked out onto the Womansway again. It was busying up.

"If I'm wrong, how do you explain your dream? I can explain it, can you?"

"Trauma."

"No, Con, you'd get more than just a dream from that. It's trying to tell you something."

"It's telling me I went to hell." The man with the trolley passed by again, it was empty now, he must have made a delivery.

"It's telling you something you won't accept, and it won't go away until you do accept it. In hospital, you were delirious, said a few things, I —"

"What? What things?" She snapped. "Ro, you had no *right*, no right to listen! A person's thoughts are private! You've trespassed on my mind!"

"You said you didn't love your father."

"I what?" Her voice was raised. "But I do! Roween, how could you — I thought you were my friend!"

"That's why I was there, Con! Listen, please, just, just listen. Your mother was beating you, right, why?"

"She was jealous of me because I had my father's love and she didn't. She resented not having such feelings for me herself."

"But no, *he* didn't have those feelings either. Don't you see? Your belief in his love for you is a fabrication, you cooked it as a way of explaining things to yourself. He never really cared for you ever, or *he'd* have been the one who murdered your mother, not you. To her, you were the symbol of everything that was wrong with her marriage and her life. To him, you were a performing doll to be displayed to his colleagues at the Academy, a convenient instrument to show them what a family man he was, stable, dependable, mature."

Conley didn't say anything. Her face was an explosion of rage, but something held her back, intangible but there, restraining, nagging.

"Look at it rationally, Con. Remember I said my name meant 'inspiration' in Old Davian? I was wrong, Giquis told me. It means something else entirely, and it isn't even in the feminine form — I ought to be called Roweena! All these years, I was so proud to have an exotic name that my father had picked out of history, and he'd made a novice's error! My entire image of him, nurtured throughout my life, came tumbling down. Yes, I had a good cry about it, but in the end, what does it matter? He's still the same man. If I ever see him again, he won't be any different, I'll just understand him better. So he's a second-rater, well, I'm disillusioned. But now I know the truth, I can love him as he is, not as I imagined him to be."

She wasn't angry any more, calm, really. "How can I love my father if he isn't how I imagined him?"

Roween shook her head. "I can't answer that, Con. Just accept that your parents were only ordinary people, not gods, and they didn't *ever* care for each other or for you. It wasn't your fault, it's just the way they were."

Conley was breathing slowly, felt like you do when you've just realised that no matter how hard you try, you're not going to arrive in time for a crucial appointment. "So why the nightmare?"

"You're punishing yourself for clinging on to a belief you know, deep down, is unfounded. Your mother beats you because your father loves you. She'll stop when he doesn't."

They heard the front door open downstairs. Ihann, home from work with a bunch of white roses he'd bought on the way back.

* * *

She was racing up scarlet-hued stairs, the scrawny girl just keeping ahead of her. "Come back here, come back!" she shrieked, clumsy in her drunken fury.

"You're evil, I despise you, I want to kill you," the girl shouted, tearful, whining. She lashed out at her, missed, struck the wall. The breaking rod crackled, her hand didn't hurt. Had she made the noise herself?

The scene folded, they were in another room. Both were visible, the woman snarling, the wretched girl defiant, face stained with tears. They looked so similar, the one an older version of the other. She picked up a figurine from the table, hurled it. It clipped the girl's arm, shattered against the wall.

"You can't hurt me any more, mother, I'm past hurting. I don't love you, I never have, you're a monster, I'd be better off dead."

She screamed, advanced, her quarry didn't move. Things folded again, there was just her and the girl, nothing else, nothing except the stick, the inescapable stick raised above her head. But it wasn't the girl, now, it was Conley, adult, tall. It was like looking into a mirror. Why hadn't she ever noticed the likeness before?

"It's me," said Conley, knowingly.

She woke in a sweat, sat up straight, gasped for breath. She didn't cry.

* * *

Later that night, Conley visited Roween as she slept, experimented. Partial success, but she couldn't thank her as she'd wished.

* * *

Ihann had let Conley come down to bid farewell. Roween had a long ride ahead of her, but looked cheerful, smiled. She'd bought new boots, shorter, but the rest of her clothes were the ones she'd worn from Elbienau. *Memories she needs?* The horse was different, hired, more her size.

"I'll be back as soon as possible," she said.

"I'll be here, Ro," Conley answered, "and thanks."

Roween grinned, set off.

Conley watched her to the end of Womansway. She felt cold, Ihann took her back inside.

Chapter 56

Within the com-3, Porett's night had been scarred by disorder and fear. The hurt was not as intense as before, but it lasted much, much longer. He knew he couldn't survive many more such attacks, that the torture would eventually prove lethal. Oh the dream, the joy, if he ever built up a tolerance!

He detected the com-1's activity, waited for the patch through. His real-world self had managed to dig out the gestures that handled call forwarding, and have some unsuspecting underling spend three days casting them. Would've been two days, but the oaf had missed a gesture, had had to clap out and start over.

Roenna's smiling, freckled face appeared, her hair a straggle-tangle of auburn wilderness, eyes green, not a trace of makeover anywhere. She grinned. "Hello, Topper!"

"Greetings, Ro!" They used their old cutter names; he'd almost forgotten them, but Roenna's easy ways had slipped him back in time before he'd even noticed. She hadn't changed much, eyes less sunken now, she was getting sleep, and she didn't look as pale, must've been in the sun. Well yes, the freckles.

And she still had her boundless, undirected enthusiasm. "Now, have I found something for *you*! I went to the Academy's bound-book room, like you said, and, surprisey-wisely, all the books were bound. 'Nothing special about that', you say, but aha! Even the old *sealed* books are bound! I ask for one to be opened, and the little bookfetch man obliges. 'Why are these books bound?' I ask, innocent as three palms. 'Security, madam,' he replies, just like he's been told, 'a back-up copy of the list of sealing gestures went missing, so we added Magicorp binders to everything.' 'Well well well, is that so?' I ask, 'Yes indeed,' he answers, 'this one has been read since then, which is why there is no seal on it now.' 'Why, thank you young man,' I say, 'but I sealed this book myself twelve years ago and I never told anyone what sequence I used.' Exit little bookfetch on urgent business that he's suddenly remembered."

Porett was smiling; the silly voice Roenna had used to mimic the sub-librarian was as engaging as all her impressions. "So I was right, all the magic has been sucked out, they're trying to cover it up."

"Looks that way, Topper. What sparked you onto it?"

"I heard it from a friend who linked to some woman while she was talking to the person who did it."

"Uh? Whatever you say, wonderboy... Hey, I found something else for you!" She dragged her fingers through her hair, hooked it away from her face and threw it back into the briars. "In the refectory, I catch hold of my little bookfetch again. 'Hello, little bookfetch,' I say, 'do you want me to bribe you with a voucher for a CBT medical fac where they'll add a handbreadth to your height so you won't be such a stumpy?' I'm a bit more subtle than that at the time. 'Yes, kindly lady,' he responds, chomping through some pigmeat that looks about as edible as a leather apron. 'Well, young fellow, what I want from you in exchange is a list of all the books that still have their original seals on them, binders or not.' 'Easy,' he says, 'just the one,' and he gives me the name, so I reward him with the voucher and leave him to his apron."

"A clinic pass? You'll want me to reimburse you for that..."

"Not to worry, Topper, I found it where some sieve-brain left it as a bookmark, didn't cost me a click."

He grinned, *good old Ro, ever resourceful*. "So what was this book then?"

"Well here's the funny part, I had to write down the name because it's in Old Chaienish. Estavian, Eletic, Ilathic, I can handle those, but I do have my limits. Got yourself a pen?"

Oh damn the hell, not in here. Memory time again. "Not a pen, an East/Trad fingerboard." He pretended to open a slot drawer fitted with some kind of fancy, built-in notepad.

"You devil, you. Well, it's 'Kathechsis Reh'." He made like he was taking it down. "I have a translation of that if you want it."

He stopped faking, looked up. "You devil, you..."

She beamed a wide smile. "'Kathechsis' is a burst of scooty thoughts ignited by some idea. 'Reh' is adjectival, describes something that changes things. Looked them up in a classical dictionary, it's way amazing how many Estavian words derive from Chaenish. Maybe I'll read some more about it sometime."

Roenna, she'll cut anything... "So a rough translated title might be 'Brainstorms Change Things'?"

She frowned, looked upwards, then smiled again. "Near enough, maybe 'Brainstorms Can Change Things', closer."

"Got it. So why was it sealed?"

"Well, that's where you've mired me. I originally asked so I could find what books were out when the magic pooped, but this one shouldn't have been there in the first place. It's antique, maybe three K years old, handwritten. Ought to be in the archives with the other musties. They moved it here because it was sealed, but why it was sealed, and which naughty person did it, I don't know. They can't get it open, any case, no-one knows the key."

"Do they have a duplicate?"

She gave him that oh-come-on-be-sensible look she affected so well. "A book that old, it's probably the only one in existence. Boggles me why anyone would want it anyway, who reads Old Chaenish these days?"

"At a guess, they still teach it in Chaen. Maybe they have copies there?"

"And maybe they won't let you touch them even if they do."

Porett was thinking. "Do you mind staying at the Academy a tad longer, Ro?"

She tossed back another dangle of hair that had flopped in front of an eye. "Course not, Topper, I could stay here forever, you know me, Little Miss Books!"

"Fine, I'll clear it with Lord Calter. I think I'll also get in touch with some people I know in Chaen, have them send round someone who can read the old language."

"Well unless you have some real finey-winey controls for see-into lenses, your linguist isn't going to be able to read much."

"We'll have the seal off by then. There's someone I think will know the gestures, he used to be the senior librarian in our day, name of Athur Sage."

"Athur? Oh yes, remember him well, does he know the pattern?" She rubbed her hands together, conspiratorially. "Well, fear not, then! We're chummy-chummy! I'll have it out of him in a jiff, I used to spend hours in here when I was a student, some nights he'd keep the library open late just for me. Nice chappy, always seemed sort of worried."

Porett supposed he shouldn't really be surprised, Roenna did used to live in the reading rooms... A thought: "You don't happen to remember his daughter, do you?"

"Little Roween? Course I do! Earnest girl, yes, sharp as a point, only person I ever met who swallows books ravenously as I do. Why, you know her?"

Nonchalant, "Oh, not really, no, don't recall her myself. She's a friend of your cousin's."

Later, it occurred to him that Roenna hadn't mentioned Roween's eyes when she'd described her. Probably never even noticed them!

Chapter 57

When Ihann entered, Conley was staring out of the window, the atlas resting on her lap.

"Has anyone ever told you that you have the most beautiful hair?" he asked.

She looked at him, blankly.

"Just now, in the sunlight, it was almost glowing. It's not a trick, is it? A spell?"

"No," she answered, slightly confused. "You like my hair?" She fingered a lock, "But I thought you, well..."

He smiled. "But should that stop me from admiring your looks? I don't have to be attracted to something to find it pleasing — a flower, a butterfly, a sunset. Are you saying you never notice pretty women?"

"I don't go up to them and say so."

"Different societies, different customs," he chuckled, neatly. "Do you have anyone special back home in Cala?"

She almost said "who'd want me?", shook her head.

"A pity," he sighed, "you frighten suitors, I think. Too good looking, too intelligent, they suppose you're already taken, or, if you aren't, that you'll eat them whole and spit them out in the morning. If you ever marry, your husband will rank among the bravest men in Murak!"

She felt herself offended, somehow. "That isn't true, Ihann, I don't throw up barriers. I receive lots of attention, men aren't afraid of me."

"The nice ones are. Tigers fear nothing, but they live alone. With other tigers, they're intense, ferocious, but only for a short time, then they're gone."

She smiled. Anya had been a tiger, yes. What other animals were men? Sennary?

"I can see I've upset you; I'm sorry. Let us change the subject. I came to ask if you would like a walk this afternoon, down to the royal palace and back. Some fresh air today should help your convalescence."

A release from her prison? "Yes please!"

"Perhaps, on the way back, we can visit some shops, buy you some new clothes. Roween did choose you an outfit yesterday, but it was, well, a little plain..."

"I can imagine," she grinned, "Ro *tries* hard, but she doesn't have the eye."

"She has a lot on her mind." He pulled a chair up next to the bed. "How much of it has she told you?"

Conley thought back, realised it was very little. "She detects the use of nearby magic, and kills it if it's offensive, a conditioned reaction she can't control. She's unable to cast spells herself, but won't tell me why. She says she knows how to get unlimited power, but that because *she* can't use magic she needs someone else to take it. For some reason, she picked on me — I haven't yet proved out her motive. Maybe because I came along at the right time, maybe because I unwittingly stole her spell-proof ideas, who knows? She doesn't want to tell me until I'm 'ready', but hasn't mentioned the subject for weeks; she's probably given up on me. Maybe she's satisfied to leave things as they are?"

"No, don't think that way, Conley, she's very proud of you, the way you've come on recently. I think she'll explain her all when she returns. She's worried, though, that you still don't consider magic as a bad thing, because in that case you may decide merely to modify the way it works when you have full control over it, rather than completely destroying it as she intends." He sounded mildly insincere.

Conley nodded. "She may be right; I won't know until she tells me everything, and the longer she leaves it then the less time I'll have to come round to her way of thinking."

"I'll have a word with her in private, see if I can ease her mind." He leaned on the bed.

"Why is she meeting Medreph anyway? What does he have to do with all this?"

Ihann looked surprised. "She hasn't told you?"

"She mentioned something a long time ago about 'stating a case', but that's all, vague. Not a word recently."

"Didn't want to cause any stress, I imagine, she gets anxious about you. Well, as your physician, I think you'll be able to take it, it isn't going to induce respiratory problems or anything." He smiled, paternally.

"Well she's been fussing about meeting Medreph for some time now, so it must be important."

"Oh, without a doubt it's that, and for two reasons. Firstly, it was Medreph who awakened in her the confidence to embark on this entire adventure. Initially after her discovery she felt helpless, doomed, unable to influence events; someone — Ansle? Giquis? — would sooner or later appropriate magic, and thereby would end reality. How could she, a worthless bookfetch, ever hope to prevent it? Well she knew how, of course, but it seemed so futile, so skinny a chance; she couldn't believe that she'd ever succeed. Medreph talked her into realising that, whatever the odds, she nevertheless had to *try*, because no-one else could even do that."

"So he's the rock who supports her." She nodded. "And secondly?"

"This is more real-worldly. We knew when she left Svala that by the time she arrived here there'd be a single empire stretching northeast of a Schaaldt-Leskina frontier. We didn't know whether Justan or the Messenger would be emperor, but we were certain it would be one of them, and that whoever it was would have magic to command. Let me ask: do you know why the Messenger never attacked the Lowlands?"

Conley looked down at the atlas, its pages open on Seesel. "Hmm, Elbienau *is* much closer to here than to the Purasan plains. Yes, I'd have expected him to invade what was nearest to home first, rather than stretch his supply and communication lines so far east."

"You see? If you've learned nothing else from this trip, at least you know a little about military logistics now!" She raised an eyebrow, chastisingly; Ihann hurried to his answer. "The reason the Messenger left the Lowlands alone was because — and this is the sum of it — the Elets told him to."

"Told him?" Her eyes widened. "The Elets *told* the Messenger not to invade the Lowlands? And he *complied*?" She sank back into the pillow. "Very likely..."

"Don't scorn me, please, Conley. What I'm telling you, few people outside Elet know. My fellow Lowlanders believe the Messenger was fearful of our army and its battle drugs. They think that Justan will respect us, too. They are wrong. Perhaps, in some ways, your king is not as wise as the Messenger, although I suppose it could have been that with access to magic the Messenger would also have turned his attention to us at this point. Now is no time for complacency, anyway. Roween is meeting Medreph to find out what the Elets are going to do about it."

She stared at him, open-mouthed for a moment, then she laughed, once. "Justan has his own armies, plus those of Akrea, Estavia, and Davia, with Voths and probably Purasans too by now. He also has magic on his side, and neither you nor the Elets have anything close to that in power. You're seriously suggesting that he'll stop his advance west just because the Elets *tell* him to?"

"I didn't say that." His hand twitched, nervously, he wiped it on his leg. "The Messenger obeyed because he knew what would happen if he didn't. He may have been

tempted to try his luck once he had magic to wield, but even then he might still have kept east of the plateau. Justan won't lend the Elets' threat any more credence than you do, he'll attack the Lowlands despite any Eletic warnings. We must pray that you can dismiss magic from the world before he does."

She fingered her hair again, not really aware she was doing so. "I can see that if magic ceased to function as expected, Justan would have terrible problems. Militarily, yes, but economically, too, it's such a part of modern life that without it there'd be an almost immediate social collapse. Manufacture, agriculture, exports, they all depend on magic — even our currency, although based on gold, uses magic for day-to-day transactions."

"But only the wealth of Murak and the others of your home countries truly depend on it. Justan rules an empire, now. Akrea and Estavia are powerful trading forces, and the destruction of magic would harm them little. Justan could soon continue his war: a lack of magic would only delay him, perhaps even enrage him enough to commit genocidal atrocities against us. Don't you agree with that analysis?"

She thought, carefully, then answered. "No. Losing magic would pretty well knock his empire to pieces, he couldn't hold it."

Ihann slapped the bed, laughed. "Then we share beliefs! Oh, I'm so relieved! Medreph has been putting our case to the Elets. If they concur, then after you have performed your task they'll leave Justan and his empire alone. Roween has travelled to learn from Medreph the outcome of the deliberations."

Conley narrowed her eyes, raised her upper lip. "I still don't understand. What could the Elets do anyway? They're just barbarians really, aren't they?" Why were his eyes suddenly wide?

He spoke slowly, his demeanour now purposeful, grave. "'Barbarian' isn't the word. You clearly don't know what they're capable of. They held back the might of the Estavian empire for a thousand years, and Justan's little jaunt will be as nothing to them." He picked up "Piydra's Gate" from her bedside table. "Have you read this?"

"Sorry? The book, yes, I read it, finished it this morning. It's relevant?"

"What did you think of it?"

"I thought, well, that it was strange, but very compelling. A whole novel with only the one character, alone in that house, with all those bodies."

"It's common in Nuagh Casii's books to have a narrative describing the thoughts and actions of a single individual. There *were* other people mentioned."

"But only in flashback, and as *she* remembered them, their words, her feelings for them, and how they had died that night."

"Flashback, ah, then it's as I suspected, you haven't fully understood the tale yet. What do you think of the heroine, Piydra?"

"I like her. She's vulnerable in a way, intelligent, but she cares too much for others, and that's her weakness. She tolerated Benedth's eccentricity beyond the bounds of sense because she didn't want to offend him. That's what led to the murders, and very nearly to her own death. When she looked into the flames and recalled the fight, I almost lived it, wrestling against his superior strength, partially stunning him on the shelf for just long enough to seize his dagger. Gripping stuff, very well written, it really had me tied."

He coughed, almost apologetically. "She made it all up. She wasn't *remembering* the events, she was inventing them, getting her story straight before she called anyone in. She murdered them, every one, in cold blood. At the beginning, when she's worrying what people will say, that she did it: well she did."

Conley's face was empty amazement.

"Benedth wouldn't have killed Laphrey, because she was his lover. Piydra, in her single-

mindedness, doesn't realise that, but from her descriptions of the two we can easily deduce it. If *Benedth* didn't do it, then no-one *saw* him do it, and that removes his motive for the rest of the murders. Piydra killed the lot of them."

"But ... why?"

"Did she like any of them?"

"She didn't seem to, no, they all had their faults, but as I said, she was put-upon, didn't want to offend anybody. She's a mouse, really. She wanted reconciliation, that's why she held the party."

"She murdered them because she found their liberty-taking annoying, and thought of a tidy way to rid herself of them all without being lynched for it."

Conley looked down at the atlas, then the bedsheets. "Oh my ... hell!"

"Of the three books Roween gave you, this is the only one which truly gives an insight into the Elets. They're tolerant in the extreme, will allow anyone to do whatever they wish; individuality is all important to them, it's their life. But if you push them too far, if you press them too hard, they'll react. Barbarians?" He laughed.

Conley felt terribly cold. "If Medreph doesn't talk them round, what will they do?"

"They'll rise, not just a few, but every last one of them. They'll leave their fields, their homes, and they'll swarm through the Lowlands and over the Schaaldt. There, they'll kill that which offends them, whatever threatens their freedom. Your bravery shots, our battle drugs, the berserk fury of the Guels, they pale alongside the Elets when they're doing what they believe is right. They have full control, you see, both of their minds and their emotions. They know exactly *why* they're killing, what they have to do. Complete ruthlessness, no mercy, no fear of death. I wouldn't want to be Justan, no matter how big his army..."

"I think I'm in shock."

* * *

Large, iron railings surrounded the palace, black with gilded points. Guards paraded outside, wearing the golden tunics of the Seesel princes. Conley was impressed by the spectacle, the close-order marching, all in step; slow, long strides designed to catch the eyes of the admiring public watching from the gates. Ihann was looking at the soldiers, too, Conley suspected for reasons similar to her own. *Life, but I could do with a man!*

"Ihann," she asked, quickly, "why are there no women in the Prince's guard?"

He grinned, winked. "The display is for aesthetic purposes as much as security. Only soldiers of the same height are selected for duty here. There may be a tall woman among them, as there may be shorter men in the parade tomorrow. You, for example, were you in the Prince's guard, would be in today's march rather than tomorrow's or the day after's."

"I see. They're very good — it's considered glamorous to be in the army?"

"Here as elsewhere, yes. Recruits enjoy a certain status in the community, but it's not without its drawbacks."

"Drawbacks?" She turned, took his arm as he led her away through the crowd.

"They're not allowed recreational drugs, only those meant for battlefield or medicinal purposes. It wouldn't do to have the army floating around on a cloud of good feeling."

"That's understandable, but I think that back home in Murak our soldiers *are* allowed to use happy shots when they're off duty, except maybe in some barons' armies the rules are different, I don't know."

"Oh, not every drug is proscribed here, only the ones with lingering after-effects. Alcohol is permitted at all times, and its use is even encouraged in the navy. Bliss is out completely, which can be a little upsetting at first, when you've been used to feeling all smiles for so long."

They crossed the square and walked towards a wide street opposite. There looked to be a scaffold at its end, she'd get a better view from the hump of a bridge.

"Ihann," she asked, "have you ever taken Bliss?"

He half-smiled. "Conley, all Lowlandic parents give small doses of Bliss to their offspring. They do it as a matter of course, it makes discipline much easier if children all feel good about the world."

She did little to hide her surprise. "But that's terrible!"

"No more terrible than giving wine to a child in Cala?" Devil's advocate.

"Nonsense! It's of a *far* more serious nature. It distorts their entire outlook on life, on other people. Surely there's a price to be paid for such wholesale manipulation of an individual's emotions?"

He dropped his head. "When the children become grown-up, they may stop, yes, but then they'll begin to have feelings that they've never really experienced before. Anger, discontent, frustration, passions that people in your country will have learned to deal with at an early age. The fear usually gets them in the end, it takes a particular kind of strength not to return to the drug as soon as its emotional cushion disappears. They have counsellors in the army, to help recruits come to terms with themselves, but for most people it's straight back to blissfulness."

"So *you* still use it?" Why did she find that repellent?

"I studied medicine in Elet for two years. Nobody can hope to do that without the respect of the people. I haven't taken Bliss since 1788."

Now she felt foolish. "I — *I* had a problem with happies, I feel I'm over it now, but I'm scared, in a way, that I might go back on them sometime."

"I've never been tempted. Emotions only have meaning when they arise themselves. Unlike Roween, I do believe that mood-altering drugs can be useful as a way of temporarily influencing behaviour to achieve some immediate goal — the army's battle-drugs, for example; on a more constructive level, there are many people who have difficulty in talking to others, and would be unable to find a partner if they didn't have some help in overcoming their early inhibitions. These Bliss-like longer-term effects, though, I feel they just cheapen lives, not enrich them."

The street was busy, noisy with the clacking of wooden heels and the shouts of vendors.

"Bliss is supposed only to enhance feelings that you already have, so how can you say that using it devalues them?"

He stared into the distance, towards the scaffold. "How can there be true pleasure without knowledge of pain?"

She noticed a man gazing at her, taking in her figure. "Sometimes, you can make the pain yourself."

* * *

The rocking of the cab was gentle, smoothing out the unevenness of the cobblestones, swirling Conley's stomach as they crossed over bridges.

"It's been a wonderful day, Ihann, thank you. All these outfits, you're very kind, I wish I

could repay you somehow."

"The pleasure is all mine, I haven't enjoyed myself so much in years! It's rare I'm able to shop with someone of such excellent tastes, but who is yet prepared to listen to my suggestions — and even to heed them. You're very beautiful, Conley, and a magnificent frame for clothes. Even the dullest of gowns would seem special if worn by you, but the latest Taltu imports, accentuating the waist, well! Just seeing you in them was a thrill! There's no need to thank me, and certainly no need to pay me back; I consider your company reward enough."

She looked away in embarrassment. "I can't get used to these compliments..."

"What you are not used to is a man giving them so freely. You feel I should have some hidden (yet perhaps not-so-hidden) motive. I assume you have no brothers?"

"None." She didn't know if his assessment was right, but she did feel muddled, yes.

"Prepare yourself for more such comments in Elet. Few people there will have seen your like before, and they will be genuinely taken by your looks. When Elets say they admire your beauty, it will always be without improper intent. They don't approach anyone for courtship unless... Oh, forgive me, but you don't speak Eletic anyway, do you?"

She smiled. "No, I'm sad to say that I don't, it wasn't until Roween told me that I even knew they didn't speak Estavian. I think she does — speak Eletic, I mean."

"Roween?" He laughed, put a hand in a pocket. "Roween speaks many languages, or at least she understands them, some are dead. She learned Eletic from Medreph, but even before then she was fluent in Inquan, and from books in the Academy library she's taught herself the old languages of Chaïen and Ilathica. Oh, and also Old Ca-Atlan — I remember her telling me that it's quite similar to modern Inquan. Our Roween is quite a linguist."

"That's impressive, I never knew; I wonder why she's not mentioned it to me herself? *I* would have, in her position."

He rapped the roof of the cab with his knuckles. "Perhaps she thought it would be conceited of her?"

The driver slowed his horse to a halt, climbed to the ground, opened the door. Conley jumped out, much to Ihann's amusement and the other man's dismay. He pulled a small set of steps from underneath the bodywork. Conley felt somewhat silly for not having noticed them when she boarded the cab, but at the time she'd been worried that her boxes weren't properly secured on the roof.

"I think," said Ihann, "that tomorrow afternoon I'll teach you a little Eletic. Is that fine with you?"

Conley watched the coachman untie the string holding her purchases to the baggage rack. "Yes, it sounds fun. We can surprise Roween when she returns." *If she ever does.*

* * *

"I'm not sure this is a good idea." She was wearing one of her new outfits, cotton but with a silk-like trim, practical yet smart. "If what you told me yesterday is true, the Elets are utter brutes. I don't know if I want to learn their language; I don't know if I even want to visit their country, I might offend one and have him go berserk on me."

Ihann grinned. "It's not like that at all. I know I must have sounded as if I despised them, but I don't, not really. You see, the Elets *are* an uncommon people, yes, but it's because they're highly principled. They never lose their tempers, ever; everything is thought through, calmly and rationally. They may take their feelings into consideration as valid contributing factors in determining their eventual actions, but they never let their hearts drive their minds."

"They are the noblest nation I know."

"I don't understand, Roween has that *same* attitude of reverence — they must dope the food there or something! To me, they sound a bunch of crazy people, suppressing their feelings for most of their lives before finally releasing them in a frenzy of bloodlust to stop their brains from exploding!"

They were in Ihann's library, the walls half-concealed behind endless shelves of medical books from countries near and far. Neatly-bound handwritten notes stood in a glass cabinet close to a desk.

"The Elets haven't risen for over a thousand years, Conley. When they next do, it will be because there is some threat to their homeland, or to their way of life; it won't be as a valve to relieve some periodic build-up of collective emotional pressure. They are not savages: they're intelligent human beings who know themselves and have an unbreakable sense of right. It's *that* which makes them so formidable, so frightening. Step on them too willingly, ignore all reasoned argument to desist, and they'll accept your decision calmly, coolly, without anger. Then they'll hit you so hard you won't *ever* get up."

"You talk as if you have experience..."

He nodded, stared straight ahead. "Indirectly, yes. In the Eletic medical archives I found cures, treatments, ways to deal with conditions that are often fatal in the Lowlands. Not just the big killers like smallpox, cholera, but the smaller things that most people fall to in the end — abscesses, swollen prostates, different forms of dementia, heart rot... There were so *many* cures, volume after volume, covering everything from childbirth complications to, well, to others so obscure I could barely make sense of them. Yet of all these marvellous procedures and remedies, the Elets will let me use but a handful."

Conley gaped surprise. "But — but why? Why train you, and then..?" Her words seeped away.

He shrugged. "They don't say. Oh, they're very nice about it: upon my return, when I set up my surgery here, the first time I placed an order with a herbalist for some of the plants I'd need the Elets informed me by letter that they would prefer it if I didn't obtain further supplies without their permission."

"Or what?"

Ihann's cheek twitched. "It may have been a test, but if so then I failed it: I didn't risk finding out. People are therefore coming into my surgery every day with ailments I could cure within a week, but of which they are going to die, and just because the Elets don't want for-some-reason-secret medical techniques disseminated." There was sadness in his voice. He glanced at her. "You think I'm weak?"

"No, it's..." She stumbled for the words. "I can't conceive their point of view, and I don't fully comprehend their actions. How, then, can I censure you for what I don't even understand?"

He smiled. "You don't always need to think the way that they do to know how they'll react to circumstances. At times, they can be all too predictable, especially when it suits them. I don't know that they *ever* bluff: if they pledge to do something, then they *will* do it — no matter how bad the consequences might appear to us. Were they to threaten Justan with the conquest of his entire empire unless he met certain trivial conditions, you can be quite assured that if he didn't then they would follow through with an all-out invasion. As I said, though, they prefer reason over force; *they* don't want to die any more than we do. It's only when all other methods fail, and they are compelled to act, that they'll resort to confronting a problem on its own terms."

"Or so you're hoping..."

He sat at the desk. "They may see as their best option the destruction of Justan's empire *before* he can fully stabilise it, rather than let him be until he can attack them at

leisure. Some believe that even without magic, he, or perhaps the Estavians, could achieve the necessary level of restructuring within a decade; these pessimists might win the argument. Roween and I, and to some extent Medreph (although for different reasons), consider the loss of life that would follow a preventative attack to be too great, especially as it might well be completely needless, and coming as it will on top of all the deaths occurring from when magic cuts out. Unfortunately, that's irrelevant to the argument." He smiled. "Perhaps I just don't have the stomach for it. You still want to learn their language?"

"In the book, it said it was the best way to understand their culture, the way they think."

He passed her a quill and some paper. "You'll probably want to take notes."

* * *

"We'll start with some grammar. In Estavian, every sentence has a verb. So it is in Eletic. Most sentences have a subject, and they can also have objects. Now whereas a basic Estavian sentence is of the form subject-verb-object, as in 'Conley eats carrots', in Eletic the verb comes first, 'eats Conley carrots'. Fine so far?"

"If it wasn't, there'd be something awfully wrong with me!"

Ihann smiled, but looked a little wounded. "Adjectives are treated like verbs in applying them to nouns. If I wanted to say 'Conley is rude', in Eletic the word order would be 'rude Conley'."

She knew he was right. "I'm sorry, Ihann, I didn't mean to be, I know this isn't going to be easy."

He smiled. "Let's use 'hungry Conley' instead. Now, joining the sentences together, the obvious thing to us would be to say 'hungry Conley and eats Conley carrots', but the Elets don't do that. Instead, they have a special pronoun, 'na', which they use to mean 'the subject'. So they'd start off by naming the subject, then follow it by the descriptive part, thus: 'Conley, hungry na, eats na carrots'. Got that?"

"I think so, yes."

He nodded. "Now there's one other thing that's important. Whenever they say a noun, the Elets mean it indefinitely — 'a' rather than 'the'. So 'eats Conley carrot' means 'a Conley eats a carrot'. If you want to refer to a specific carrot, then you can use a word that means 'this' — the same rule formally applies for a specific Conley, too, but with common proper names they usually drop it."

"Can you give me some examples in the actual language? How would I say 'my name is Conley'?"

"Right, well you don't phrase it 'my name is Conley', it's more like 'I am Conley'. I'll go through the stages: the word for 'person' is 'giala', so 'giala Conli' would mean 'a Conley is a person'. The word for 'this', well, it's not really a *word*, it's the prefix 'lae'. So 'laegiala Conli' means 'this person is a Conley', or 'I am a Conley'. 'Giala laeConli' means 'Conley is a person', or literally 'a person, is this Conley'. 'Laegiala laeConli' means 'this person is this Conley', or 'I am Conley'.

"Right. Laegiala laeConli, Laegiala laeConli, got it. So how would I ask someone their name?"

He sighed. "You wouldn't ask them their name, you'd ask them who they are. Well, let me see, it's a question, I think some of this may be hard to explain. The easy part is the prefix for 'that', which is 'cai', so 'caigiala' is 'that person' — or simply 'you' in Estavian. Now, you want to know a noun for which caigiala of it applies, so that's 'hua caigiala na?'. The 'hua' is

the interrogative, and the 'na' shows where the answer you want is to go. So 'who are you' translates literally into 'for what thing is it the case that you are that thing?' If you ask a question in which there isn't any missing information, you just need to know whether a statement is true or not, the form is 'va' followed by the ordinary sentence. So since 'you are Conley' is 'caigiala caiConli', 'are you Conley' is 'va caigiala caiConli?'."

She was writing this down.

"If someone asks you a question, 'yes' is 'yae', 'no' is 'nae', and 'don't know' is 'hae'. Easy to remember. Oh, but 'not' is 'nae', too, so 'I am not Conley' would be 'nae laegiala laeConli'."

"I *think* I'm getting the idea. What does 'Liagh Na Laerich' mean, then? The 'Lae' part is 'this'-something, I guess, but why is there a 'Na' in the middle?"

"Well I'm afraid that sometimes the Elets take things as understood implicitly, and so they don't always say everything in full. The city's ceremonial name is 'Ihll liagh na laerich'. 'Ihll' is island, 'liagh' is lake, 'rich' is country. So it means 'an island, a lake of which is this country', which to them is Elet. They're likening the city to an island, with Elet as the lake surrounding it. Quite poetic, really."

"Why don't they call it 'Liagh Ihll Laerich'?"

"Because that would be a statement, 'a lake for an island is this country'. By taking out the Ihll and putting it first, it lets you know what the coming phrase refers to. If I wanted to say 'Medreph is in Liagh Na Laerich', for example, it would properly be 'Ihll, liagh na laerich, eshal beMaedregh na', although I'd usually drop the 'Ihll' — and the 'be' in front of 'Maedregh' that makes the noun third-person. See?"

She grinned. "It's all very logical, but I can envisage its getting complicated."

"It's better than Estavian, there are no irregular verbs or anything, but the Elets tend to omit a lot, especially when using different tenses. Sometimes, too, you have to listen to their tone of voice to know whether what they're saying is indicative, like 'I am thirsty and I want a drink' or subjunctive, 'if I am thirsty I want a drink'."

"What about the spelling? I've been assuming it's phonetic?"

"And so it is — very! In different parts of Elet they spell words according to the local accent, which means vowels are sometimes shifted. That's why they don't *always* transcribe them when they use their horoform script. They do adopt a formal convention when rendering their words in Estavian letters, though."

"Wait..." Conley looked down at her notes. "You're telling me they have two alphabets?"

"For different purposes. They use Estavian characters for the printed word, because their own clock-shaped ones don't stamp very clearly. The rest of the time, though, they resort to their original, more thought-out system. Numerals are the only things common to both schemes, because the Estavian ones are actually based on ancient Eletic archetypes anyway."

She sighed.

* * *

The study door opened, her host peered round it. "How are you doing?"

"Fine, fine — is there a word for a hundred, or do they use 'ain-aich-aich'?"

"'Ainaichaich'," he replied, "but a thousand is 'ainaiches'. Sorry to disturb you, I just came for a book..." He emerged fully, crossed over to a shelf.

"These notes of yours are very good, Ihann, they're helping me a lot."

"When you can read them," blushed.

She smiled at his shyness. "Some words *are* hard to make out, yes, but as I have to struggle reading my own hand sometimes I can hardly complain about yours!"

"The medical bias isn't distracting?" He turned his head sideways, read titles.

"Oh I haven't got into vocabulary yet, I'm focusing on the grammar. I've developed this notation for bracketing pieces of a sentence together so I can track what the whole thing means."

"Really?" He removed a hefty volume from a leather-bound set standing near the window, put it on the desk, positioned himself behind Conley. He read a little of her work, nodded. "I see, yes, that's very smart, it looks like a real help. I wish I'd thought of something similar when *I* was beginning." He picked up the book again, headed for the door. "You're quite a theoretician!"

"Not really, Ihann — Roween beats me cold. You know, I *still* haven't fathomed how she purges magic, and I've been trying for months. It doesn't fit into the framework at all — spells just don't work that way. What she does ought to be impossible."

He paused, half out of the room. "I congratulate you on the speed of that forced link, but I nevertheless won't compromise Roween's plans; regretfully, you'll still have to await her return."

"No hints at all?" sweetly.

He smiled. "Perhaps you should consider how magic *would* have to operate to support the observable evidence of what she does?"

Before she could answer, he hurried to his consulting room.

* * *

They were washing up after their evening meal, fish, Ihann had cooked it.

"I was wondering," said Conley, "why the Elets don't have an explicit concept of name. They can say that an object is *called* something, but they can't say that something is its *name*."

"They can," he began to dry a plate, "but they don't; it's not part of their philosophy. Their whole way of seeing things is founded on ideas of referents — what things are called — rather than identifiers — what their names are; indeed, if you think about it, it's even *built in* to their grammar. This all stems from their conviction that names are separate from an object's intrinsic being, mere vehicles for conveying labelling information between interlocutors. When an Elet says 'chair', that properly translates into 'what I call a chair', which could be different to what someone else calls it."

"But that's a little pedantic, isn't it? If they can agree on a common, very precise meaning for verbs and adjectives, why can't they for nouns?" She placed a second plate in the rack.

"I trained in medicine, not linguistics — Roween could perhaps tell you the theory, but not me; I do know, though, that to an Elet, saying that this object is a plate," he held up the one in his hands, "is on a par with saying that this action is putting it away." He placed it in the cupboard. "Naming an object is as meaningful — or as meaningless — as naming an action. It's really just a question of perspective."

She smiled. "I don't pretend to understand, but I do know that *whatever* system it is they employ, it'll be totally self-consistent; I've learned that much already..." She reached for

more soap flakes.

"'The Customs of Elet' is correct when it states that learning their language gives an insight into their minds. But do you like what you see?"

"I like the language itself as a mathematical formalism, but to have to speak it all the time? Is it an aid to creative thought, or a hindrance? It must certainly raise some odd questions of identity: not to have a name, only a marker by which others refer to you."

"Yet is that such a bad thing?" He shrugged. "It gives you a privacy, an isolation; no one can really know *you*. You can be who or what you like, you can be several people, experiment until you find a persona with which you're comfortable. Who cares if you used to be someone else? What's it to them?" He realised he was holding an empty cloth, picked up a cup.

"You can't be *anything*, though, can you? There are physical factors that curb your choice. Without magic, for example, Roween will always have goggly eyes, irrespective of whatever identity she might brew in Elet. And you yourself, you can never be — " hand to mouth, "oh I'm sorry Ihann! I shouldn't have — "

"I can never be the same as other men?"

She flustered. "I — no, I was going to say, you can never be female."

He stopped. "Female? Why would I want..?"

"Well, because..." She was rubbing at some cutlery, a fish knife. "The social advantage of being male outweighs it all, I expect."

"Outweighs *what* all? I could still be a doctor, whatever my gender. This is Bridges, not some pokey little stop-over in sunny Svala." He bowed his head, held his breath a moment. "I apologise. I know there are still ways that men — "

"So that's *not* it? Then why — " She bit her lower lip, looked up a memory. "I ought not really to tell you this," edgily, "it's company confidential, but at Porett Technologies I read a paper from the internal library which proposed a method for consciousness projection. It was way horizon for its time, but I do know that more work was done in the area, classified. Now just *suppose* someone there figured how to cut a proper job of it, offered a service where people could exchange bodies. Would you swap with, say, a female who wanted to be male?"

"Would *I*? Well I might try it, but, I don't know, if it was permanent." He was frowning, had his cheeks raised.

"Well think of it: at the moment, you're attracted to men, but on the whole they're not attracted to you. If you were female, they would be, and *you'd* be properly equipped to respond."

"But I wouldn't find *myself* attractive." He started to dry the second plate.

Conley didn't reply immediately, washed the forks and spoons. "So you *fancy* yourself?" Another pause. "It makes sense that you should, I hadn't given that thought, but — "

"No, no I don't, but that's precisely my point. To attract, people need to feel *attractive*, there's a vanity about it that..." He smiled at her. "I'm talking rubbish, I fear."

"No, not entirely," she grinned, "but I know Roween would disagree rather forcefully!"

"And yet there's something," the cutlery, absently, "some unease I have... I wish I could pin what it was. I know there are people who'd give all they had for a body swap, even if they got one twenty years older than the one they left. Personally, though..." He looked up. "This must sound like an awful slight to womankind?"

"Is it the practical side, having periods, babies?"

"No, not that, I'm a physician, I..." He grunted. "It's emotional."

"You can voice it?"

"Well, yes I can, but it's — "

"Now, now," laughing, "don't be bashful! I won't tell anyone — promise!"

"No, but I know you'll think badly of me, it's selfish, illiberal."

"You can't *help* the way you are, I won't mind, but I'm curious: what *is* it that you find so deterring about becoming female?"

"It's just..." He sighed. "Very well: if I can't have, I don't want to be had."

She paused, digested. "I concede — you're far too male."

Chapter 58

"Forward!" Nic commanded. It walked forward. "Stop! Walk towards me." It walked towards him. "Stop! Walk towards the person in this room you most dislike." It shuffled a foot out, hesitated, didn't take the step.

Ansle nodded, sagely. "I see. Simple commands they can perform without trouble, but anything requiring *thought*..."

"Yes," agreed Nic, "but they *are* able to do pretty well anything that in their previous lives was second nature to them. I can have this one ride a horse because he could do that automatically before he died, but that one over there," he pointed, "was only a beginner, he'd need to think too much — it isn't ingrained in him yet."

"Yet? You mean they can learn?"

He frown-smiled. "Well, not really, it's tricky — given time I suppose they might. You can tell them to copy you in doing a simple task, giving the sequence a name for them to remember — 'make cake' or whatever; later, if you command them to 'make cake', then they'll do so, but only if their memory is up to it. Even then, they'll perform all actions just as they did the first time, and any minor change in circumstances may confuse them. Give them an empty jug instead of one full of milkwater, and they'll probably carry on regardless; swap a fork with a knife, and when it comes to cutting with it they'll falter, won't swap it back."

"What about more complex things? Can they use magic?" It was Nolley who asked, to Ansle's open annoyance.

Nic looked at her, sidelong. "It seems not. We tried with a dead mage: you could tell her to cast a light-prime and she'd make all the right gestures, just as she would have done in life. When she'd reach the end, though, nothing would ever happen."

"Why should that be? I understand the underlying theory of magic to imply that if gestures are made properly, in the correct order, the spell must work regardless of other considerations. Live spellcasters can easily flick long segments while carrying on a conversation, and yet their spells still function; concentration isn't a factor."

He shrugged. "They usually pay attention when the spell is about to be cast, so perhaps the process requires some sentience at that point?"

"But macro-physically, can't spells backfire even when people aren't really attending to their gestures?"

"That's hard to ascertain, General — most miscast sufferers aren't exactly able to tell us anything about it afterwards!"

She opened her hand, conceded.

Ansle glanced over to her, uneasily, checked she'd finished. Satisfied, he turned to his deputy. "Nic, how about *other* types of co-ordinated activity? What's the best it can do?"

"Attack!" he instructed, pointed at Ansle. It advanced, quickly, hands held claw-like before it.

"Stop!" shouted the chancellor, before it reached him. It did. He readjusted his robe. "Very funny, Nic."

He smiled, his moustache adding emphasis. "The more primitive the action, the more likely they are to be able to comply. Killing is apparently something people did instinctively throughout prehistory — it's primal."

"A lot of use if all you have to do to escape death is tell them to stop." Nolley's voice was wry with suspicion.

"We have a simple solution. An establishment in Cala Bay Town is making us some deaf

shots that will blank out users' auditory faculties for about six hours. So, we issue our commands, slap the deaf shots on the prosses, and they can't be given counter-orders. The control spell we use only works for verbal instructions, so there's no danger if the enemy holds up big placards with 'STOP' written on them."

"Do they need food?" interrupted Ansle. "I've organised supplies assuming they do."

Nic nodded. "As with normal prosthetics, they require proper sustenance, yes. Without water, they probably wouldn't last more than about a week, and be largely inoperative within three days. Food's not so essential — perhaps five or six days before they become uselessly weak, over a month before they waste away."

"I suppose you have to *order* them to eat, though..."

"That's correct, but it's advantageous; if we lose track of any of them, they won't last over long. I wouldn't worry about packs of them wandering aimlessly around the countryside, terrorising farmers for the next fifty years!"

Nolley was fidgeting, impatient. "Forgive my scepticism," she paused, ordered her words, "but when you first told me about this project you vouched the opinion that prosthetic brains might be of superior intellect to their originals. However, it transpires that your creations are not merely dim, but they don't even have the basic capacity to realise they should eat when they're hungry. Even *animals* can do that."

"The problem," began Nic, "is that they have no motivation. Insofar as processing power is concerned, if we give them tasks that they internalised when alive, they do indeed consistently out-perform their previous best. One of my students is working on a clerk at the moment, he can total lists of numbers about twenty percent faster than it seems he could before. His brain, it seems, is running quicker, but there are few opportunities for us to exploit the speed-up. They just can't think for themselves."

"But why is that?" she continued. "You're not proposing that there's something in live people akin to a soul, are you?"

"Not in the least. My explanation is more related to causality. Compare a person to a single log fire, burning in a grate. If we throw water on the fire, it will go out. We can wipe off the moisture and leave the log in the sun to parch — perhaps eventually even getting it drier than it was while burning. However, we also need a spark to set it aflame. Without a spark, a log can only burn if it is already aflame. With people, I believe that thinking proceeds only as a continuation of existing thought. Our magic can rebuild a body to superior specifications, but it doesn't provide the initial conditions necessary to set the mind in motion."

Ansle raised his hand slightly. "I think I should say that Nic and I differ on this point. In *my* opinion, the prosthetic spell damages the brain when it reconstitutes it, prohibiting the higher mental processes. That's what I shall be telling Justan, anyway; otherwise, he might ask for guarantees that nothing could happen which might act as a catalyst to start the prosses off thinking. He prefers them as they are, inert."

"Me too." She glanced at the vacant face of the animated corpse, rubbed her arm, subconsciously. "So, Professor Nicvia, how many do you have, and how many can you make?"

Nic walked to a desk, pulled a notepad from a drawer, passed it to her. "We only have a couple of dozen test models at the moment, but once we start full production we'll soon exceed that. Casting time is about thirty hours — no need for wakers — but we're having to use cheap labour and there'll be a consequently high restart rate due to errors. Calculating from the maximum number of workers we can fit in the castle, the turnover comes out at around a thousand a day."

"A thousand a day?" Slowly, she clasped the back of her neck, scowled, considered. "Of course, if you billeted the castle garrison outside, that would release another few hundred beds for spellcasters, and also lower the number of uninvolved people who knew what was going on inside." She scanned the notes. "Furthermore, your equations have rather pessimistic

values for the coefficients representing expected gesture rates."

Nic looked at Ansle.

"I think, professors, you could probably cope with fifteen hundred bodies a day. And if *I* can conclude that after a cursory examination of the facts, so can Justan. He'll order you to improve your productivity, and that will mean you'll lose the excess that you were hoping to keep for yourselves." She tossed the pad onto the desk. "I suggest you come up with a more plausible set of figures."

Nic grinned, returned to the drawer, withdrew a single sheet of vellum. "Justan would think something was amiss if he couldn't squeeze more production out of us. Fifteen or sixteen hundred, yes, that's what I expect he'll press for." He held out the paper, Nolley took it. "Those are the true estimates. I'm confident we can shift two thousand a day once the factory is running to full capacity."

Nolley looked them over, coldly.

"Nic," said Ansle, smugly, "you're a marvel."

Chapter 59

Conley was sitting at the desk, staring through the library walls and out to infinity. She'd been memorising Eletic words for feelings — always used as binary, directed relationships, 'I am happy with you', never in terms of personal absolutes. Something about it had set her mind strolling, and when the door opened she was daydreaming about Rhiev.

"I'm back, Con."

She broke from her reverie in an instant, focused on the world. "Ro? I didn't hear you arrive, I..." Words took too long, she kicked back her chair and ran to her friend, hugged her, smiled widely, so pleased. Roween held her tight.

"Oh Con, you're still here, I've been so worried..."

Conley felt her throat lumping, cleared it so she could say her line. "Guahiu laegiala faa neeth caigiala."

Roween caught back her chuckle before it broke to a sob. "And I'm happy that you're safe, too, Con."

She felt her own eyes misting.

* * *

She'd been thirsty after her ride, drank cold water, it'd helped. By the time Ihann had finished with his patient her tears had dried, although her face was left red, blotchy. Ihann embraced her, but he seemed to detect a sadness that Conley, in her joy, had missed. He held her shoulders at arms' length, looked into her crossy eyes, waited.

"He didn't show; Medreph, he wasn't there." Her voice was shaky; she was trying to sound firm but it wasn't convincing.

"Do you know why?" asked Ihann.

"There was a note, he sent it by bird. He's still in the wilderness, waiting for a messenger from Cala."

"Cala?" Conley was surprised. "But he's a month out of Cala at least!"

"You think I don't know?" Roween lashed. "I've been gutting myself over it for the past week." Her cheeks were flushed, eyes watery again.

Ihann brought her close. "Conley didn't mean anything, Roween, she was just asking, of course you're upset."

Roween sniffled, rubbed her nose. "It was important, we agreed, we *had* to meet. I tried so hard, I thought I wouldn't make it, I'd not be there on time, but I was, after all Con and I went through. But I never supposed Medreph wouldn't show, it didn't come to me, he'd just *be* there, that's all, all I ever expected, but he wasn't."

Ihann stroked her hair, soothing. "Medreph is from Elet, he's a free spirit, he isn't bound to keep to arrangements..."

Conley felt intrusive, stayed silent.

"No, it's not that, no, Ihann, his note, it changes everything. The Lowlandic legation in Cala, they were given information, don't you see?" She shook her head. "Oh, this is useless, I have to compose myself, I can't just, blubbing is silly, I shouldn't have burned the note..." She pulled away from Ihann, stumbled out of the room.

Conley moved, following, but Ihann took her wrist. "No, let her deal with this herself. She's had it inside her all the way back, she just wants a release. Half an hour, she'll be fine..."

* * *

It took an hour, but she'd bathed, tidied herself up, changed from her travelling clothes. Ihann and Conley were still in the library, playing cards.

"I'm ready, now," she announced. "Sorry about earlier."

"That's alright, Roween, we share. Take a seat, start from the beginning." He laid his hand face-down, as if he and Conley would be continuing their game later.

Roween slumped in a chair. Conley registered it as her normal slump, not her distressed slump; so she *was* back to her self, sure enough.

"I arrived at the coaching inn to find a note waiting for me from Medreph. It had been there for around three weeks. There's a Lowlandic diplomatic mission in Cala, and someone — anonymous, but Medreph can guess who — sent them an envelope found at Porett Technologies. The contents were very interesting. It was written by Porett's secretary to herself."

"To herself?" Conley didn't expect an answer, she just found it queer.

"Apparently, Porett, the man, had husked her up, offered her some kind of deal whereby he'd unhusk her, permanent, if she did something for him — please don't ask me what, Con. His price was that her memory of what he'd done to her would go. So, she wrote herself a note to find later."

"And did she?" asked Ihann.

Roween shrugged. "Medreph didn't think so, wrote she's locked away in an asylum somewhere, staring blank wherever you point her. Someone else found what she'd written, gave it and some of her effects to the Lowlanders, they comsphered Medreph about it. Thing is, this secretary, Elidia, she knew a fair amount regarding Porett's plans. In particular, she knew he killed Queen Mitya, and why, put it down on paper."

Conley and Ihann glanced at each other, back to Roween.

"Mitya had this idea for a kind of magical plague. Elidia's details are sketchy, but enough. Once released, it spreads by magic, kills people. No non-magical defence. Medreph is waiting for the note itself to reach him from Cala before continuing on his way. If he can get it to the Eletic grand emissary, it might sway Justan, prevent his attacking the Lowlands."

"You really think it would?" Conley was puzzled.

Roween smiled, sadly. "No, I don't. Justan will reason like you, that the Elets should be *more* likely to surrender, not less, with an open threat of death looming over them. He won't understand — and boasting of his power will only serve to heighten their resolve. There's a chance he doesn't actually *know* about the viral spell, in which case he'll have Porett strung up, but I doubt it, he's too shrewd, he'll have found out somehow by now, taken control."

Ihann strummed on the desk, once. "This is grave news, Roween. If Justan chooses to ignore the warnings, then there will be no further discussion: the Elets will attack."

"I don't follow all this," announced Conley, suddenly. "Because Justan may have access to some new weapon from Porett Technologies, that makes the Elets even more likely to challenge him? But he'll use it to wipe them out! He can easily obliterate them anyway, even *without* any magical help."

Roween held up her hand, motioned to stop. She waited a moment before speaking,

too long, sensed it shallow, over-dramatic. "Listen, Con. The Elets know that Justan will be unable to use magic, because, well before they attack, we — you — will have banished it forever. In their minds, the question is whether to leave the resulting mess to sort itself out, or to help it by purging Justan's entire empire, stopping it from reconstituting to cause even worse bloodshed later on."

"I know all that, Ihann explained..."

"Well that's good," Roween continued. "Then you must see how this changes things. If Justan doesn't know about the plague, or doesn't intend to use it, that adds weight to our case, that the Elets shouldn't unseat him. If, however, he is fully appraised of it, and even has every intention of unleashing it on the Lowlanders, that justifies the other point of view: Justan is corrupted by power to such an extent that there will not be an end to his menace until he, and all his supporters, are dead."

Conley paused. "But of course he'll still threaten to use it, he doesn't know that he won't be able to!" She realised, after she'd said it, what she'd implied.

"Therein," said Ihann, "lies the heart of the matter. It's a beautiful irony, of the kind the Elets truly relish. His future has been placed in his own hands; his actions judge him. Whatever he would do unprovoked unto the Elets, they will do in kind unto him. It's perfect for them. They know how he's most *likely* to behave, yes, but they can still give him an opportunity to prove them wrong, escape his fate. They'll only condemn him if he condemns himself."

"I don't know if Ihann has explained, Con, but if the Elets do decide to attack, people are going to die in their hundreds of thousands. Innocent people, not just the ringleaders, they'll be swatted like flies. Too many, and unnecessarily. We have to stop it."

Conley frowned. "Yes, I agree, but how can we help? If Justan ignores the Eletic emissary, there's nothing we can do to prevent the subsequent invasion of his empire."

"But there is, Con. We can get rid of magic before he implements his decision."

* * *

They left Ihann and Bridges behind, followed the main road towards Warnhem, capital of the Lowlandic duchy of the same name. Roween was quiet, kept her eyes ahead but didn't appear to take much notice of anything. Finally, Conley felt she had to say something.

"So, where exactly is this village?"

Roween looked up. "Sorry, Con?"

She'd known she'd have to repeat her question. "This village where we're meeting Medreph, where is it?"

"Suadh Varl Na? It's at the edge of the plateau, the first place in Elet you reach from the wilderness."

"Suadh Varl Na — that's Tall Cliffs, right?"

Roween smiled. "You're good!"

She grinned. "I wasn't sure about 'Suadh', but if it's at the edge of a plateau..."

"Well, if you're interested I can teach you some more of the language while we're waiting."

"It'll pass the time, yes. How long before Medreph joins us?"

Roween looked across to her, lopsidedly. "Hard to say. The wilderness can be dangerous, it's a huge forest, few tracks, fewer roads. Most people think it's just a haunt for renegades,

bandits, but it's not, there are whole tribes there, ancient, primitive."

"Like the Guels, you mean?"

She shook her head, emphatically. "The Guels were near-civilised by the Estavian empire, but these forest dwellers were left alone, little use to their overlords. I don't know much about them, they have no writing, no literature, their lore and legend is passed down orally. Medreph's knowledge is more extensive, he's heard a lot of their history, experienced a little of their culture, he trades with them a bit, thinking of writing a book..."

Conley understood. "You worry too much, Ro, he'll be fine, you'll see. When did he say he'd arrive?"

"He'll be in the village any time about a week from now onwards, at a guess." She nodded to herself. "I'm sorry, Con, you're right, he'll be there." Smiled; she tried to look cheery.

"But if he isn't?"

"If he isn't, we'll travel to Liagh Na Laerich without him, I know what to do there. Lauthil or Chenii-Imor will chaperone us."

Conley put up her hand. "Ah, now you're going too fast. First of all, who are Lauthil and Chenii-Imor, and second, what do you mean by 'chaperone'?"

"Of course, you were asleep when he talked about them. They're two of his children, they live near Suadh Varl Na, we haven't met but they'll help if Medreph himself can't. They may even be there already, case he's early."

"And 'chaperone'?"

Roween looked skywards, at the clouds. "We'd never pass as locals, and without someone obviously accompanying us we may have some difficulty moving through Elet at all. In times of unrest, people will be very suspicious, stop us, question us, all the time. Better we have someone along who looks responsible, so folk know we're accounted for."

"Strange place..."

"You'll be saying that all the time, once we get there..."

Conley looked to her left, followed Roween's gaze. "It's a storm."

"Too far north to catch Medreph, and we'll be safely in Warnhem if it comes our way."

She waited a moment, wondered whether her question would set Ro off again, chanced it. "Something I've been meaning to ask: why didn't we just tag along with Medreph all the way? Why did we split up and take different routes?"

Roween was still staring out to the east. "We couldn't go through the wilderness because we're female. The forest people, they have primitive customs... There are other reasons, too."

"But why couldn't he come with us?"

"He has some things he's bringing, magic. He couldn't take wagons across warring countries, had to go some other way. Ships were an option, or barges up the Leskina, but the ports are watched, too hard to smuggle stuff that way."

Conley clicked her tongue, thinking. "He's bringing zip; that's for our benefit."

"Sharp, Con. Binders, comspheres, roughwear, light sets, they'll all go in the library with the books. If you don't pick up the reflex from that lot, you never will..."

"Another reason you couldn't travel with him?"

She nodded, smiled. "I wouldn't want to wipe it clean. Even as it is, we'll have to send it on ahead through Elet, I can't have it close in case there's an accident." She patted the neck of

her horse. "No, we had to travel separately, didn't have any choice."

"So what determined our route? Why didn't we go by sea ourselves?"

Roween finally left the sky, looked towards her companion. "We could have, some of the way, if you'd been well. I told you when we set off, though, I wanted to educate you."

"Against magic, you mean?"

She shrugged a shoulder. "There's time, yet. You've come along in other respects, so have I, I've learned a few things about myself, grown up a bit more. Just wish I could poke you off spell worship."

"When we reach Warnhem, I'll let you have another try. It's awkward conducting an argument on horseback."

Chapter 60

If Porett had so desired, he could have stolen everything stowed within the box on Idric's ship. A few gestures, and the contents of the two containers would have exchanged, he'd have been able to take whatever he chose. Transporting goods quickly across large distances had been the primary goal of the Trans/Disc project — faster and safer than traditional methods. Unfortunately, the necessary enchantments were very expensive to produce, with a final post-optimisation figure of just under one megagesture per unit. His labs were working on a new model with an overall red bias, as opposed to the green of his present system; that might get the total down to 700K or so, but actual transmission would need a day's worth of flicking for every use. For the existing boxes, it took only a minute. Different views of gesture-efficiency... Either way, one Trans/Disc module would still retail at more than Idric's entire ship, spice cargo and all.

He'd been hoping to make the first exchange before lunch, but had been delayed: the second box hadn't cleared customs in Trilith as quickly as he'd intended. Just bad luck, Ansle wouldn't suspect anything — he was tracking two mock-up copies of the boxes left back in Cala, identical to the originals in every detail except for being completely non-functioning. Well, almost completely: if someone cast the gestures on one to initiate an exchange, it would cause colour loss and a nice big bang instead. Porett had upped his insurance cover, of course — might as well get something back if it did pop.

The afternoon's trip was going to be a fact-finding exercise. He hadn't decided whether to recruit his mercenaries in Murak (where they were plentiful but distant), in the former democracies (which would be quicker, but everyone was an army deserter) or in the Lowlands (if they had any pay-soldiers at all). His main Seesel contact, Lauss Wineman, was certain that people *could* be found, but he had a rather lax attitude to life, and either suffered from a congenital smile or was happied out on fuzzy-dust all the time.

He tapped his com-3. "Talk time," he said, the phrase he now used as proof of identity to his captive persona.

His other self looked up. "Just finished speaking to Penderley, there's a grad at the Academy, Thorewt or something, he'll join the team but wants his doctorate first. Maybe six months, he's writing up."

"He'll replace Vyval fully?"

"Yes, better in a way, less of a theoretician, likes to cut. I offered him 15K a year, he'll take it, 5K more than he can hope to take lecturing, and he's too specialised for much else."

He nodded. "Good. Any ideas yet on self-linking?"

The image shrugged.

Porett smiled; it still amused him how his second soul echoed his movements perfectly, every nuance. No great revelation, though, seeing himself as others did; he was just how he'd always expected he would be, really. "Well I have had a few thoughts myself; I don't think it'll take much, just need to find someone we can trust to fix my focus."

"Anyone come to mind?"

"Why I tapped in. Have you heard from Roenna?"

"Ro?" He smiled, slowly. "Yes, she'd do it, wouldn't she? We can trust her, fine, and she's not an employee so we *could* tell her the details. She might even throw a few ideas."

"So she hasn't called in, then? About the translation?"

"Bit early for her, especially if she was working late. I can try her sphere, see if she's with us yet?"

"Why not? Speak to you soon." He tapped out.

* * *

She answered after three or four flashes, awake and about, near her com-1. Porett couldn't tell if she'd been up long — her hair was a total mess, but then it was always like that. He spotted the shot on her temple, worn label, one she'd cooked herself from a spent Evergreen. *Naughty girl, Roenna, time to snap into reality...* Cheerfully, "Morning, Ro, how'd it go last night?"

"Hello, Topper," she grinned, eyes half-closed, her head continually making tiny movements in all directions. "Wait a tiny-winey," her voice was almost musical, "I'll just... nearly finished anyway..." She peeled off the shot, took a deep breath, quickly. "Gods, those are strong!"

"Still flicking your own, Ro?" He'd liked it at first that she'd changed so little since their student days, yet why did her old habit bother him now? He must be pruding up! Or maybe he'd always disapproved?

"Celebrating, Topper, your Chaienish girl's a smarty! We both went into cut mode, zipped through the book real quick, finished about three thirty." She looked over her shoulder, down, Porett couldn't see exactly where. "She's still snoozing, I think the happy was too much for her."

He widened his eyes. "You gave her one of your specials?"

"She asked! Said it would relax us. Don't think she's used to them though, *are* you Tulip?" She glanced low to her right again.

"What did the book say?"

"Oh, she'll do a full translation for you over the next four weeks, maybe five. It'd be quicker, but she can't control those East/Trad lenses you sent, without me it takes her a good half hour to focus on the next page."

"Well if you'd talked Athur Sage into taking off the seal..."

"I told you, Topper, he doesn't know the sequence, he did it random. He was real sorry, but he screwed it deliberate, so's he couldn't remove it, ever. I told you!" She looked hurt.

He felt guilty. "Yes, well, sorry Ro, I didn't mean to dig at you. So what did you learn, anyway?"

She grinned again, eyebrows kicking up. "Right, well, it's a book on Chaienish magic, as practised many Kyears ago. Makes some pretty wild claims, what theory there is sounds wackers to me, all develops from this premise that there's no limit to what magic can do. Wish they'd demonstrated the idea, made the text self-translating or something!" She chuckled.

"How did their magic cut? They didn't have gestures..."

"No gestures, that's right, same as they still do it in Chaien today. Some dollop of a priest kills a goat, and before you know it there are daisies growing out of your eyebrows. There's a ceremony beforehand, course, and a lot of chanting, moan moan moan, droning on about what it is they want the gods to grant them. According to the book, about the only thing they won't ever get is the goat back to life."

"So when you say 'anything', you mean the range of possible spells is the same as with our gesture magic, but the processes of casting and proving are less well-defined?"

"I mean..." She stopped, blinked a few times. "Sorry, Topper, where was I? Think I took off my shot too quick." She rubbed her temple, screwed up her face, pouted. "Ah! Remembered! Range! Well, that's the interesting bit! Although they don't really know how to ask for things in such a way as to get exactly what they want — as faced by what the gods *decide* to give them — our book assumes that sooner or later they'll crack that minor obstacle,

and that then they can pull pretty much anything. Course, the author was a bitty-witty optimistic, they still have exactly the same probbles in working new spells today, but if anyone ever does find out where they're doing it wrong, this book will be ready for them!"

Porett tightened his pony tail, not that he needed to in the com-3, just something he sometimes did when he was thinking. "Sorry, Ro, still don't see where this gets us. If they could formalise their casting, their system would at best be equal in power to ours, just with phrases instead of gestures. Perhaps more expressive, but paid for by harder proofs."

"Well that's where it gets real real real interesting! In the book, they have no idea of any limits to magic, so it's an axiom that when they do get to work spells as advertised, they'll be able to cut anything at all with them — and that includes changing how magic itself functions. A zinger, isn't it?"

His eyes were wide. "They what? But that's ridiculous! If that happened, they might crumple it up for everyone!"

"Yes, they say that too, so they go into lots of possibilities, think of all these cloudhead magic schemes that might build in some robustness, stop people from misusing it, so on. Really brambly, tied in knots so tight you wonder whether the author spent too long in a mirrorhall. I'm going to have to read it again". There was a moan from the floor behind her, she frowned at its source. "Dearie here is coming to, expect she'll want me to explain things to her, what she's called, where she is, little things..."

"I'll let you get on then, Ro, thanks for our chat, might call you later about coming up to Trilith. Oh, last thing, what did the book conclude in the end?"

"Pointless, really, it couldn't see a solution, dooms us to much nothingness. Spooky, had me worried, hope it never cuts."

"If it does?"

She frowned. "Not pretty, there might be something fancy could be done, but my guts tell me the only answer would be use it to turn off magic for keeps. Drastic, hey? Can you imagine?" She shuddered, exaggeratedly.

Porett was already imagining.

Chapter 61

The guesthouse was small, family-run, built on three floors just inside the city wall. There was no dining room, but across the street stood a friendly-looking restaurant, so Roween suggested they ate there.

Inside, it was panelled with dark wood, glowing in the light of oil lamps. The air was rich with the smells of meat and sauces, intermingling with a smoky sweetness. There were other people already seated, locals eating out; the storm in the east had stayed there. Diners noticed Conley as she entered, her tall, confident manner singling her from the otherwise dim cosiness of their surroundings.

Roween chose a table beside the window because, paradoxically, it afforded more privacy than the other, more central position they were offered. The blind was drawn, shutting out the darkness of the street, but she could still peek behind it, steal ten-second segments from the lives of passers-by.

"Those men, they're looking at you," noted Conley, behind her menu.

"They're looking at you, Con, not me," Roween answered, knowing she was taking bait.

Conley quickly glanced to the wall-side table. "No, Ro, it's not me, it's you, one of them is — no, don't turn round, he'll see you!"

She frowned. "What if he does? He'll get a better view of my eyes, that's what he wants..." She faced him, glared her best glare. He laughed, self-conscious, returned to his meal, his conversation.

"You shouldn't have done that," Conley reproached her, "he probably had a fancy for you, you've put him off now."

Roween sighed, picked up her menu again. "When men look at you, Con, it's because they're filled with desire. When they look at me, it's merely freak-watching."

"Don't be silly, Ro! Sometimes, I think you're as bad as I am, always running yourself down. You're not unattractive; Lord Sennary liked you."

Ba-dumph. "Lord Sennary?" *Oh, more bait, foolish girl.* "No he didn't, Con, you know he didn't. You're the one he has his," pause, "eyes on. I'm just a convenience, a means by which he can wheedle himself into your affections."

"You really think so?"

Yes, she's fishing alright. "Course I think so, he dropped me like a child discards a boring toy, soon as you appeared. There's a fire in him when you're around, don't say you haven't noticed, I know you have."

Conley pursed her lips, coyly. "Well, he is titled, and he's the right age..."

"To say nothing of his build, his smile, his voice, his," pause again, she didn't mean to, "eyes."

"He hasn't really shown me any attention, though, too shy, more so than I expected. He acts close, but he's distant. I'd like to meet him again when all this is over, get to know him a bit better, find out what he's really like."

"Maybe he has a girlfriend already? He knows how to use those fine looks, that innocent air of boyish charm — he probably has several..."

Conley missed the sarcasm, pondered. "No, I don't think so, he's too straight, he'd have said something when I, you know, when I, well..."

"Yes, I know." *Life, it's difficult enough having you drooling over him at all, never mind harping on to me about it.*

"I wonder, when I get back home, how I can just bump into him again, see how he feels about me, maybe give him a little help." She giggled.

Make it sound unromantic. "He'll be at his farm, I expect, helping out. They'll flood within days when their weather returns to normal." *Why isn't there ever a waiter when you want one?*

"His farm? I thought he had a castle?"

She raised her menu, waved it a bit to summon attention. "Castle Whiting, yes, in Davia, I think he lets it to pay off his father's debts, some company or other that does weekend deer-hunts. I don't really remember."

A short, dumpy-looking woman breezed out from behind a door, her slightly grubby apron the only evidence that she was what the menu referred to as "prompt, efficient service". Roween breathed deeply. *Relief!*

* * *

"Magic," said Roween, "is frightening. Can we agree on that?"

Conley waved her fork, swallowed. "No. Some of the *uses* to which magic is put are frightening, but magic itself isn't."

Roween jerked back her head, closed her eyes. *This is going to be impossible!* She leaned forward again. "Very well, Con, I'll argue within your frame. Some of the uses to which magic is put are frightening. Others are complete, undiluted evil."

"I wouldn't go as far as to say that."

"Porett is working on a magic-borne plague which will completely eradicate the Lowlanders and the Elets. You tell me *that* isn't evil?"

She nodded. "I concede. If he really can cut it, it's evil."

"He can, I've figured out how. He sets a matrix on someone, and propagates it to other people nearby. The original matrix decays, feeding off matter, cancelling it with magic." Her voice felt hard. "It'll throw off waves of heat, too, probably kill the victims long before mass loss does. That won't stop the spell, though, it'll keep on going, it doesn't care, eventually it'll gobble up the whole body, no mess, everything left nice and tidy." She laughed, bitterly.

"He sets a matrix? You mean a focal matrix? But how can he make it decay? Focal matrices are either not there, or everywhere for all time, coexisting with matter harmlessly."

"That's the normal, everyday working view of things, yes, but you can bind two matrices together in what the theoreticians call matrix-space. Once you've done that, you can then bring them closer until they resonate. When they do, you slowly move them apart again, thereby adjusting the phase, so they have to pull something in just to keep stable. With no other matrices bound to them, they'll take matter. I haven't yet worked how he does the contagion, I'm not topside on meta-matrix operations."

Conley laughed, stabbed at a carrot. "You sound it to me, Ro!"

"No," she sipped at her mineral water, "I didn't bother taking it any further once I realised it was pointless. When you think deeply about matrices, you begin to wonder where the foundations lie. Everything seems to be built on top of everything else, with nothing at the bottom to prop it all up. You have the real world, supposedly overlaid by matrices in the matrix-space world, with that world in turn overlaid by meta-matrices, and that one by meta-meta-matrices, so on forever. But there's nothing causal to link them together, no real reason why it should be that way, it's just a handy way of looking at things to explain how spells work."

Conley was staring at her intently, and it hit her she'd said too much.

"Go on, Ro, this is interesting."

More water. "No, Con, that's enough for now, let's get back to magic use." *Give her no time to interrupt.* "The whole science is advancing so quickly that new spells are coming up before people know how to deal with them. Sooner or later, there's going to be an accident of gigantic proportions. Porett will cook a counter-plague that will prevent his creation from spreading indiscriminately, but who's to say that in twenty years time some bored undergrad isn't going to stumble across the same idea and let loose an epidemic before anyone has a matching cure? What about the spells we haven't *discovered* yet, that turn the atmosphere to steam for twenty minutes, or redirect the rays of the sun? Or the feedback explosions that destroy entire cities? It's getting out of hand — no, it's *got* out of hand."

Conley was chewing, slowly.

"All this is possible within the theory that you believe describes how magic works. From my standpoint, it's worse. I know you don't give it any credit, but spells, gestures, they're just a structure imposed by us from the outside to explain something much deeper. Magic doesn't function that way at all. Someone — you, I hope — is going to have absolute power, total. Do you understand what that *means*? Your every whim, every desire, can be made true, whether it adheres to existing laws of the universe or not, like in dreams." Conley flinched. "You'll be able to do anything, literally, even if it's speculative, 'make this creature behave in a way which will interest me'. It sounds seductive, doesn't it? It's not, though, it's meaningless, it makes *everything* meaningless. Unless you relinquish it, you may as well sit under six happy shots for the rest of your life."

Conley spoke, quietly. "Magic can be used in despicable ways, yes, but it can also be used for good. It could be modified, it could — "

"No, no Con, it has to go. The mechanism which drives it has to be constrained, you can't turn some watered-down version of magic into a physical law."

"You said I could do anything."

"You get what you will for."

"So if I will for spells to work only up to two K gestures in length?"

"Can you be sure there aren't any offensive spells below that cut-off?"

"I could will there to be no offensive spells at all."

"But according to you, it's people who make magic good or bad — almost any spell can be used for evil, given appropriate circumstances"

"So I just say that no spell can be used for evil."

Roween shook her head. "Evil from whose point of view? Porett might not think his plague is evil! Yet some religious types already say that *any* interference with nature at all is completely wrong."

"From my point of view."

"But that will change, Con, unless you want to remain invariant, never adapting, never having new experiences. What if someone wants to do something for fun which is basically evil, like it maybe kills someone, but overall it's for the greater good, saving the lives of thousands? Evil at what level?"

"I'd have to think about it."

Roween dropped her shoulders, gripped her knife, outsized in her small fist. "Con, that's the problem, you'll *always* have to think about it. Whatever you want to do, there'll invariably be details you hadn't considered, and when you look at those there'll arise yet more."

She frowned. "What if I wrapped that up as part of what I willed for? If I said I wanted

the details all handled too, as if I'd thought them through?"

"I don't know, it may be that you couldn't think them through, they might be never ending, moving away as fast as you approach them. Life knows what would happen then, probably magic would stop — I'd hope that if you thought about it long enough, that's the conclusion you'd eventually reach anyway."

"What if I decreed that I could think them through, and that magic wouldn't stop?"

Roween looked upwards in despair. "How would I know, Con? It sounds like it would mean you were willing a change in your thinking processes. If you try and stop that from happening, there'll be some other ambiguity you hadn't thought of, you're working from within an enclosed system, you can't get out, it surrounds you whatever you do. The only way to break free is to smash the whole edifice."

Conley smiled. "Why am I arguing? I know you're right. But before I turn off magic for eternity, however I'm to do it, I may exercise my omnipotent powers just a teensy little bit."

Roween breathed out, long, for the moment resigned. "How teensy a little bit?"

"One immortality, two resurrections, and a small gift for someone I care about." She picked up a glass tablepot, what looked like grey pepper inside it. "Is this some kind of seasoning?"

"It's a mushroom taste-enhancer, makes you more sensitive to flavouring, gives you a warm, tipsy-smiley feeling."

Conley put it down.

Chapter 62

Sennary strode down the long, bare corridors, following the unctuous, one-time Trade Minister of Davia whose function it now was to prime people prior to their meeting Justan. Sennary wasn't sure whether her irritatingly ingratiating manner was natural or affected, but it certainly had the desired effect: you were overcome with joy when finally admitted to the presence of The King himself.

The hall was large, white, a lower ceiling than he'd expected. Justan was seated at a table, signing papers proffered by a thin, beaky-looking secretary permanently hovering in his mid-fifties. Sennary bowed, watched his king dismissed the scribe with a wave of the hand.

"Lord Sennary, you travel quickly; I wasn't expecting you until tomorrow." He rose, pocketed a holed, gold medallion from the tabletop.

"I rode all night, your majesty; the mage-storm forming to the west is pulling in cloud from all around — if I'd rested I could have been caught in the rains."

Justan grinned. "My apologies; these large-scale magics have second-level effects that are not always desirable. The frontal system will be ready to move in two or three days, according to the MSR."

"Towards the Lowlands?" He realised his question was naïve. "Floods, I see, they don't like water..."

"There won't be enough to cause widespread irreparable damage, just a peripheral amount to worry them, to show them a little of our power. I have other ideas for the substance of the downpour."

"You think they'll surrender without a fight?"

Justan looked at Sennary's hand; it was clenched. "They don't appear to care *who* rules them, so long as their supplies of drugs aren't affected; that's what I find intriguing. Sit down?" He indicated a tall-backed chair facing his throne, walked over.

"You're wondering why the Messenger never invaded."

"The more I find out about the situation, the stranger it seems. In two days' time, I'm holding an audience with an envoy from the Elets. They have made some 'suggestions' that at first seem rather amusing, but which on closer inspection perhaps have body. They back them up with carefully-worded threats, stated unemotionally, but showing a great deal of forethought. Their central demand is that we do not invade the Lowlands."

Sennary considered. Was Justan asking his advice? Or had he been summoned here for some other purpose? *Be noncommittal, see.* "We can assume that the Messenger received a similar ultimatum, and listened to it."

"He did: my search squads found the original letter in the records. His followers burned entire offices, destroying name-lists, but they didn't torch absolutely everything: many comparatively unimportant documents in out-of-the-way rooms escaped their attentions, the Messenger's letter from the Elets being among them. It's similar to mine in its overall requirements, but it carries no details of what the Elets planned to do if their wishes were not observed. I assume they supposed he knew."

"The danger with barbarians is always that there are so many of them, they can sustain tremendous losses; they're also very mobile. They could cause considerable — " he stopped; Justan had signalled him to do so.

"The Elets are not barbarians. The more I learn about them, the more they concern me. The Lowlandic countries are an ideal buffer between the Elets and the other nations of the north. They're small principalities, loosely federated only so as to share a single currency and certain common institutions — overseas trade delegations, embassies..."

Sennary was nodding. "Yes, the way they are organised *is* very convenient for the Elets. They're like the Purasans, in a way: it's hard for them to unite for long enough to attack their neighbours, but if they themselves are invaded then they'll fight as one."

"The comparison is not exact, because the Lowlanders are kept particularly docile by the drugs they all take. I've had some research done: their primary intake is of a substance called 'Bliss', which they make from the tap root of a certain swamp plant. Historically, it was introduced into the Lowlands shortly after a great flood fifty or sixty years ago; people found it sprouting everywhere. Clearly, it was water-borne, but as to how it actually got into the water, no-one seems to know. At the time, no-one cared, either, particularly once its 'therapeutic' effects were discovered — far more pleasant and safer than what they'd been stuffing into themselves before. Now here's the disturbing part: where do you suppose the plant grows naturally?"

"I'm hoping you're not going to say Elet..."

Justan folded his arms, shook his head, tut-tutted. "Nothing so obvious: Ca-Atl. It's their most sacred herb, they use it in initiation ceremonies for the mortal lovers of their god-rulers." A chuckle. "Very mortal — they kill them after a year, pregnant or not." He waited for Sennary's smile, continued. "The question is, how did plants that grow in the protected salt marshes of Ca-Atl get washed up in the Lowlands? More to the point, who put them there — because it sure as magic didn't happen spontaneously. The Ca-Atlans wouldn't have done it themselves at any price, so someone else must have stolen cuttings and grown them secretly. To account for the kind of numbers that finally appeared in the wash of the Lowlandic flood, the herb must have been cultivated for decades in advance of its being used. And once the perpetrators were ready with enough plants, how long did they have to wait beyond that time before a Cold Sea deluge occurred of sufficient magnitude that they could use it surreptitiously to supply the Lowlanders with the raw materials for their own Bliss industry, and tie them to its charms?"

Sennary blew a silent whistle. "If what you suspect is correct, then the Elets are far more ambitious and calculating than anyone had previously imagined."

"That's why this emissary's visit is no small matter. I don't believe they will bluff; if they tell us they want the Lowlands left alone, they think they can support their bluster with action."

"I don't know." He rubbed the stubble on his chin with his thumb, a raking noise that spoke of his early start to the day. "We have magic; they must know that however good their army is, they can't prevail against us forever. Eventually, they'll be sliced."

Justan raised a hand. "Unless, for some reason, magic won't enter the equation. Remember what happened at the Erva? You weren't there, but..."

Sennary closed his eyes. So that was why Justan had brought him here. "Conley and Roween. They brought down the Messenger, and now you think they're going to help the Elets try to bring down you."

"I've discussed it with the Academy's theoreticians. Conley's reputation is formidable: if there is anyone in the world capable of tuning a wide-area antimagic blanket from this Roween's coarse, individual-specific spell, it's her."

Sennary bit on his tongue; of course, Justan didn't know Conley's secret. A question then rose in his mind: why was Roween tolerating Conley's presence at all, if, as she must, she knew the mage was a fraud? She wouldn't need a scrap of help from Conley to prove any spell in existence.

"Lord Sennary, you will have realised by now that I wish you to find both Dr Conley of Malith and her companion, Roween Sage, and to prevent them by force from interfering in any way with the use of magic. I would prefer you to keep at least one of them alive, but if circumstances prevent that then so be it."

Sennary was skidding through the possibilities, bought time. "I am relieved of my

command?"

"You wanted to return to more active service, and this is your chance. You can draw on whatever resources you require, or even *think* you may require. A large army would be somewhat conspicuous, but a small unit, perhaps, moving at night?" He eyed Sennary, closely.

"No, no, it would have to be done solo." *How can I justify that?* "Nothing covert, subterfuge is out, we'd be recognised immediately for what we were, couldn't swing it. One person, moving alone, heavily armed and on a good horse, he could maybe get through without being taken. Enough of Porett's wakers, and I could travel virtually non-stop."

"So you know where to find these women: that's good."

"I have a sure idea, yes..." He suddenly remembered something. "The storm, I'll need to speak to Ansle, have him call it off."

Justan smiled, one-sidedly. "Don't concern yourself with the chancellor, Lord Sennary, he isn't reliable. Draw up your proposed route, and I'll personally ensure that it's clear of bad weather. The storm's creation will still proceed, but I intend to send it on to Elet: if everyone except you is mudding up under its effects, your quarry will be easier to overtake."

"It's that important?"

He nodded. "Paramount."

Sennary back-gripped the hilt of his sword. "I'll make preparations."

"You have three days."

"Three days?" *That all?!* "But I'll have to find an enhanced horse, fix up supplies, organise maps, get myself tagged..."

Justan was looking at him, patiently. "Time is not with us. I *would* have said leave tomorrow, the very day I expected you to arrive here, but I want you to listen to what the Eletic grand emissary has to say. I intend to use Porett's truth shots to find out exactly what the Elets know, and what they really intend to do. They *may* be hoping to gain some power over spells, but they may even have some Chaienish-like magic of their own. It might be that Conley is deeply involved, but perhaps she's merely an unwitting lapdog. Whatever the case, there is every reason to believe that at least something of what we discover will be of later use to you on your mission."

"I trust so, sir."

Chapter 63

"I'm stiff from all that riding," Roween declared, shuffling along behind Conley. "Horses are too big, they ought to make them different sizes." She stubbed her toe on one of the raised cobbles, mumbled.

"They do, Ro: back in Cala, you can get prosthetically enhanced ponies at Ridgeway Liveries. Same as a horse, only smaller." Conley glanced back to her friend, waited. "You know, I never really realised before quite how short you are." Roween caught her up. "Do I often walk on ahead like that? I don't mean to."

"Not your fault, Con, me being silly, noseying through windows. Have you spotted how even the shops here have those tiny panes? Not like the big displays in Bridges. Part of the local character, more provincial." She felt faintly embarrassed.

Conley's eyes scanned about her, lanterns beginning to burn through the deepening dusk. "It does look markedly different, yes. I noticed earlier that everything's made of wood. Same basic style as in Bridges and Warnhem, but nothing's brick."

Roween pulled her jacket tighter, grieved for her old coat. "This far south, I guess they can pillage the wilderness marches of timber. Less danger of flooding, here, too, so no special reason to stay with heavier materials. Wood needs a bit more maintenance, I suppose, it's why there aren't temples around any more, they'll have fallen flat. There'll be a stone fort somewhere, though."

Conley flicked back her hair, long, it needed cutting, tying back perhaps. "Border town, yes. No wall, so it must have some other defence. Seems a reasonable inference that there'll be a fort."

"I think it used to be moated, noticed a dip as we came in." She rubbed her arm, muttered, "This wind is keen..."

"Moated? Oh, so, what makes you think there's a fort here too?" She stared back down the curving street, seeking some outline, some shadow with substance.

"The signpost said this place is Zoderdhua. As I remember, there's a whole string of border towns with names ending in -dhua, they date back from imperial times, maybe beyond."

"'Dhua' isn't a Lowlandic word, sounds out. Eletic?"

Roween nodded. "Means 'tower'. The Estavians threw some up to mark the westernmost limit of their empire, but the sites are ancient, were fortified long before, way old, maybe trace back to prehistory."

The road straightened out. Conley recognised their inn, five minutes down on the right, but then picked out something beyond it — a raised blackness, swallowing the candle flickers of Zoderdhua's evening. She stopped, pointed. "Is that the tower?"

Roween narrowed her eyes, was conscious of Conley watching with interest, the way the faint, ambient light exaggerated her squint. "It's a mound, I think, maybe had something up top once, ruined now, tumbledown."

"Feel like giving it a look-over? It's not late, and it can't be far away."

Roween glimpsed movement, someone crossing the street. "I don't know, Con, it's dark, might be risky..." She moved her head, upper body, from side to side. "Is it far?" *Oh, what it must be, binocular vision!*

Conley was scoffing. "Risky? Everyone here pops Bliss! The worst that can happen is they'll smile us to death! Come on, we might find a few remains, shards of pre-Estavian pottery, or maybe a handful of those little lead spheres."

"It's getting late..." She jolted as she realised she sounded like her father, grinned.

"Well, I suppose, so long as we're back by ten thirty — I don't want a late start tomorrow. We should be able to make Suadh Varl Na before dusk, if we're lucky with the weather."

Conley slid her hands into her pockets. "Lucky? Chance doesn't come into it! You know as well as I do what that cloud is — there's one just like it that spends its time draining over Western Svala. It can move as far in a day as we can travel in a week, and if Justan sends it our way we'll mire up, there's no — "

"Justan? Don't you mean your father?"

Conley faltered, waved a hand. "My father, then." Back in the pocket. "It doesn't matter *who* actually drops it on us, the point is that it'll happen exactly when The King chooses, and once it hits we'll be slowed to a stroll for the rest of our journey."

Roween looked to the east, saw nothing in the gloom. "What worries me is that it's big enough to move now, but it's stationary. How large does he want it? Is it just for show? Let the Elets see how strong he is? Where's it going? Must be Elet, not the Lowlands, it would *drown* the Lowlands..."

"He wants to impress someone. When's the emissary due to meet him?"

Roween sucked her bottom lip, raised an eyebrow. "Don't know, Con, soon, but we ought not let that make a difference to how fast we travel; we have to hurry anyways, maybe not even wait for Medreph, just get to Liagh Na Laerich before..." Her sentence drifted off.

A couple was walking towards them. Conley simply *knew* to expect greetings, gritted her teeth to a smile.

"Good evening," said the man.

"Good evening," replied Conley, failing to move her arm in time before the woman knocked into it. The couple walked on, hand in hand. Conley glanced back. "Damn, I *hate* that!"

"They were just being polite."

Conley sneered after them. "Oh, I hate that *too*, yes, but what I really loathe is the way they keep bumping into you. So the streets here aren't as wide as in some places — they look even narrower with these gable overhangs — but how much space do these people *want*? There's only four of us on the entire footpath, yet she *still* nudged me! I feel I should check my pouch all the time, in case someone's lifted it."

"Just the way they are," she inserted a half-skip into her walk, kept alongside her companion. "Lowlanders stand closer to one another than we do, they're more physical. They like touching, especially when on Bliss, and I guess your looks have a lot to do with it, too. The Elets, now they're much warier, they stand back. When I first got there, I kept moving towards them to where it felt right, and they'd step away, so I'd follow, like I was chasing them round the room." She fluttered a giggle, softly.

"Better that than having strangers handling you... I won't miss the Lowlands, that's for sure." She sighed, morphed it to a laugh. "And I never did see anyone at it in the open..."

Roween shivered. "Autumn. Too cold."

* * *

They'd passed the inn, but were still on the cobbled street, when they heard the footsteps behind them. Roween was first to look back, touched Conley's forearm, stopped. A band of youths was hurrying up to them, five, no, six, late teens, men.

Seeing the two women halt, the group slowed. One, the tallest, led them, the rest disorganised behind. Roween couldn't mark them out, they were dressed smart, not flash, more

poor-type stylish.

The tall one spoke. "Excuse me, ladies, bright ladies, are you busy?"

"We were going to the tower," Roween replied, drawing away.

"Ah, the tower, once so proud, it's fenced off, dangerous, could come down, spoil your fun."

"Our fun?" Conley looked to Roween for guidance, found none.

"If you're not busy, then, we'd like intercourse." Cheerful.

What?! Roween felt her jaw muscles slacken, aborted reply. *Oh, a misapprehension!*

"Was that a request or a demand?" asked Conley.

There was a mumble from the pack. "What's she mean, 'demand'?" "It was a statement, wasn't it?" "Request?"

Another of the youths piped out, a stockier one, fair moustache downing his lip. "Young Ander back here," he pointed, "it'll be his first time. Can you be patient with him?"

Roween was tightening up, reading their eyes. They weren't riding Bliss, not yet, just buoyed by the residue of previous doses. She gripped Conley's forearm.

"It won't be with *any* of you!" Conley scorned.

"There are six of them," murmured Roween. She felt so hot now.

Tall-one again. "I see, you're foreigners, you're afraid you'll infect us with your burning ills."

"We have condoms," said a voice.

"So you won't fall pregnant, either!" another noted, laughing.

"But you're complete strangers!" Conley.

"We don't mind." "Whatever you want." "We'll make allowances."

Tall-one appeared concerned. "If you find us unattractive, we can do it in the dark. Or if yon cloud is bothering you? Vill lives nearby, he has a room."

The underchatter broke again. "Is it their month-time?" "What if it is?" Sniggers. "Don't worry, Ander, you'll like it, truly!"

"I don't *believe* this," Conley hissed, low, staring at the leader. Two had gone behind her.

"They want to rape us, Con..."

Tall-one looked puzzled. "Of course we do, wasn't I clear?" He smiled. "Perhaps the distance separating our cultures distorted my words."

Conley nodded, deliberate, slow, calming herself. "We differ in other ways, standards of behaviour, what we're used to..."

Babbling from the others. "We'll do it any way you like, miss." "Where's she from?" "What's she want?"

Tall-one raised a hand, thin, slender, uncalled. He addressed Conley. "I've heard that in the east the men are unthinking, uncaring. They'd use force, their greater strength, numbers, to take you."

"And you wouldn't?" Conley again; Roween was a statue.

He looked surprised. "If you prefer it that way, yes, of course." He shrugged, looked at moustached-one; he shrugged, too.

"Don't hurt us," pleading, Roween, barely audible, immobile.

"We'll be as gentle as you please, we have Bliss, you know it? It extends your awareness, touch, serene, sensual."

"We won't hurt you — " "Not if you don't want." " — we're not animals!" "Charged, Bliss is charged." "Don't they use it?"

"Animals! Yes, you *are* animals!" Conley was suddenly fired. "You may *act* polite, come over cool, but you're wolves, that's all, wolves!" She moved her arm round Roween's shoulder, mother-like, protective. "Can't you see she's frightened dead?" Anger welled, overflowed. "She's a child, for love!"

The tall one looked to the darkened skies, dawning a smile. "A virgin. So that's why she's like this..."

The moustached one reached for Roween's hand, she pulled it back. "I have some balm, it won't hurt, don't fret, we'll show you what to do, it's easy, natural, you'll enjoy it."

Someone behind him spoke, clear, like the street was waiting for it to be said. "Are they lovers?"

Immediate answers. "Could be." "I think so, yes." "So what if they are — " "It won't matter under Bliss." " — we're going to fuck them, not marry them!"

Roween felt something in her belt, way over-heavy, like her mind had been seeking a solution, was letting her know it had found one. *The dagger!* She pulled it out, brandished it.

"A knife?" The tall one looked nonplussed.

"Not long ago," said Roween, bizarrely firm, "we two killed a soldier between us, sliced open his neck." She ran a finger beneath her ear, smiled.

No-one moved.

She looked at the blade, nodded, then back to the men. "First one of you who tries to jam his pizzle in me gets it slashed to hell off."

They broke. "This isn't right!" "Is she threatening us?" "We should call the guard." "She's mad — see her eyes!"

Tall-one had his hands on his hips, shook his head. "I think we've been reasonable about this, ladies. We can meet all your conditions, airy, strange that they are. How about if we give you the Bliss now? It'll melt your remaining objections, stream them away."

Excited again. "Give them the Bliss!" "This is taking too long." "Who wants the short one first?"

Conley's rage detonated. "Ro! I *have* to flick!" She turned, hit the startled Roween hard on the back of the neck, side-handed, spiralled her senseless to the floor.

In the next seven seconds, five light-primes flew from her fingers.

The youths were staggering back, half-blinded, arms shielding their heads. All Conley saw were rollicking red discs wherever her eyes alighted.

"This is hassle!" "That one's out, and that one flashes!" "Foreigners!" "Gods, I can't see!"

She heard tall-one's voice. "Lads, I think we have a dear wrong one. Let's find somebody normal." To Conley: "Goodbye, bright, precious lady, have a pleasant evening."

* * *

Roween awoke, felt a pillow beneath her head, saw walls. Conley was humming something, anxious, one of Anya's tunes?

She stopped. "Awake, Ro?" Joy in her voice, then concern. "Don't speak if it hurts."

The boys! Faltered. "Did they..?" She didn't feel *sore*, but life, her head!

Conley was already beside the bed, easy in the small room. She was trembling, nervous. "No, it's alright, I dazzled them, light-primes, 19s. Oh Ro — " she started choking tears, "I didn't think you'd ever — you've been out almost an hour."

Slowly, Roween closed her eyes. "So the reflex does leave me when I'm asleep." *Gods! Of all the thoughts, why that one?*

Conley wiped an eye. "I, but..? Yes, only for some spells, I tested them in Bridges — even big light-primes work, but you can still punch one-line charms, haven't tried anything else." She paused, concerned. "You've confused me, are, are you hurting? Maybe you're still concussed? Gods, I hit you awful hard."

Roween smiled, crooked, like her cheek was numb. "I never even noticed your experiments." *Why hasn't she told me about them already?*

"Oh Ro," she was holding back sobs, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry I hit you, I'm stupid, what I *did* was stupid, cruel, but, I just — I was so *angry*, I felt so helpless. And then, when you didn't wake up — gods, I've been worried, it was *my* fault, I thought maybe I'd put you in a coma, you were so limp... Please — say you're alright?"

Roween squeezed her hand. "I'm fine, I know I am, the sleep has fixed me. And I *deserved* all that happened; if I had have hacked at them they'd have called the guard, execution — you did right."

"Right? But *I* didn't know they'd have had us arrested, I just had to *do* something, if we'd — we'd have been killed." She reached for her kerchief. "It wasn't like in Bay Town, I didn't take any pleasure, and I didn't *want* to hurt you, it was all I could, I could..."

Roween groaned. "Sorry, Con, damn, I didn't, I shouldn't — I let them frighten me." She clenched her fist, small, futile, looked away.

"No, no, it was *me*, I hit you — they'd probably have, I don't know, have gone. Don't blame yourself!"

Roween said nothing.

Conley seemed to sense the root of her unease, lost her own tears, leaned across. "It's over now, really, don't worry, the door's locked, we're safe. We don't have to go anywhere tomorrow, we can stay, work things out. If it's me you're frightened of — "

"No!"

" — well I understand, I accept that, and I can only promise that I won't hurt you ever again, ever; I didn't *think* yesterday, I acted, foolishly, and I realise now I was as bad as the men."

"No, no you weren't, there's no call for guilt; if *I* don't fault you, why fault yourself?"

"I was just so *mad*." She stroked Roween's still-short fringe, tried to smile. "Would, would you really have done it?"

Roween let her continue, gazed at the bare walls. "To every last one."

"Gods..." She tweaked out a grey hair.

* * *

Conley was gazing out of the window. "I spoke to the innkeeper earlier, nice man, jolly, unclly."

"While I was asleep?" *No, she wouldn't have left me.*

"Before lunch, when you were dressing." She was looking through one of the small panes, framing her face.

"He say anything?"

"I asked him what the word 'rape' meant. I felt, I don't know, I needed to rationalise it. Worked my way round to the subject, didn't open out straight away. I think I got away with it. He laughed, explained."

"Are you going to tell me?" She slumped on the bed, cupped her knee in her hands; her boots were off already.

Conley turned round. "Their leader was right, in a way. Words change meanings over time, can specialise within a society. In the Lowlands, 'rape' means nothing more than the man, rather than the woman, originating the first move towards lovemaking." She smiled, insincere.

"What do they use when they mean what *we* do by the word?" Scornful.

Conley dug for her pockets, sighed; they were only cosmetic on this skirt. "I tried to explain, but he didn't seem to understand, couldn't see a distinction. He was busy, it was getting embarrassing, I didn't pursue it." She sat down next to Roween, brushed a feather from her calf.

"No distinction," Roween repeated, murmuring. "How'd they arrive at that?"

"I don't know, Ro. Where do *you* see a difference?"

She pondered. "Rape is being forced. Against your will..." The thought disturbed her.

Conley rubbed her arm, agitated. "Right, so if a man asks you if you want sex, and you say no, is everything he does with that in mind from then onwards tantamount to rape?"

"I don't follow. And I don't want to think about it." *Ever.*

She uncrossed her legs, sat up straight, freed both hands for graphics. "Well say he started chatting, flattering, perhaps produced some expensive wine, loosened you a little, and after a while you got to rethinking his suggestion, and decided maybe it wasn't such a bad idea after all." Her voice was shaking.

Roween rocked back, unenthusiastically. "Oh, I see where you're going. He's made you change your mind, so you readily agree to let him bed you now. However, looking at it from your original viewpoint, he's disregarded your first answer, gone on to do you anyway." *I just don't want to think about it.*

"Yes, that's it. If anyone had asked you, immediately after you'd said no, whether it would be rape if the man were to take you that evening, you'd say yes, it would be. Later, though, when he actually does it, it isn't rape at all. Is it?"

"It's fair enough for a man to try and make you agree, I suppose. It's not, well, I don't really know... I don't really care. You're trying to rationalise something that's irrational. A woman *knows* when she's been raped." *Does the man?*

Conley shook her head. "But I *have* to understand! At what point does it become rape? If he makes you feel sorry for him? Or guilty? If he bribes you? Pays you? Threatens you? Beats you? What if you won't change your mind until he's actually *in*? Everything's rape! And I *hate* it!"

Roween averted her face. "Con... I know what you're saying. In the Lowlands, they've extrapolated. If it's fine to talk a woman into a mood change, then it's just as fine to drug her into it, or not even to bother. Because everyone here is bubbling up on Bliss, the possibility that you don't want to have your mood changed just doesn't enter into it." *Does it back home? Don't think about it...*

Everything's rape. "That's why those guys were so persistent, they just took everything we said as being mere conditions that we were setting to enhance our pleasure. It never *occurred* to them that we just didn't want anything to do with them." Everything's rape.

"I think we should drop this..."

Conley seemed to hear. "The thing is, if only they hadn't been so damned polite. Near the end, I even got to thinking that maybe they had a point." She paused, threw up her hands. "Can you *believe* that?"

"Leave it, Con, you're dwelling on it. It's bringing it back..."

"So why was I half-numb with fear? It was freakish, unreal... Icy."

"Let's go out, I feel a lot better now and we've lost today anyway." She swung her legs over the bed, down to the floor.

Conley rose, sighing. "I should hate them. I *do* hate them. If only they hadn't been so damned polite..."

Chapter 64

It was still morning in Bridges when Porett called Wineman, but mid-afternoon in Trilith. He was meant to be meeting some Lowlanders Wineman had organised for lunch, so he hadn't eaten and his stomach was getting noisy. This would be the Trans/Disc project's farthest ever exchange, but he knew it would work, the linking was handled the same way as for comspheres. Might be disorienting if he stayed for long, going to bed some hours later than normal, but he wouldn't be there more than half a day before returning. He'd planned that anyway, but had pressure now, news that Magicorp had bought out the Soatian arm of Khrov, the cosmetics people. Probably their response to his acquiring Farmer's team at East/Trad, strengthening their own illusion research group. *Better make sure there's nothing else behind it, though.* Maybe also find out why this was the first he'd known of it...

Both Trans/Disc boxes had built-in comspheres, only model 1s but good enough to check out destinations before arrival, all that was ever needed. He looked in, found Wineman just entering the room.

"Lauss, good to see you."

Wineman wandered over to the open comsphere. "Yes, good, it's good, good to see you. Too."

Porett smiled, falsely. "Sorry for the delay, I'm ready now, how's it your end?"

Wineman looked around, absently. "Fine, you'll like it, it's warm."

"I'll begin the gestures then, see you in person shortly." *First thing I'll do when I've found my feet is get a local manager who doesn't sop his head with disposition-enhancers.*

"I'll listen for the breeze of your arrival."

* * *

He kept his eyes open as he completed the gestures, lying on his back in the box. One moment he saw the high, vaulted ceiling of the south turret in his mansion, and the next it was the cobwebbed wooden beams of a Lowlandic warehouse. Seamless join, no odd effects. He sat up.

Lauss held out his hand, shook Porett's energetically, smiling, always smiling. "I'm so glad to have you with us, Lord Porett. Talking through the spheres is as whispering to a ghost."

"I'll take your word for it..." He freed his hand, climbed out of his coffin.

"We can walk to the restaurant, think about things, unfade memories bleached by the sun of life."

"Whatever you say..." *I wasn't really listening.* "Hold on, let me stitch a binder on the door; I know you people don't need locks but I'd hate to be marooned here."

"If it pleases you, it pleases me."

* * *

There were four other people at lunch, acquaintances of Wineman. So, though, were most other Lowlanders, judging by the number of times the man had waved, chatted to,

complimented folk he'd passed in the street on the way here. They couldn't all have been strangers, could they?

Porett speedily outlined his requirements: a trained unit, equipped and ready to move in four days. He was eager to start eating — service was slow, but he gnawed at a bread roll, bribed his belly to quit complaining. Three of his newly-introduced dining companions, the men, were clearly riding on some kind of drug, not so recently taken as Wineman's indulgence, but enough trace to take the edge off them, make them wander. The woman was Akrean, name of Malva. To Porett's eyes, if not to theirs, she regarded her fellow captains with complete contempt, and had total confidence that Porett would select *her* as his local leader in preference to any soft degenerate. This, he did, and even before he'd finished his soup. She knew, but for appearances' sake he kept up the sham that it was a difficult choice and that any one of them could have done it really, and that she only got the job in the end because his imported fighters would be mainly Akreans and might be more 'empathic' to her. They understood that.

Afterwards, he left Wineman to supervise the unloading of yesterday's coffee shipment, and agreed to let Malva show him some of the sights of Bridges.

They were walking alongside what used to be a canal, was now a sunken park, trees sprouting unexpectedly from way below. Porett began to probe, gently, make surer he could trust her. "So, how long have you been in Seesel?"

She hummed. "Five years, coming up to six. It's well enough, there's work."

"That long? I'm surprised you can bear all the niceness — it's getting to me, and I've only been here a couple of hours."

"I tolerate the Lowlanders because they tolerate me. In Akrea, my kind is shunned. I sleep with women." Matter-of-factly, "Does that shock you?"

It did. "Why should it? So do I!" *Well I would, given the chance.*

She flickered a smile, the first sign of emotion he'd seen in her. *Must hear that line quite often.* She wasn't as tall as most Akreans, and her hair was straighter, probably treated, make her look more like a local. Still had an Akrean accent, though. How old would she be, twenty-nine, thirty? Hard to tell with warriors, they age so fast.

"How many people do you have?" he asked.

"Some are on other assignments: Lauss told me you wanted ten for this, ten is all I have free at short notice."

"Lowlanders?"

"Two or three, but they're good, ex-army, they're off the Bliss. Most are immigrants, like me, running from somewhere for some reason, got accepted here."

"Any Elets?"

She sneered, he wasn't sure whether at his remark itself or at mention of the Elets. "No chance."

"It's not a problem. As I said at lunch, after we've gone into details it might be that we could need more personnel. How would you feel about coming to Estavia tomorrow, pick some people who'll fit in? I've arranged to look over some Akrean mercenaries presently stranded in Trilith."

"How do we get there?"

"Magic."

She nodded, once. "So long as I can get back quickly if there's trouble. Don't want to have to kill anyone who knows me."

"It'll be safe enough. I've arranged for several mages to be around when we're

interviewing."

"Mages?" She laughed, scornfully. "What use are they against steel?"

Porett stopped walking, waited 'til she turned. She put her hands on her hips.

"If you're to work with me on this," he announced, slowly, "don't *ever* doubt the efficacy of magic. Ever."

Her upper lip was still curled. "It's not fast enough, it needs time. One on one, I could take you before you'd got halfway to anything."

He slipped his left hand into his pocket, nonchalant. "Try it."

She froze a moment, caught his gaze, he could see her thinking, "Did he mean it?" Yes. She went for her dagger, he flicked out right-hand gestures but she'd thrown it before he could release, aimed for the shoulder, enough to put him out for a week, nothing permanent.

The point of the knife rammed into his arm, he was twisted back, but carried on the spell, avoiding the blade as it fell to his feet. "Point armour," he said, calm. Out of his hand flashed a brilliant white light, dazzling the astonished Malva. "Conley light-prime." From his left-side pocket he snatched a cloth tab, slapped it on her shoulder, whipped away his hand in time to avoid the explosion. She yelped, grabbed at the wound. "Blow shot. If I'd put it on your neck, you'd be dead."

She winced as her eyesight returned, could see her injury. "Damn the hell! I'm missing flesh!"

Porett fumbled around inside his jacket, found a wrap-pouch, bit off a corner. "White gel, hold still, let me apply it." He squeezed gently, watched as a small glob appeared at the makeshift nozzle. He passed her the rest. "It'll ooze in, put some more on every hour or so, about the size of a pea, don't rub it. When you wake up tomorrow, you'll be right as ever."

Cautiously, she lowered her arm, ready for the pain that never came. She bent down, picked up her dagger. "Why didn't the flash blind you, too?"

He pulled at his lower eyelid, showed her, grinning grotesquely. "I'm wearing lenses, they reflect away all excess light, I can look directly at the sun if I want."

She nodded, accepting. "If all your mages are thus endowed, why are you recruiting mercs?"

"Well," he discarded the backing paper he'd creased off the blow shot, "there's a chance that, at times on this mission, magic won't work."

She looked up, smiled.

Chapter 65

Neither of them mentioned the tower, despite its waiting, ever-watchful, background presence. Instead, they wandered along the Elet road a little way, past a couple of livestock smallholdings, then off down a hedge-sided pathway that led them between fallow fields before fading into forest. Away from people.

It was late afternoon when they climbed a bank beside the track, sat down on the dry, fallen leaves from the sycamore canopy. They'd expected to be gone awhile, so Roween had swiftly packed some bread and cheese. They weren't hungry just yet, but Conley opened her flask, took a sip, passed it to Roween.

"Quiet here," she noted, approvingly.

"There's birds," replied Roween, handing back the water. Conley screwed its cap on, set it down.

"And us." She took a leather thong from around her wrist, twisted it twice, tied back her hair. "I'm sorry."

"I forgive you."

The low, Autumn sun filtered through the emptying branches, glowing the browns and bronzes, gilding Conley. A squirrel bounced out in front of them, peering, inquisitive. Slowly, Roween reached into her bag for a pinch of bread, but it cocked its head and was gone, flowing off across the path and up a tree on the other side. She laughed. "Magical."

"Magical?"

Roween leant back. "Magical, in its ancient sense, 'wondrous'. Not to be explained, just to be appreciated, accepted for what it is."

"You're a romantic, Ro..."

She sighed. "Things alter so quickly, Con. Nothing's ever like how you remember it any more. Even twenty years from now, will these woods still be here? These trees still standing?"

Conley ruffled up some leaves with her hand, listened to the rustling. "You're the one who wants to change everything..."

A feeler again. *This time, perhaps?* "Magic, yes, well I'm not the only one guilty of that. You only came with me so you could figure a way to make spells last longer."

Conley was staring at the squirrel, still visible in its resting place, busying itself before hibernation. "I'd forgotten."

She told herself she'd have done it soon anyway, begun the lead-in; she wasn't letting *it* get to her. But, she knew, she was lying to herself... "I hadn't forgotten, though. I was thinking about it the other day, somehow got on to errors instead. That's one of the things about you, Con, makes you special: you don't cock your spells."

"Special? Me?"

"Not that again, please..." Shaking her head; it no longer hurt. "Most people have maybe one percent chance of miscasting per hundred gestures. For 5K gestures, that's about two chances in five of muffing it. Professionals can expect to make it to 5K nine times out of ten. Uninterrupted, that is, reading from a list."

"You're talking misgestures? Going for a fingers and not locking? Or do you mean making a legal gesture, but in the wrong place?"

"Both. I've seen figures, there was a paper on it at a workshop held at Baron Esseren's — three years ago? The gist is, people lose concentration, and *that* can lead to mistakes. Only the very best can gesture without goofing. You, you're like Anya Kryslod at his

keyboard, he'd play twenty or thirty thousand notes in an hour and not hit a single dud."

"It comes with practice, you get a feel for the patterns." She loosened the knot in her hair, lowered it a mite.

Roween cleared her throat with a cough, startled something over to the right somewhere. "I've thought of a way to get spells error-free, well, pretty much so. No mistakes when you cast them, anyway — maybe when you first make them."

"*Make* them?" Puzzled, "Before they're cast? What, like prefabricate them you mean?"

"Yes, a bit, same as that held-gesture trick except you can keep it up indefinitely. I was mulling over meta-matrices, and it just came to me."

"What did?"

She fumbled inside her bag, produced a folded sheet of paper.

"You were planning this..."

Roween raised her eyebrows. "I often carry paper with me!"

Conley didn't seem impressed. "Ro, I know you well enough now to tell when you're scheming..."

She blushed, deep, quickly. *Don't let her suspect, redirect it.* She smiled. "Well, I thought, if the opportunity arose..."

Conley snatched the sheet, grinning, opened it. "It's blank."

"At the moment; I have to explain things first. Or, rather, you do." She swallowed air, readied herself. "How does magic work?"

"Uh? How's it *work*? At what level?" She noticed she still had the paper, held it out; Roween took it back.

"Macro physics."

"First principles?" She sighed. "Why do you want me to tell you what you already know?"

"Because although I'm personally well acquainted with the theory, I don't know what *your* interpretation of it is. If you give me a quick summary, I'll be better able to slot in this new bit I want to try on you."

Conley frowned, raised an eyebrow.

"No, it'll help me, really," Roween added, nodding, enthusiastic.

Conley remained unconvinced. "I suppose, maybe, if you insist... But stop me when I'm boring you." She leaned forward, rested her chin on her hands, collected her thoughts. "Well the basic idea is that everything that exists, every 'physical presence', is made up of matter and energy. There's a force known as the 'matter-energy force'; it determines whether a given physical presence is matter or energy, and what particular form it takes."

Roween smiled. "I didn't intend quite so 'first' first principles!"

"I'll skip to the main theory, then." She finger-flicked at her cheek, like her hair was falling in front of her face. Just an insect. "Well, by tweaking the matter-energy force associated with a physical presence, you can change the very nature of that presence, even turning matter to energy and energy to matter. Because *everything* physical is made up of matter and energy, it follows that you can make anything into anything else. In practice, though, you're limited in the number of ways you can pull a matrix without shattering it or losing control."

Roween looked up. "By 'matrix', you mean an aligned matter-energy force."

"A focal matrix, yes, you know perfectly well."

"Alright, I was just checking we had the same vocabulary, sorry; you have to remember I never attended lectures, I got everything from books. Go on."

Apologies... "Yes, well, so to create a light-prime, you poke a matrix to flip a presence from matter to light. A dark-prime flips energy into air. Basic transmutations involve both: to strengthen a bridge strut, you switch matter to energy, then back to a slightly different, tougher type of matter of a similar density. All spells involve such changes, to some degree."

"Question is, though, what's the mechanism by which you can fiddle with a matrix to make it do all these things?"

"I'm coming to that, Ro, give me a chance..." She felt herself scowling, countered instantly, probably didn't want the furrows. "The reason it's called 'macro physics' is because it turns out that you can set up configurations of physical presences which induce resonance within the matter-energy matrices of other, nearby presences, and subsequently they align. We use gestures to do it, because the human hand seems to be ideally constructed for forming attractor positions that cause orientational changes in the matter-energy force. It's possible, of course, that there may be other ways of achieving similar effects — sound, for example, which is how they appear to work it in Chaien. Nothing's been proved, though."

"Maybe light, too?"

"Hypothetical, no-one's been able to verify it one way or the other. Worth investigating — there are several groups researching the area." She paused, half-closed her eyes, slyly. "This error-free casting method, it wouldn't involve light bouncing off special symbols drawn on a piece of paper, would it?"

Roween nearly giggled, held back. "I said earlier that this 'just came' to me, Con, but I hardly think the necessary runes for what you're proposing would have done *that!* It would take a *lifetime* of experimentation to find them! No, no, you carry on, I'll wait until I can vision where my idea best slips in." She smiled, almost coyly.

They hadn't seen anyone else in the forest since they'd entered it, over three hours ago. What they were hoping for, of course, to be alone. Must be that local folk rarely came this way. So why not? Wrong time of day? Bandits, maybe? Bears? Or perhaps it just didn't lead anywhere significant.

Conley continued her lecture, warily. "So, of the various alternative means of affecting the matter-energy force, gesturing is undoubtedly the one most developed. There are five basic positions: fingers, point, palm, wrist and fist." She demonstrated each one as she named it, clapping at the end to break any spell lead-in. "There are others, but they always decompose into one of the five. This one," she flicked a clenched wave, "is a palm fist. Takes longer to execute than the straight pair, but that's invariably the case for compounds. The only really useful segmental gesture is the focus," she made one. "Quicker to do point fingers palm, but you can hold it for..." She sat up straight, quickly, shook her head, cracking a smile. "Of course, that's where you got the idea."

The idea? What — "Oh, for held gestures? In a way, yes, I suppose. I was aware gestures had to be maintained for a minimum length of time, but I also knew there was no maximum since people sometimes have to hold a focus for hours, especially in surgery. Even atomic gestures need to be held for longer when they're being used to manipulate a link-distant matrix, or a large collection of matrices like for working on the weather and so on. The shortest necessary holding time depends on how long it takes to induce the required bearing change in the target."

Conley rocked her head, side to side. "To some extent, yes, but the manner in which a gesture is formed can make a difference. When I go to a wrist from a palm, see," she shook a leaf from her hand, showed what she meant, "I pull back on the knuckles, and I bend the fingers only at the first and second joints. That thrusts forward the wrist, and I can break the

gesture off quicker, go on to the next one. It's that pushing forward," she did it again, exaggerating, "that swings in the matrix, I can sort of visualise it in my mind, swirling it round in the wake of the forward-moving wrist."

"That's very interesting," Roween was clearly impressed. "I've never really had the chance to observe your hands closely during casting — it's hard enough just following the *content* when you flick a sequence, let alone grasping the intricacies of your technique." Her voice was genuine admiration. "So the way you form a gesture can accelerate the matrix alignment?" Conley shrugged. "That's smart!"

"Well of course it can, Ro, otherwise people would be able to make clay models of preformed hands and use them to store the last gesture of a spell, breaking it or something to release the magic. However, even miniatures take so long to construct that they have no influence on any matter-energy forces. I know some feasibility studies were made into artificial gesturing, but I don't think they ever came to anything."

"Perhaps," suggested Roween, "they haven't been trying the right approach? What are the main functions of the gestures in a spell?"

"Functions? I don't understand. You mean what the primitive segments do?" Roween nodded, Conley considered. "Well, a few are notational, just there to glue the other segments together for the proof. Others are to maintain a matrix which is either being worked on or which is being kept ready for later. There are some that prime physical presences ready to form a matrix." She rubbed her cheek. "That's it. The rest, the majority, are going towards moulding matrices in the right direction, ready to take effect when the final gesture is made."

"There are locking gestures, too, though, so you can pick up a matrix that you've previously given a signature. Since the oriented matter-energy forces extend away from a point indefinitely, you —"

"Yes, Ro," mild annoyance. "So I forgot catch-and-throw segments. Why ask, if you know it all anyway?"

"Well there seems to be this natural assumption that a matrix can be stable, and yet the concept is never really utilised. If you tag something, the tagging-matrix stays in place, obediently, forever. You can read it off from anywhere, because every matrix is omnipresent. Same with focus fixes, same with artefacts, they're fine left alone, no need to maintain them. Thing is, though, there don't seem to be any segments that explicitly freeze matrices in place. It just sort of happens, as part of the general outcome of a spell."

"True," admitted Conley, "I know of no gesture sequence that actually says 'now imbue this with magic'. That's to be expected, though. Magic works by changing a matrix so much that its associated physical presence has to transmute to comply with it. Now if there was a segment that all it did was write the matrix into the presence, how would it work? Only by *itself* changing the matrix, so you'd end up with this different matrix fixed in place, not the one you wanted." She tongued her top lip. "No, there's not even the machinery for it. Modifying a matrix will only lead to action by or on the physical presence, it can't make the matrix itself do anything other than change orientation. It couldn't stabilise it unless the presence was also stable."

"The relationship is two-way, though," countered Roween, cautiously. "Changing the matrix changes the physical presence, yes, but changing the presence — destroying it is the best example — can also change the matrix. Maybe you could distort the presence in such a way that it could hold in place for later use a matrix that encapsulated a partially-finished spell?"

She was gazing, fixed, just beyond her feet. "I doubt that conjecture, Ro: you can have several different matrices representing the same physical object, it's not a one-on-one mapping. Matrices are fine-grain, presences are coarse." She threw aside an arm, condescendingly. "What am I talking about? Of *course* you can't steady a matrix in an arbitrary position! It's the matrix/presence *pair* that has to be stable, not just the matrix on its own. If you wrote it into the presence and it didn't prove, the whole lot would go up!"

"Well, that point about holding isn't strictly true, is it? If you were casting a spell that was close to the edge, like it was red by one gesture, and you deferred release of its penultimate gesture, then the spell up to that point might be colourless, and only the final red would make it stable. However, the matrix can still be maintained for as long as you keep up that gesture."

"Can it? I wouldn't want to try..."

"Course it can. It's like you said, the proving takes place when the spell is cast. If it's still in the process of being cast, or if you clap it out before the end, then it doesn't matter a jot whether it proves or not."

Conley shuffled. "I see what you're suggesting, yes, but I'm not convinced. Spells can turn colourless and backfire on you even when you don't think you've finished casting."

"I don't believe that's true, Con, no. For a spell to eat you, you have to finish it somehow. Maybe you fluff a gesture, maybe you delay too long before forming the next one, whatever, it definitely needs some end-point. Once it's got one, the matrix will stop wobbling, and impose itself on its physical presence. If you're out of luck, the matter you were working on will flash to energy, or the energy will whoosh to gas, and you'll fry in the resulting explosion."

Conley stared out across the track, towards the sunset. Roween watched her, waited. Finally, she clicked back to the world. "You may be right, Ro. I can't think of any documented case studies that don't have at least something you could construe as marking spell termination."

She hunched her shoulders. "So you accept, then, that for as long as a gesture can be held, the spell is still viable, and all the work done on the matrix up to that stage isn't lost."

"I... I suppose so. It sounds like it must *be* wrong, but just now I don't see exactly why it is."

You will, Con. "Good. Now, this is the idea I had. Obviously, you can't expect anyone to hold a gesture forever, but the trouble is that other than gestures we know of no scientifically rigorous means of modifying matrices, so it's like we *have* to use them, no other choice. However, suppose we found a theoretically sound way not of actually modifying a matrix, just of locking it in place for a time. It could then be picked up, and the spell continued from this save point, hours, days later."

Conley had worked her way over to the glooming tree that was shading them, rested her back against its gnarly, lichenous trunk. She said nothing — why bother? Roween clearly had the answer anyway, knew she was bursting to give it.

"You name the matrix!" Triumphant.

The suggestion was just so simplistically ridiculous that Conley couldn't resist reacting. "You *name* it?" She laughed. "What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"What I said, you give it a name, write it down with your free hand. You then drop the gesture. So long as you don't damage what you've written, and no gross physical changes affect the spell's target, you can later scrub out the name and carry on the sequence from the next gesture. If you time it right, it'll work fine. If you're too slow, or you rip the name by accident when you're unprepared, it'll close the sequence and there'll be some feedback."

Conley gazed in disbelief at Roween's smiling face. "That, Ro, is the most cockeyed idea I ever heard!"

She acted slighted. "What's wrong with it, Con?"

"What's wrong with it? Where to start? Nothing's right with it! It has no basis whatsoever in macro physics. Giving a matrix a name and writing that name down doesn't set up any kind of link with the matter-energy force behind the shape of that particular matrix. It's just letters on a sheet of paper."

"Yes, well I told you I'd have to slide it in to your view of things. There *is* a connection, and a very powerful one, but it's not at the immediate matrix/presence level." She knelt,

excitedly, so her hands could give form to her words. "Say you set up another matrix with a centre just the right distance away from that of the first one, causing them to resonate together."

"A binding."

She nodded. "Bindings give you a way of affecting the constitution of the *matrix*, rather than the constitution of the physical presence that supplies the matrix. Such a method is a meta-matrix operation, and its functional domain is what we know as 'matrix space'. However, you can also set up other meta-matrix operations, with subjects adjacent in matrix space to this one, and thus you get a meta-matrix space, which meta-meta-matrices work on. You can continue right up through the levels, indefinitely."

"Forgive me for interrupting, but what bearing if any does this have on your naming suggestion? Meta-matrices aren't something I really feel comfortable with — I went for Sequence Composition in my second year, dropped Functional Analysis for it."

"Oh," she seized her chance, "now that's a pity, because it's what's at the limit of the spaces that actually concerns me — where it tops out. You see, a matrix can be regarded as encoding its physical presence. Modifying the matrix changes it so it no longer reflects the current state of its associated presence, but it doesn't *immediately* alter that presence; only when your spell is completed does the matrix decode itself, causing its physical presence to adjust appropriately so as to match. A matrix is an implicit representation, and when casting is finished it becomes explicit, which is effected by redefining its physical presence. Follow so far?"

"Go on." She reached for the flask of water, kept her eyes on Roween.

"Now, matrices which — through binding — operate on other matrices can likewise be regarded as encoding those other matrices, and therefore, in a sense, of encoding their physical presences, too. So it continues, meta-meta-matrices encoding the meta-matrices they work on, and yet higher matrices encoding them. But what do you get at the very top?" She paused, for suspense rather than reply. "I'll tell you: one matrix that encodes every matrix below it in the hierarchy, which is to say all other matrices — which in turn is to say all physical presences."

Conley was drinking, but was immersed in thought. She wiped her mouth. "I'm no expert, Ro, it's out of my field. However, without some way of showing that higher levels contain guaranteed fewer entities than lower ones, it seems to me that there might just as well be an infinite number of matrices at the top — if 'being at the top' actually means anything anyway."

Roween took the flask. "Ah, but that is the case, yes, upper levels do gradually diminish, the higher they are. I've read the proof, but I don't offhand recall it. Not sure I understood it anyway." *Lies, bluff it.* She swigged at the water. *Warm.*

"Well, let's assume you're right about this limit matrix: how *does* it tie in with the naming stuff?"

"One matrix, ever-present, is an encoding of all other matrices. To get to the particular matrix we want, we just need a key, some way of remembering it. Because the key is a presence, and will have its own matrix — undirected, but still there — that'll end up being wound through the matrix tree up into the limit matrix, altering it ever-so-slightly to some fearfully minute extent. Now, *knowing* that, when we restart the spell we can index straight into the appropriate encoded matrix, and carry on casting from there."

Conley sighed, smiled, half-hearted. "This is way over me, Ro, I'm getting lost. I just can't visualise it, all this talk of matrices, meta-matrices, infinite hierarchies..."

"But you do believe me, don't you?"

She added worry to her expression. "It's not that I don't, it's just I'll understand it when I see some evidence. Hot, Ro, I know you're queen of the theoreticians, but this is in my stratosphere. I'm tired, we've had a long afternoon, I don't want to work, I need to relax, come

to terms with some things. Can't you just show me what it is you mean?"

Long afternoon? I haven't started! She closed her eyes, slow, steadied herself. "It'll be easiest, yes." She picked up the paper again, brushed off the leaf-dust. "Give me up to the final wrist of a 23 light-prime, and hold it." Conley obliged, languidly. Roween passed her the pen. "Think of a name."

"Roween," she said, "after you..."

Roween sighed. "Write it down." She rested the paper on her lap. Conley's left-handed script was surprisingly readable, much better than Roween could have managed. *Of course.* "Now, drop the wrist."

Conley paused a moment longer, then broke off, clapped.

Roween held up the sheet. "No need to do that, Con — the matrix is frozen now, it won't blow on you."

"No harm in being careful, is there?"

"None at all, indeed it might help, show you that even after a clean break the accumulated gestures have still been saved."

"Let's see it work, then. What do I do?"

Roween took out her knife, passed it to Conley, laid the paper on the ground. "When you're ready, stab the writing. That'll put you in the same place as if you'd just dropped the wrist. Flick out the last gesture straight away after."

Conley eyed her, sceptically. "Is it alright if I remake the wrist and unhold it at the same time as I skewer the paper? It'll help the timing."

"Fine by me, shouldn't cause any difference."

Conley knelt, faced Roween, prepared herself. She rested the point of the blade on ROWEEN's W, gliding her right hand into a wrist gesture. Ready, she took a deep breath, nodded twice to get the rhythm, then cut into the paper and threw a palm.

Immediately, there was a flare of light.

"See?" asked Roween.

Birds in the branches above were taking flight, their warning calls wakening the lazing woodlands. Conley dropped her arm, gaped at Roween. "Hot, Ro, I don't believe it!"

You do, Con, that's the whole point! "Why would I lie to you? I knew it would work."

Conley was in a state approximating confusion. "You could tell? Could you smell the matrix?"

Roween grinned, embarrassed. "No, Con, I can't detect matrices. There's a reason, I'll tell you later if you remind me. I smelled the light-prime, though; so long as they're not too bright, and I'm not the target, they're — " Abrupt. How to describe the sensation?

"I, hot, Ro! My head's spinning! If I gave this to Porett, he'd skew my salary sideways by a couple of zeroes! It's a whole new industry you have here!"

"Not quite, no." She folded to her feet, stood up. "It's getting dusk, best if we go back now, we can eat on the way. See if you can cut how it works."

She made sure Conley returned the dagger before they left.

Chapter 66

"This is some kind of joke, isn't it? You're wearing an illusion."

The image in the comsphere smiled. "I can assure you, my dear Ansle, that I am perfectly real." He nodded, frowned. "Oh, now you're disappointed..."

"I'd been *led* to believe that you were dead — a fact with which I was most comfortable."

"Dead? Me?" Gigus laughed. "I shall outlive you, Chancellor, be *certain* of that."

"Where are you?"

He shook his head, still smiling. "Come now, Ansle, have you really learned nothing these past ten years? Any experienced statesman at least makes *some* attempt to veil his intentions, it's *so* unbecoming otherwise. Thoughts of revenge can tarry a moment, I'll tell you my whereabouts soon enough."

Ansle glared at him. "The same old, old Gigus — trying to promote your own intellect above that of those more intelligent than yourself."

"Well at least you accept that I'm me now..."

"How did you fake your death?"

"As far as I'm aware, I didn't: nobody present when I enacted my disappearance would have seriously believed that it killed me."

"You have an invisibility spell?"

A snort. "I teleported, ten paces backwards."

Ansle paused, thought. "Porett's Trans/Disc work came out of your research..." He raised his chin, knuckled the beard's-edge stubble where his Permazip razor hadn't reached, slowly sneered. "*He* uses a *chain* of small teleportative links, but you've discovered how to cast them individually."

"Something like that, although how Porett employs his design skills is not my immediate concern; later, perhaps."

Ansle narrowed his eyes. "Yes, Gigus, why exactly *are* you contacting me? It must be important if it warrants your showing yourself again."

"And so it is. I have grand designs, Ansle, but time is against me. Ultimately, I had to flee Elbienau because I made the mistake of prematurely showing your daughter a certain gesturing skill I've developed; I've since realised, however, that I'm not the only person to have revealed too much too early. How did Conny and her friend kill the Messenger? What significance has Elet in their plans? And is there a connection between either of these questions and this rather stupendous collection of magical miscellanea which recently fell into my possession?"

"What miscellanea would that be?" He shuffled in his seat. "And I ask again: where *are* you?"

"I'm deep in the wilderness, among my worshippers. Oh, I learned well from the Messenger, how to be a god, how to design a religion; I've had my contingency plan in place for some years. The people here are primitives, superstitious of what they don't understand; as such, they are easily impressed — even simple spells are miracles to them. They've never seen or heard of magic before, which makes it all the more surprising when a baggage train stuffed with all manner of artefacts crosses their land."

Ansle was frowning, about to speak when he stopped, smirked. "I'm not falling for *that*, Gigus. You've lived among the Messenger's gullibles for too long..."

"So you know nothing of the train?"

"I know that no such train ever existed."

"And if I told you I'd captured it; that wouldn't interest you?"

"How could it? You're *inventing* all this! Where are your prisoners?"

"Ah, yes, well one of the problems of being a god is that the newly-converted tend to be, shall we say, 'enthusiastic'. Even though the leader was known to them of yore, my minions ensured that there were no survivors."

"How utterly convenient."

Giqus sighed. "Before making this call, I long considered what information I should impart to you and what I should not. To find out whether you were appraised of the magic-smuggling expedition, I determined that I had to tell you the truth of how it came to my attention. I knew you'd freely admit it was nothing to do with you if indeed it wasn't, but if it *had* figured in your plans then before answering my subsequent questions you'd have needed convincing that I wasn't acting simply on second-whispered information. As you are plainly quite uninformed, it seems my honesty was wasted."

"Ha! So you *were* lying!"

"Believe what you will... That is not, however, the only reason I decided to break my silence."

"Ah, yes: you purposefully mentioned earlier that you needed 'time'."

"Time, yes, to think and to act, to grow strong. Five years from now, I could be — oh, no matter. Suffice to say that what I am about to tell you will result in my remaining unmolested for a sufficient period, and will make my task thereafter considerably easier."

"Then I won't listen. Goodbye!" He reached to tap out.

"It concerns you personally."

Ansle's hand was poised above the comsphere. "I should warn you that we're probably being listened in on."

"I'm not calling through the exchange... Oh, it's of no consequence: what I have to say is common knowledge anyway."

"Common knowledge? But — "

"Look: on the whole, Ansle, you're stupid, aren't you?"

"*Stupid?*" Spluttered.

"You're educated, and ambitious, I'll grant that, but you don't have the brains necessary for survival at the top."

"I've lasted longer than *you* did."

"You're an easily-manipulated egotist, so far out of your depth it's a matter of some wonder that your stupidity extends to not recognising your situation. The real battle in my day was *always* between myself and Justan; you were simply the convenient idiot he installed to keep the Academy in its place while he stripped it of its power. You're laughable, yet — or perhaps *because* — you think you're one of the most influential people in the country. How people must mock!"

"I don't have to sit here and take — "

"Your wife, now, *there* was a smart woman. Why do you think she got into the state she did? She knew you were an ersatz husk too arrogantly pompous to realise it, knew she had to live the rest of her life with a never-was failure."

"So why didn't she say so, then? She had innumerable opportunities!"

"Because she also knew that if you ever found out the truth it would be the end of you as far as Justan was concerned, and therefore that her station would lower even further than it did upon her marriage to you."

Ansle's face was red, the veins at his temples pounding. "I don't know what you're hoping to achieve with these *insults*, old man, but I *warn* you — "

"No, Ansle, *I warn you!*" He was scowling. "*Don't* do whatever it is that Justan is waiting for you to do — organise a coup, I should imagine — but *do* keep up the appearance that you will *eventually* do it. As long as you *might* serve his purpose — but not once you *have* — you'll live."

"Do you know what he has in mind for me?"

"I know what *I'd* do in his position..."

"Quite the prophet aren't you, Giquis?"

"I like to th— "

Ansle tapped him out mid-sentence.

Chapter 67

Back in their room, growing late. Roween was lounging on the bed, just finished packing for tomorrow's journey, the atlas of Elet propped up beside her. Apart from what filtered in from the streets outside, the only light came from a small tallow lamp, positioned by Roween on a rickety bedside table. Running low, weaving, it cast giant, waving shadows onto the wall, umbral projections of mythical, magical forms.

Conley was out in the yard, experimenting with spellsaving, away from the gaze of all-seeing Roween. She said it was to shield her sorcery from dispelling blasts, but they both knew the real reason: fear of feeling foolish.

Roween looked up from the pages. Would it be tonight? Was she herself ready? Yesterday with the youths had been a shock, horror-awful, had showed her the ease with which death or madness might choose to descend. She closed the book, rolled to her feet to replace it with the rest of their gear. As she stood, she glimpsed her image in the window, rendered to distortion by the lead-lined panes. Thin, emaciated, drawn. Was this really her? Wrecked on the rocks of reflection? Ragged hair, rough-tanned skin, sleepless eyes. She looked away. Even now, she always noticed her eyes...

Just as she lay down the atlas, Conley opened the door, slowly. She saw Roween, loosened up. "Thought you might have been asleep," commented.

"How'd it go? Learn anything?"

"Fine, no problems, I have a better idea of it all now." She sat, her side of the bed. "Only one or two things I don't yet understand, I'll think about them in the morning." She pulled off her boots.

"Nothing serious, then..."

"Not really, something happens and I don't see why it should."

"Want to show me?"

She fell back on the pillow. "We're out of paper."

"Use names from here," Roween picked up the atlas again, tore out a sheet, some islands. "Underline one when you want to make it an index."

"If you say," weary, don't even ask if it'll work. "It happens with multi-step saves." She leaned across, took the bookleaf. "If I do the first ten gestures and save them," she whisked through, "followed by the next twelve," flicked out effortlessly, "I can stab the one, stab the other, throw the palm, and — " burst of light.

Conley's gestures cast grotesque shades behind her, to Roween's mind like lumbering gargoyles, frozen in a dance for a fleeting instant, an embrace.

"Now watch what happens this time. I'll start with the twelve second name she'd chosen. "I was thinking there'd maybe be a market for partial spells, where you could sell people difficult or tedious gesture sequences, and they could slot them ready-made into their own designs." She pricked a name, pricked another, released the palm, popped the light. Roween blinked. "It works, too," continued Conley, "but it shouldn't. I'd been doing it quite happily for half an hour before I realised."

Innocent. "Well clearly it's behaving like you expected. Why is that worrying you?"

"Although I unsaved the two segments such that the gestures they stored would be released in the correct order for the spell, I actually created the second one before the first. Now you say that this naming trick fixes matrices, but I don't see how there was even a matrix *there* when I stored the spell's second stage. The first segment sets up the matrix that the second one uses, yet at the time I made those second-segment gestures the first-stage matrix didn't exist. Those gestures were therefore meaningless, they couldn't manipulate anything.

Yet, still, when it came to casting the spell, if I unsaved them in the right order I nevertheless got the flash. So why is that?"

Roween wavered. *Tell her?* "Maybe segments are commutative?"

"They're not. If I unsave them in reverse order, the spell doesn't work — even if they were originally saved correctly."

"You swapped the segments? But that could have done anything! It might have blown!"

"No chance of that, same colour count, it still proves."

Roween blushed, hurried. *Oops!* "So, what do you think happens?"

Conley shrugged, screwed up the map. "Seems to imply time shifting! Maybe this naming business encodes the physical world, but maybe the world is completely deterministic. Maybe that means that the present configuration of physical presences also sort of encodes all future states of the world." She tossed the ball of paper into a corner. "Maybe it's all rot."

Now? Now! "Bull's-eye, Con!" She clapped, once. "It's nonsense, I made it up. That whole waffle of meta-matrix limits, it's *rubbish*, no basis in fact whatsoever."

A groan, long one. "Great. Well thanks, Ro, so I just wasted an entire evening..."

"You didn't, Con, I concocted it for a reason. It only worked because you *believed* it would. It didn't contradict anything you knew, and it meshed with your view of the world, and no-one else except for me had ever considered it, so whether it worked or not was down to whether *you* believed it would or not. The theory came from me, and you ascribe me with a profound knowledge of magic, have complete faith in what I say on the subject, so why *shouldn't* it work?"

Conley's face was fixed with the same, strangled 'is she mad?' expression that Roween had first witnessed in a cave, south of the Rodya, out of the rain. It was the firelight that brought it back, the soft glow of a weak flame, playing on Conley's smooth features.

"It's time, Con, time for you to know."

No protests, she sensed that Roween meant it, instantly erased her trivial anger, overwrote it with attentiveness, intense, immediate. "I'm ready."

Roween looked up at the ceiling, grouped her thoughts, smoky darkness filling her vision. *Ready. But am I?* She bit her lip, began. "I've rehearsed this so many times, Con, but I still doubt I'll say it right. Forget all you were ever taught about magic. It just doesn't work that way. There's no matter-energy force, there are no matrices, gestures are irrelevant, proofs inconsequential. Scrap it from your memory. I'm going to tell you how things really are, only not with the depth of study that's been lavished on macro physics or anything: I don't know how or why it works, just that it *does*."

Conley fumbled in her pocket, then groped at the bed, looked around. "I ought to be taking notes..."

"It's not hard, don't worry, just listen. The whole massive structure built on the bedrock of macro physics, it's all an invention, created incrementally in an ongoing effort to describe and codify the way magic supposedly behaves in the world. The Academy has it wrong, Con. All that's needed to make something happen is for someone to *believe* that what they're doing will make it happen. That's it, the essence."

Conley paused. Serious. "There's no more?"

"Before people got organised, there were too many counter-beliefs to be overcome. Historically, the change began with macro physics, when a few pioneering scientists proposed the basic theory concerning the matter-energy force. It seemed reasonable, the principles it provided looked much the same as those for any other self-contained set of physical laws, and it

explained some previously non-understood natural phenomena. More people came along, extended the idea, made their own hypotheses, and because they fitted in with what folk generally accepted anyway, albeit superstitiously, the notion of ordered magic gradually gained a hold. Finally, the validity of the theory as a usable model was verified by using it predictively, assessing what effects it admitted and attempting to cause these to occur. So eventually such a large number of people believed it, took it as a law of nature, that for all practical purposes it *became* one."

Conley was shivering, edgy.

"There are sceptics, of course, who don't accept it, but their opinions are swallowed by those of the majority. Other, compatible systems do exist, though. In Chaïen, they have a sacrifice-based religion, believing that gods grant them 'favours' — spells, to us. The Inquans have a healing magic, all to do with the symbolic breaking of clay dolls made to resemble the patients. The Messenger's antimagic came the same way: his followers believed that their prayers to him tapped his godly energies so much that any magic cast at him was instantly absorbed and channelled into answering their devotions — thus, as a side-effect, making him effectively immune from magic. People accepted this suggestion so readily and in such numbers that eventually he actually *did* become proof against spells."

"I don't understand. If, as you say, all magic is founded in the collective beliefs of people, but those beliefs themselves do not intrinsically accept this view of how magic works, isn't that contradictory? If enough people believe that their way truly describes how magic works, then by your argument magic will change itself so that it really *does* work that way." Her voice was quivering, excitement? Fear?

"I think I'm over-using the word 'believe'. Look on it as cause and effect. If you do something which you categorically believe will cause a certain effect, then the true magic will give you that effect — I call this the 'belief/cause/effect rule'. The magic-systems that people have built up, such as our macro physics, only serve to provide frameworks in which to ground the beliefs that performing certain actions will cause given events to occur. It wasn't the Followers' belief that the Messenger was magic-proof which made him so, it was their belief that praying to him drained him of magic for answering their prayers, *that's* what did it. So long as enough people prayed, convinced that by doing so any magic cast at him would incidentally be sucked out before it took effect, that's indeed what happened."

"I think I see, yes," still trembling, shadowlight rippling her hair. "So this afternoon, the naming thing, what happened?"

"Ah, yes. I *added* a little to the theory, that's all. Found how you viewed things, where the limits of your knowledge were, and stitched in my new piece. It was consistent with what you believed, and also with what everyone else who accepts the doctrine of macro physics believes. Since there were no opposing ideas, and because a way of storing gestures is something people have been actively seeking for years, it wasn't going to fail on those grounds. Only two people knew what was supposed to happen, and we both had complete conviction it would work."

"I'm not sure *I* did." She sat on her leg, fidgeted.

"You did, Con. You didn't understand it — that's not surprising, it was trash — but you *believed* it. Different things."

"But what about the two-stage saves? I don't believe that stuff should work, it goes against what I know to be true." Heartbeat. "Knew to be true."

"You went off extending the theory on your own. You expected the saves to stick for segments isolated from their contexts, so they did. Only later did you realise that they *shouldn't* have behaved like that, but by then you'd already seen them work, so you figured instead that your knowledge must be incomplete, and that there had to be another explanation. If you'd given the matter some thought *before* you attempted anything, and had concluded that order-independent segments wouldn't cut, you'd have been right, they wouldn't have. See?"

"I follow your argument, yes." She looked so sad. "Hard to accept it, though, very hard. I'll try... You're asking a lot, that's all." She smiled, almost guiltily.

Roween panged for her. How much she'd come on since they'd first met — shed her instability, learnt to ride her anxieties. She was trying to be open-minded, to understand something that chafed against all she'd ever been taught, wasn't upset that at present she didn't, only that she was letting down her friend. Roween just wanted to squeeze her, tight.

"One thing, Ro. There must be dozens of people every day who try to advance some aspect of magic theory in one way or another. They probably have much better-formed ideas about what they're doing than I did, and yet how many succeed? Hardly any, I'd have thought. Some of their theories even have the force of logic behind them — Gamtan's papers on perpetual motion are the obvious example — but they still don't make good."

"That's right, but *you* had unfair help. I, too, believed that when you tried yours, it would work."

Conley twitched, glanced at the door and back. "Two people make all the difference?"

Roween chuckled. "No, Con, it just vindicates my feelings about true magic, proves me right." Her smile dropped. "Proves me right, yes..." She looked down at her hands, curled into fists, opened them, flexed her fingers. "You see, Con, my belief has something extra. Normal experimenting mages, they work within some rule-based system of magic that comes with a whole apparatus of its own for casting spells. They believe that making the right gestures, or killing the sheep, whatever, it'll cause some effect to occur. True magic obliges them. However, they don't *know* that's what happens, they're convinced their own 'magic' is doing it. Me, I know they're wrong, I know *exactly* why the spell is really working. Not only am I using the belief/cause/effect rule, I *know* I'm using it, it's the raw concept that governs all pseudo-magics — but I'm applying it stand-alone. Because of that, it doesn't matter how many counter-beliefs oppose me, they're irrelevant, they'll only block spells that are using false causal rules. Spells that *I* believe in, they employ the real thing. This afternoon, you cast probably the first genuinely true magic spell ever. If my understanding of true magic had been wrong, it wouldn't have worked..."

"Then why haven't you cast anything yourself?"

Roween hung her head, still analysing her hands. "That's the tragedy, Con, I can't. I can't manage simultaneously both the belief part and the cause part of the belief/cause/effect rule. If I try a spell," she began a 23 light-prime, "I know it won't work because I know it's using an invalid mechanism." She was slow, awkward, making the gestures. When she finished, nothing happened. "The only rule of magic I truly believe, as an absolute rather than by proxy, is the belief/cause/effect rule itself. My problem then is initiating a cause."

"I see why you can't use gestures, but not why you can't use something else."

"Well I could use gestures, I suppose — any trigger will do, so long as I've linked it firmly with the effect I wish to produce. But it's not as easy to do as it sounds. Say I decided to cause a flash of light when I snapped my fingers." She snapped them. "See? Nothing. I believed it would happen only if I believed it would happen. How do I break out of that loop? It regresses forever."

Conley screwed up her eyes for a moment, framing the problem. She opened them again and sparked into talk. "Let me paraphrase that, see if I follow. You want to cast some spell, call it S. To do so, you need to tie it to some 'trigger' event, call it T. Because S is a spell, there's no way it could happen naturally, so, without true magic, T would never actually cause S. Therefore, true magic is required, which means your belief/cause/effect rule applies. This says that if you believe that T will cause S, then T really *will* cause S. Therefore, if you want T to cause S, you first have to convince yourself that T will cause S. Now whereas other people may have what they think are perfectly sound reasons for believing that T will cause S, you know that they're wrong, and that in truth the only way that you could actually get T to cause S is by using true magic. That means re-application of the B/C/E rule, which requires that its premise be true. Unfortunately, its premise is that you believe that T causes S, which is

exactly what you were trying to use the rule to establish. It's a circularity." She laughed. "Once you figured out the rule, you couldn't use it!"

"Perpetual doubt, yes. The only way to escape is to give myself some other reason for believing T causes S. I look on the problem as one of initiating action. Think of an athlete entered for the high jump. He's standing at the beginning of the run-up, and he *has* decided he's going to jump, but that's not good enough to *do* the jump, though, is it? He actually has to *move*. What links the intention and *desire* of doing the high jump with the physical actions necessary for its accomplishment? We can all do it for movement: the would-be jumper knows what to do, he isn't going to stand there all day waiting to do it, psyching himself ready but never actually setting off. It *is* like that with spell casting for me, though. I know that all I have to do is accept that the trigger will indeed cause the spell, but how do I go about that? I don't have direct control over my faculties to believe, I can't *will* disbelief; I have to *persuade* myself, proceeding from what I already accept. There's no button I can press to make myself believe anything defined within a closed system, it's an act of faith. I'm waiting to make my jump, but unlike the athlete I can't connect the desire to jump with the execution of that desire."

"It must be possible to give yourself *some* focus to concentrate your mind. There are martial arts experts in Talia who can break planks barehanded without using magic, they let out a yell just as they're doing it. They've trained themselves, the yell is a key that they use to unlock their reserves, release all their energy at once. They couldn't do it without the yell. You should be able to try something similar. Coach yourself, I don't mean by yelling, more like working within a narrow frame of reference." She rolled her eyes, choosing a line of argument.

"I don't think that would be useful, I'd rather — "

"Forget about making yourself believe it, go for the throat!" Had she even heard the interruption? "Just *assume* you'll believe it, and plan for the trigger instead. Set yourself some target, a future event you can figure to make happen. Say to yourself that when you see such-and-such, that's your trigger, and this is what will occur as a result. Make the trigger difficult to achieve, so you'll have to think about it more, go into detail, through all the options, take time. All the while, keep assuring yourself that whatever it is you want to happen really will happen when the trigger cuts in. Now it might be days, it might be weeks, but eventually it'll sort of seep in, and you'll have yourself a conditioned reaction. When that trigger finally *does* come, you'll have it automatic in your head, you won't even have to *think* about beliefs, you'll just *know* the effect will occur. And, according to your B/C/E rule, it will." She stopped, eager for approval.

Roween was red-faced. "Don't you think it might be easier, now we've come all this way, if we just have you cast the spell?"

Conley's cheek fluttered. "So at last you trust me, then?"

"I *always* trusted you, Con. The problem was, you didn't trust yourself."

She clicked her teeth, nervously. "I'm still not against magic. You know that, don't you?"

"It's a simple choice. You destroy magic, or magic destroys all of us. This talk of yours, resurrections and immortality, you *know* it'll evaporate when the moment comes. There's no half-way, it's everything or nothing."

"Perhaps. I guess so, in my heart."

"I know. You can be supercilious at times, Con, but when it really matters, you do the right thing."

"Thanks, that — that means a lot to me." She brushed an eye.

Roween looked away. "Don't get sentimental, Con, please. There's still a lot of work to be done. You won't be able to use true magic until you have the spell-kill reflex."

"I won't?" Conley sniffed. "Why's that?"

"Try it. Snap your fingers and flash me a light-prime." Conley obliged, but their room remained in half-light. "The only incontrovertible evidence you'll ever have that what I've been saying is really true is when you can sense magic yourself. Perception is proof. *Then* you'll know. As it is, there are little doubts, niggling suspicions. You can probably still cast normal spells."

Conley's eyes glazed wide in sudden panic. She motioned swiftly through twenty-three gestures, and sank back in relief when the brief flit of light bleached the walls.

Roween smiled. "Because you have the ability to cast spells ingrained in you, all you'll need to do once you get the reflex is decide what it is you want, pick a sequence of gestures — those for a light-prime, say — and then flick them out. You cast spells so quickly that your subconscious mind will reflexively accept the link between the trigger spell and the desired effect, so the magic just *has* to fly. That's why I chose you to do this, Con. You're the fastest spellbinder anyone's ever heard of."

"Chose me?" She looked away, distance. "So you did... And here was me thinking it was because you wanted revenge for my plagiarising your thesis..."

Roween realised in time that it was a joke, laughed, didn't embarrass herself with a pseudo-indignant reply. "Helpful coincidence."

"Something I don't understand, Ro. Won't you magic-quash this last spell I'm supposed to cast? Distance from me won't help you avoid doing so, because magic will disappear from everywhere. And your reflex outranked the Messenger's antimagic."

It's all covered. "The Messenger's defence was itself effectively a spell, I told you that. My reflex isn't a spell, it *kills* spells — if it was a spell, it would kill itself, right?" She paused. "Maybe. Anyway, it could easily wipe out the Messenger's magic-proofing, because that was supported by false beliefs. Consequently, when I pulsed the chamber his shield was blasted aside just like any other normal spell would have been. Now this spell *you're* going to cast, the 'last spell' as you call it, it may smell bad, or it may smell good, but as it's going to perform the same basic function as my reflex does (despite undermining it), I strongly suspect it'll smell absolutely divine — if, that is, it smells at all. Since it'll pull at the very way true magic works, though, I don't expect my reflex — or yours — will even get a chance to cut in, it'll be rendered obsolete before it can spark."

Conley flopped back onto the bed, stared up at the protracted shadows on the ceiling. "You've thought about this a great deal, haven't you Ro?"

"All the time, Con." *All the time.*

Chapter 68

Sennary stood when the old man approached, but Justan the Great remained in his throne, silent. He signalled to his left; a lamb-fleeced chair slid gently across the Inquan carpet to rest two paces away, facing. His visitor nodded, slowly, wearily, and, after an open-armed bow, accepted the invitation to sit down. Sennary, to The King's right, followed.

Justan spoke: "How precise of the Elets, to send a dying man as their grand emissary. A simple way of ensuring that imprisonment, torture and the like would have no effect on you at all." He smiled.

The old man coughed, wetly, his lengthy beard shaking with the effort. "It is a tradition of my people," he wheezed, almost sadly. His bony hand raised a little, indicated the MSR inquisitor who had followed him in, now standing discreetly against the tapestried wall. "Yon spellwright, he is not required. These magics or yours," he waved at the shots on his temple, "they are ineffective. I can lie."

Sennary glanced over to Justan, anxious. They'd tested the process late yesterday, one shot a minute, it had worked perfectly. Justan was scrutinising the emissary, eyes strong; without breaking his gaze, he raised an arm, pointed at the door. Head politely down, the army mage departed, backwards.

"How do you do that?" The King asked, calmly.

"Those adhesive patches, it appears they prevent one from saying what one knows to be false. They do not, however, prevent one from saying what one believes to be true, nor what one cannot determine. All things taken out of context may easily be thought of ambiguously. By framing words appropriately in my mind, I can say anything I choose. I granted it only fair to warn you, lest you assumed my guaranteed veracity."

"I appreciate your candidness. Shall I order refreshments, or do you wish to begin our discussion?"

"I shall state the Eletic point of view." He coughed again, phlegm gurgling in his throat, steadied himself. "Put plainly, the Elets, we regard the Lowlands as buffer states between our homeland and the world to the east. If you invade the Lowlands, we will come to their defence, and your empire will be destroyed as a consequence."

Matter-of-factly. "You are aware, of course, that I have at my command an army of considerable size?"

"It is large compared with those of other states, yes. It is not of any consequence in the absolute sense. Eighty percent of your population works on the land. These people are unable to fight, because if they did there would be no crops the following year, and famine would then be inevitable. Your army, it is therefore made up primarily of city people and nobles. The figures for Akrea and Estavia are better, because their farms are more efficient, but even they have forty percent of their people tied to the fields. Your army, it is also predominantly male, because most of your womenfolk fall pregnant to escape conscription — as would your menfolk, were it possible! Taking age constraints into account, you can perhaps at best wield an army numbering five percent of your total adult population. Of this, what fraction is currently required to keep the peace in your new territories? Would eighty percent be accurate, assuming your adoption of the Vitalists meets no resistance?" He hacked another cough. "The Elets, they *all* fight, even such as I. Is the population of your empire one hundred times larger than that of Elet?"

Justan was looking to one side, knuckling his chin. He glanced back at the old man. "Probably, yes. Even were it not, I find your argument unconvincing. Will Eletic peasants fight today, knowing it means starvation tomorrow? Will parents abandon their children? Will the aged and infirm stand alongside the young? Will your people make no attempt to hold what they conquer?"

"The Elets, when they attack, think of nothing but the death of their enemies. *Death*, mark, not mere defeat."

"Once, perhaps, ten centuries ago. You're far too civilised now, I think, too soft to play the barbarian."

"Can you be sure of that?"

"Can you be sure of the opposite?"

The emissary smiled, threw a liquid cough again.

Justan leant back, deep into the velvet of his throne. "You must also be aware that I have magic at my disposal. You've seen the cloud I have mustered to the west; I could drown the Lowlands in a single night if I so desired."

"You may be a megalomaniac, King, but you are no lunatic. Submerging the Lowlands would rob you of their wealth, and still would not prevent our counter-attack. It takes no more than considered preparation to defeat your battlefield magic, as the Messenger's army almost proved at Ganeizna Green; I can assure you that you'll have no chance to use it against the Elets. And at the more strategic, indiscriminate-destruction level, we are conversant with your plague spell and are taking the necessary precautions." He began to gesture, slowly but smoothly, his ancient hands creaking into place like weatherworn spokes taking strain in a wheel.

Justan waited patiently for the light-prime to flash. He clapped, once. "Simple tricks, culled from child-school textbooks, are no defence against state-of-the-art meta-magic. I'm curious, however, to discover how you learned of our capabilities in that area."

The Elet reached within the folds of his short cloak, withdrew a sheet of Porett-headed paper. Sennary jutted his chin. A secret pocket — the search had missed it? He flickered a smile as he recognised the green-brown of Hease and Eller tweed, a jacket reworked into a cape. Justan, unworried, took the note, casually read it.

"This is interesting," he said, at length. "May I keep it? It could prove useful to me."

The emissary hunched his shoulders. "It has served our purpose; do with it as you will. The lady Elidia, whose writing that is, I have for her a medicinal preparation. It is Lowlander in origin, and may facilitate her recovery. Can you arrange for her to be administered one drop a day, starting," he paused, "thirty days hence?"

"It will be done." Justan held the paper to one side, released it into a controlled breeze that carried it softly out through the door.

"There is more, King." The emissary coughed, long; he pulled out a handkerchief, emptied his mouth into it. He breathed deeply, cautiously, continued. "The Elets will attack you if you invade the Lowlands, as I have warned; immediate removal of climate control, it is a necessary precondition, to show your intent. We will also press attack if you do not put end to a certain practice: you have a way of mobilising the dead. An army of such creatures, in time, it could threaten us. You must cease their 'production', and outlaw it."

Justan folded his arms, tarried his reply while he gauged the pale, impassive blue eyes of the Eletic errant. He clicked his tongue. "You know many things, Grand Emissary, that are thought by some to be secret."

Sennary felt embarrassingly uncomfortable.

"We take an interest in your affairs... We know that Tetra Labs are working on a wide-area mind-scrambler that you have commissioned. We know that the Cadence consortium, formed to buy Agritech's pest-control division, is using its acquired expertise to design locusts which can survive northern weather, while flying always towards the setting sun. We know that Farmer's group at East/Trad has been thoroughly subverted, and is in the preliminary testing phase of a long-term invisibility spell — with comsphere guidance, I believe, rather cheeky of them, don't you agree?" He laughed, broke it into mucus. "In short, we have siphons on the

spy networks maintained by you, Magicorp, Porett Technologies, Ansle of Malith, Lord Calter's Labs, MedSpell, KNews — indeed any individual or organisation with an interest in things magic."

"That list is ... extensive."

"We have many sympathisers, many spies, and have up till now enjoyed the advantage of not being suspected of piggy-backing on espionage rings. Now you know of our activities, though, you may be able to confound them, at least to some degree. We, however, need not concern ourselves with your reciprocal intelligence work in Elet, for indeed you have none! We document in detail all and everything about you, yet of us you know nothing. Is yours a sensible position from which to moot invasion?"

Justan continued to study the old man. "A few chance-heard snippets — even educated guesses — could furnish those facts; they don't prove access to organised information-gathering nets. Cadence is run by Estavian financiers who thought they'd get into defence magic before it was too late; their locusts won't breed and are therefore useless. Tetra's scrambler has unpredictable effects on affected animals, birds and insects — probable as not they'll berserk anything still standing, for example the spellbinder..."

"We have determined that the main issues are Porett's plague and the Academy's zombies. Both are usable without further modification. The virus, we can deal with that, but animation of corpses must cease."

"Your request can be granted, of course. Consider, however, what you are asking of me. Were I not to invade the Lowlands, what would happen then? It is only perpetual war that keeps any semblance of order in my country. The mass of people are united, working together in common endeavour to defeat the 'enemy'. They're bearing hardship, accepting harsh laws, and ignoring the suspension of long-held rights. They direct their energies against religious tyrants, decadent democracies, and wild barbarians; as they do, technology gathers pace, in ways which eventually may improve their lives. But what if there were no wars to fight? Without some focus, the people would lose their coherence and fall prey to manipulation by unscrupulous forces. Power would be wrested by faceless business conglomerates, criminal syndicates, secret societies and multi-faceted institutions that have long forgotten their original rôles. Perhaps, remaining among them will be a hand of independent individuals — a few aristocrats, mystics, Poretts. I, of course, would be overthrown with ease, or become a living statue only retrieved from storage when required for pageantry-related purposes. Justice would fall to the rot of corruption, with the law little more than a source of sometimes-useful excuses that may be convenient for cosily explaining the established factions' more noticeable excesses. And what of the people? The majority would be trapped in an existence of permanent wretchedness, with no access to, or any hope of *obtaining* access to, the technological or financial skills that would enable them to climb from their pit. Society would polarise: a small, privileged elite keeping down the great herd of uneducated nobodies, bleeding them; mercilessly and indifferently reacting to any real or imagined threat."

The emissary showed no emotion. "When you run out of enemies, will it not happen anyway?"

Justan head-pointed to Sennary. "My marshal here has made impressive progress in initiating democracy among the Purasans. Democracy brings with it a moral legitimacy which my own inherited position does not admit. If such a system were introduced throughout the empire, it would eventually grow strong enough to withstand all internal pressures. It could actually succeed in bringing together disparate nations for a lasting peace, crossing cultural boundaries in a way that business and criminal blocs would be unable to match. All I need to implement such a federation is time, but to gain enough of it I have to wage war."

There was a long pause.

"I'm afraid you are idealistic, King. Democracy without enforcement takes too long to work — at least one generation. If you hoist it on an inexperienced populace, things won't really change for years. The power-brokers at the top, they may disappear, but the petty

politicians below will merely slide into the new governmental framework to carry on exactly as before. They will remain as corrupt, as lazy; they'll still give way to nepotism, graft and abuse of authority. In poorer areas — parts of the Messenger's shattered conquests — it is questionable whether democracy of any kind could even be *contemplated* without at least a decade of economic and agricultural reform — so disorganised and ill-fed are the folk who live there. Only by completely eliminating all personnel with counter-democratic attitudes could you hope to create a system from nothing that wouldn't immediately decay to totalitarianism or civil war. Do you *really* have the stomach to kill everyone who might be resistant to change?" He looked over to Sennary. "Do *you*?"

Justan grimaced, coldly. "My own rank is doomed. Its validity will continually be threatened, and eventually I'll be destroyed. It matters not to me who has to die, so long as, in time, my subjects are safe, civilised, and free to rise as high as their talents determine."

The emissary's eyes were moist, rheumy. "Were you not a king, you would have made a good king." He cleared his throat again. "We have analysed your situation. It is our assessment that you could wage a deliberately protracted war against Chaïen for up to five years, a period amply long enough for you to secure your power base and eradicate your main enemies; a modicum of ruthlessness would be necessary, but you are well endowed with that particular quality. When ready, you could swamp Chaïen, sweep westwards as far as Berea, and there consolidate your holdings. You would be able to live out the remainder of your days in comparative tranquillity, and die leaving your successor to worry about the empire's subsequent well-being.

"An attractive scenario, my friend, but hollow. Your 'assessment' is only superficial; have you details I can see?" The emissary shrugged, disinterestedly. "I thought not; I myself, however, have commissioned many studies, to examine all aspects of my position. The trends are not good. Without bold action soon, our society will collapse into either anarchy or corporate tyranny. Democracy lights the only path to a humane, enlightened future. At least it has that over your solution — I would be irresponsible indeed were I to allow my empire to implode upon my death."

"You have not yet received the results of all your reviews. The Political Institute in Taltu will report in eight months: please wait until you hear what they conclude."

"And afford you the opportunity to influence them? I think not, Grand Emissary. Besides, I fear I do not have the time; as of last week, my armies have been poised to strike at the Lowlands. If I hold them in check at this late stage, before their goal is complete, they may well rebel, depose me, and thereby plunge the whole empire into terminal darkness. They are not, however, expecting to attack Elet, and they never were. Elet is safe. But if I don't lead them into the Lowlands myself, they'll march in without me anyway."

The old man rose, awkwardly. "I have delivered my message, King. Your future is yours to decide; the Eletic response will be automatic. Consider: if you fail to disperse yon rain cloud before a time seven days from now, we will go to war. If you do remove it, we will wait seven days from then for the complete destruction of your dead legion. This achieved, we will intervene thereafter only if you attack the Lowlands. Yours is the choice. Disregard us at your gravest peril." He raised a finger to his lips, shushed. "Make no wordly promises, King; we judge only by action."

* * *

"Your opinion, Lord Sennary?"

Justan had remained in silent thought for half a minute after the departure of the grand emissary; his sudden question caught Sennary off guard. *Deliberate?* "I haven't yet formulated one, sir."

"The Elets are shrewd, and their society is more closed than ours. Many of the claims that were made here today were false, but some were true. The art is deciding which to accept, which to reject." He laughed, short. "Ha! This much for Lord Porett's truth shots!"

"Will you accede to their petition? Abandon the Lowlands, impose democracy, purge all opposition without pity?"

Justan sighed. "A king, introduce democracy? Faint chance, Lord Sennary."

Sennary felt momentarily confused, puzzle-frowned until his vision crystalised. *So*. "Your talk of democracy was only for the benefit of the Elets." He shook his head, teeth bared. "You spoke well. I felt you had faith in your words." *Perfidy*.

"The Elets are quite right, it *does* take too long for democracy to take a hold; beyond my lifetime, certainly — at least without a blood lake of the first order. The forcefulness with which I defended it, however, may cause them to reassess my position. I can now argue that I had little choice but to invade the Lowlands, yet have no intention of attacking Elet. I can profess my honourable aims, promise to vacate the Lowlands in the Spring, and the Elets may be disposed to believe me. They would never attack us so late in the year anyway; when the snows come, no army of any significant size can move."

"So this meeting was a waste of time? You were *always* going to invade the Lowlands?"

"Not at all. I might well have stopped at the Schaaldt had the Elets produced more substantial evidence of their ability to back up their threats. However, nothing the emissary said persuaded me that they had anything other than bravado in their armoury."

"It can't all be bluff, sir."

"They're over-confident. They think we'll have to fight by ordinary means, unable to call on magic all the time. They don't anticipate their plan's being known to us, and therefore don't expect we'll flaw it. However, Conley of Malith and Roween Sage will not reach Liagh Na Laerich; they will therefore not find whatever book it is they are, I assume, seeking; and they will thus be unable to formulate an antimagic gesture sequence for widespread use. They won't even cook a spell to counter Porett's plague. You will stop them. The Elets don't know that, can't therefore account for it, and it will be their downfall."

"They know that I could find Conley whatever their security measures, and that I'm probably the only solo who'd recognise both her and Roween."

"And also that you have a certain romantic 'influence', yes. Additionally, they know that you're my eastern marshal, that you're indispensable, and that I'd be risking an uprising were you to abandon your post. You're so important to me that I even summoned you here to be present when meeting their emissary. They'll therefore reason that you cannot be spared, and that if I do suspect their game then I'll have to send in others instead. To this end, I have already recruited two bands of expensive mercenaries with orders to raze the Eletic library. Their number includes some of the finest attack mages in existence — the Elets would expect nothing less. The groups leave the day after you; they'll proceed separately, but one will be following in your tracks so as to explain some of the help I'll be giving you."

"And who will take my place as marshal?"

"You yourself suggested that the Purasan lands need little supervision; indeed, for a short period *any* territory can be relieved of the majority of its guard without serious risk of revolt." He leaned backwards. "I have decided to take the Lowlands by force of numbers. I shall move virtually all my armies west, storm the principalities in a matter of days, then return them; if it's all done with sufficient speed, only a wisp of an occupation army need remain behind. A few troubleshooting units of MSR-supported cavalry can douse any revolutionary fires that spontaneously ignite, and the regular army can take over once more upon its return."

Sennary was frowning, but his mouth was a strained smile. "You've thought of all that just now?"

Justan grinned, shook his head. "I've had it in mind since this morning. Within the week, I'll move the rainstorm to Elet, routing it over the sea so as to keep the Lowlands comparatively dry. Because of it, any troops the Elets have on stand-by will lose mobility and be powerless to reinforce the Lowlands when we subsequently move in. My heartfelt apologies will be relayed to the Elets without delay — the grand emissary has the necessary comsphere — and ready-prepared, sincere-sounding explanations will be made. Come Spring, we will know far more about our enemy, and should be able to launch an early surprise offensive. That will leave us with plenty of time for our major Summer campaign on two fronts against Talia and Chaïen."

"But if I fail to stop Conley and Roween?"

"All depends on you."

I doubt it, you'll have other safeguards... "Yet if I succeed? Will you release Porett's plague?"

"The Elets must be made to think I will; it may hasten their surrender."

"So you won't?"

Justan smiled. "I would have to be drooling mad..."

Sennary took that as a negative, hesitated. "And the undead?"

"We don't have them in sufficient numbers. Against the Lowlanders, yes, perhaps, they may be effective for their shock value. My primary interest in them, though, concerns other matters closer to home..." He waved over his shoulder; someone appeared from behind a tapestry, a non-MSR mage.

"So what will you do when you have your empire? How then will you keep control?"

"I'll tell the people what they want, give them it, and then murder anyone who objects. Standard dictatorial practice. As the Elets' man said, my successor can worry about what happens after I die. Why should *I* care? My own place in history will be assured." Was his voice threaded with sarcasm?

The mage bowed, Justan turned to him. "Round up everyone known to speak Eletic, excluding the grand emissary and his party. Those who live within a day's ride of here are to be brought to me. Otherwise, filter out the useful, put the rest to death."

Chapter 69

"You realise what we're offering you? Land, technology, slaves, gold — you need them *all*. Why do you still refuse?"

The Chaienish pair shared a mutual glance, each untroubled by the distraction spots kohled beneath the other's eyes. The man to Ansle's right, the darker of the two, replied. "Chancellor, we understand your terms, and they are generous. However, I repeat, we have reasons of our own for not joining your cause. We cannot send our armies into Soat under any circumstances."

Ansle strummed his fingers, impatient. "What exactly *are* these 'reasons', man? Be specific!"

The second ambassador spoke. "If we were able to tell you, we would do so. Suffice to say," he looked to his associate, "we have received instructions."

"Instructions? From whom? Justan?"

They grinned together, amused. "The armies of Chaien will not cross the Leskina. Whatever conflict rages in Soat, we will remain apart from it."

His partner touched him on the arm, stopped his continuing, smiled. "You may use that information in whatever way you please, but we can add nothing further."

* * *

General Nolley closed her briefcase, army leather spell-polished to patent standards. She pushed it to the side, focused on the red, egg-shaped object she'd removed. She looked up at Ansle; he nodded.

"Ready," said Nic. "Activate it."

Nolley stubbed the blunt end hard on the tabletop. It split clean in half, like fractured marble, easily enough to look natural. She let the pieces go. Standing between them was a man, perhaps a handspan in height, thin, drawn, greyed, eyes fierce: the image of Count Feathe, Minister of Agriculture.

For a moment, the projection froze, its lead-time still running. Then, with a jar, it began to move, speak, the volume balancing to fill the chamber in which the three were sitting.

"The news of Chaien's neutrality is not good, Chancellor, but neither is it bad. If they won't intervene on our side, at least they won't do so on Justan's. I have discussed the matter with my allies, and you will have our support as arranged. As to the full meeting, General Nolley's precautions are impressively thorough, and we are therefore able to attend." The figure jerked a bow, faded, then twinkled out.

Nolley removed her MedSpell sound-sets, caught Ansle's quizzical gaze. "They may have said no, sent a deaf-bang instead," muttered. She scooped them up, took the halves of the CalterCom, deposited them back in her case.

"Do you trust them?" Nic asked Ansle.

"I don't trust *anyone*, Nic, not even you and Nolley here. I do, however, believe that they will do what they have promised, and for the reasons they have stated. It cost Feathe heavily to support your appointment in the General Council, but he kept his word; he will do so again."

"Three senior ministers, the tacit support of Magicorp and Agritech, Nolley's conscripts, Cala's garrison plus Zrenin's and Varaln's, the MSR, and two private armies from

Barons Chrest and Ulgrey. And the undead." He tapped his pencil on the table's edge. "It should be enough."

"Others will join us once we've started, but at this stage the conspiracy is already dangerously wide. The more made privy to it, the greater the chance that Justan will learn of our plot. We have to be careful: *very* careful..."

"So you're always saying..."

Nolley turned to him. "Professor, there are fifteen private armies still in the homelands, and three more in Davia close to our border. All of them, and I do mean *all*, will join my command when the uprising starts, you have my word. Of the public armies, well Birgue and Cala Bay Town have no garrisons to speak of; Prydec's is stuffed with cowards, so they'll stay out of it. Only the troops in Zovia are dauntlessly loyal to Justan."

"And the navy?"

Ansle was doodling, trees. "We don't know *how* they'll act, Nic. No way of telling. All we can do is toss them a squall and hope they've the sense to keep uninvolved."

* * *

"No news from Porett?" asked Nic. It was sunny outside, of course; it was always sunny in Cala this time of day. Ansle had left for his daily dose of ministerial drudgery, but Nolley still had an hour before the crucial briefing of her senior officers.

"He's out of town," she replied, without looking up from her notes.

"Trilith, you mean?"

She turned to the next sheet. "Can't reach him there, either. Hard to find now, ever since he had to trash his model 3."

"Worrying. His support would be invaluable."

"Forget his support, it's his wealth that's important."

"Where do you think he's gone?"

"General Falker tells me The King probably knows, isn't saying. His own guess is CBT, flitting in and out with the Trans/Disc."

"But in your own opinion?"

"Falker's wrong, Porett's over west somewhere."

Chapter 70

It was growing dark when they reached the outskirts of Suadh Varl Na, yet everywhere was alive with people. Some carried wood, others pushed handcarts loaded with stone. Groups surrounded speakers, dispersing in all directions at the communiqué's end. And in everyone's actions, young or old, there was an urgency and single-mindedness that Conley couldn't fail but notice.

Roween had warned her what to expect, explained earlier while they were following the trade road round the feet of granite cliffs, prior to the two-hour ascent into Elet. She still felt terribly unprepared, though, uneasy. From somewhere came the smell of food cooking; she was suddenly hungry, but knew to be patient, reined in alongside Roween, waited.

A woman approached, young, tall, freckled, her red hair a flame, kindled by the rays of the setting sun. She looked from Conley to Roween, back. "Laegiala sov caigiala na."

"Yae. Laegiala laeRoai-in, begiala laeConli."

"LaeGuenadhan," she replied, without enthusiasm. She turned, began to walk towards the lights that were glowing in the centre of the village.

"Better dismount," Roween advised, sliding to the ground with something of an effort. Conley obeyed, her action smooth, contrasting. Roween nodded towards the Eletic woman. "Her name's Gwenathan, she wants us to follow her."

"I know that," irritated. The woman was some way ahead of them already, but hadn't once looked back. They strode quickly, caught her up.

"I put the 'be' in 'begiala' because the dialect down here still uses it. Further north, around Liagh Na Laerich, it's omitted."

"Ihann told me."

People were looking at them now; not gawping, just registering enough to satisfy their interest, perhaps their admiration, carrying on immediately with whatever they were doing. Roween kept her eyes on Gwenathan, but Conley was scanning around, her nerves growing tauter each time she met someone's gaze.

"This is bizarre, Ro, I feel like everyone's hostile, spying on us — acting like we're not here, but secretly marking us for later."

"I'd say you're probably right, Con."

She didn't know whether that was good or bad. "This teen we're following, is she a gatewatch?"

"No, just someone who happened to be around. She's taking us to the Strangers' Office, the 'Margh dha na Raetron'."

"Yes, Strangers' Office, you mentioned it this morning when we..." She scowled. "Hold on, I thought 'raetron' meant 'pain', not 'stranger'?"

"It means both."

* * *

Gwenathan led them to a two-storey building of the same, grey stone that characterised the rest of the village. Inside, the walls were whitewashed, the furnishings pleasant yet functional. An older man greeted them, taller than Conley, but merely average among the Elets. He wore a thick, ruddy beard, as if to compensate for the few straggling

lengths of strandy grey hair that lay miserably on his scalp. He smiled, friendly, gestured to a comfy-looking bench upholstered in green twill. "I am Maetharach, the Strangers' Officer of Suadh Varl Na. You would like to sit down?"

Together, Roween and Conley collapsed on the inviting settle.

Without asking whether they were thirsty, he began to pour beverages from an urn which was steaming in the corner. "You have travelled far?" he asked, not glancing up.

"From Zoderdhua today, but originally Cala, Murak." It was Roween who replied, not that Conley objected.

"A long journey," he handed her a silver cup. "You've visited Elet before?"

"I have, yes, but it's my friend's first time."

He passed Conley her drink, poured some for himself into a sizeable, worn, pewter mug. "And what are your thoughts of Elet thus far, fair one?"

Conley widened her eyes, caught unawares, sniffed at her drink to buy time. *Coffee?* "Well," she fought for an answer. "I'm surprised how clean it is, sir."

He flickered a frown, looked to Roween for explanation, blushed. "We have a dust problem, the prevailing wind..."

Roween noticed, laughed. "No, Officer, she's never seen anywhere else in Elet. She meant it as a complement, she really does think the streets are tidy. They're far superior to those of Cala, Rhiev, Elbienau, Bridges — even if they're poor by Eletic standards."

He smiled again, understood. Conley just looked at her in amazement.

"So if you've visited Elet before, dark one, you are acquainted with our procedures?"

"I was chaperoned all the time," answered Roween, "but I know this is a holding house, and we should wait here until our contacts can be reached."

"That is correct," he sipped at his coffee. "You are spellwrights?"

"Yes," said Roween. "You'll need our names..."

"I have them, Guenadhan signed you in. There's still time to put you on the biograph:foreign list, tonight's net-coach is leaving late."

"Biograph? No, you'll be drowned. Ask a local taker for details, put us instead on magic:technical and warfare:plans:progress."

He stared, like he was looking through her, thinking, assessing the chances of her being a liar. He took another sip from his mug, swallowed it after a pause. "By default now, the whole warfare:plans net, it grants a raised profile. I should subdue your message?"

"Query it, let the moderators in Liagh Na Laerich decide."

He considered. "No, I'll subdue it. If I personally don't know who you are, most of the other takers won't either. Who is your contact here?"

"Maedregh, he may not be here yet. He's the father of Lauthil and Chenii-Imor. If he *has* arrived, he'll be staying with them."

"I know of Maedregh. Lauthil's father? That I didn't know. I'll send for him."

Chapter 71

"He still suspects," the comsphere Porett affirmed.

"Doesn't surprise me — nothing about Justan could ever surprise me..."

"While he was talking, someone called the com-1. It couldn't patch through, of course, but I felt it all the same."

"Well, it was always going to look suspicious, this merging in windowless rooms. What did he say, anyway?"

"He seemed pleased to hear of our expedition. Hinted he was appraised of it all along, but I doubt it, he wasn't convincing. I found something else, though: he's suspended the commission on the New Academy, said we'd know why in a couple of weeks, but not to worry, it's to our advantage."

Porett leant back in the chair, swinging his arms behind it. "Any ideas on that?"

"None, but if he's speaking to anyone in Cala about it, he's not using a known comsphere. Might have a secret one we don't have records of, but I'm maybe 80% sure that if he did I'd have overheard it by now."

He sat up straight again. "What if it's not one of our..." He rummaged in his desk. "This came while we were in Seesel, copy of an internal memo from Magicorp's finance division. It's a budget proposal for acquiring MagInk."

The com-Porett frowned. "What do Magicorp want with MagInk? Their research is bunny-and-beagle stuff isn't it?"

"I checked, yes. They spend their days disfiguring animals and fixing them back with souped cosmetic spells they want to publish in booklets for teens."

"They're a nowhere outfit, then. Pedlars, tiny. So why do Magicorp..?"

He rocked his hand. "Our people in intelligence reckon it's for their strengths in illusion. First Khrov (Soat), now MagInk. Word is, they're close to testing a one-to-many broadcast device, but can't boost the received image."

"One-to-many? But we've been working on that for years! How did the Corp get the jump on us?"

He was scanning the cover assessment. "Intelligence theorise they're using a flat plate — you lose the 3D, but it's easier to share out the image among receivers. Without a proper boost, though, you only get the degraded view, so the more people who link in, the more faded it becomes. Who wants to be entertained by inaudible ghosts?"

"I understand. So, these plates can only be used singly without a loss of image quality. And you think Justan might be cutting one like that?" He nodded. "We ought to merge."

"I'll pull the shutters..."

Chapter 72

Roween had left her door open, recognised Conley's steps. She looked up.

"Separate rooms, makes a change," Conley mused, flatly, her eyes scudding around, taking in the dimensions, features. "Same size as mine, the window's on the other wall though."

"There'll be a family suite somewhere, but the remaining chambers will all be like this — self-contained, unpretentious."

"You think there are other foreigners staying?"

Roween sat on her bed. "Don't suppose so, the chappy downstairs would have said. It's only a small village, I guess there aren't many travellers these days, war makes it risky."

"Never mind the dangers of war, it was the twisty steps up to the plateau this morning that nearly finished off me! How could a merchant bring a cart up there? In and out of rocks, dozens of about-turn corners, hard enough just leading a horse — two couldn't even pass at some points!" She entered, wandered to the curtain-pull.

"If we'd followed the road further we'd have come to an easier ascent, but it's a day's ride beyond the one we took."

Conley was looking behind the drapes, figuring out the pulley mechanism. "This is neat, come and have a look."

"Just a few lengths of string, Con. Have you seen the amenities? There's a sink and a water closet behind the interior door."

She forgot the curtain cord, looked around. "What interior door?" Her eyes rested on a wide, panelled recess running floor-to-ceiling. "That's a *door*? I thought it was a chimney shaft from downstairs!" She glanced about again. "Yes, now that's a point, where's the fireplace?"

Roween smiled, crooked a leg up, held it two-armed. "It's old technology, but there's like a boiler in the cellar. When the weather gets cold, they stoke it up and cycle the smoke under the floor-slabs. There's vents you can close when your room gets hot enough, let the heat pass on to someone else."

"They ought to use Porett Radblowers, quick and effective. And you don't need someone to sweep out the soot from between floors every few years."

"Not everyone can afford Radblowers, Con. More modern places here use steam now, anyway, no danger of fumes that way. Trying to figure out the door?"

Conley was pushing it, looking for a handle or some secret catch.

"Try sliding it. Just put your hand in the middle and move it to the right."

She followed the instructions, gasped as it glided silently aside. She peered behind. "It's on these metal runners, with little wheels." She stared closer. "Hey, this is smart tech for a supposedly backward country."

"Gives more space, but I don't really know why they want to put the sanitation facilities off on their own anyway, leastwise not for single rooms. Maybe to keep out smells or something?" She raised a finger. "Ah, it's because of the rose attachment for the taps, you can shower in there."

"Rose? Oh, this thing on the tube that's hanging on the back of the door, I see, it fixes on the... Well, I'm impressed!" She turned to the lavatory. "Hot, this is plush," flushed it. "Running water in a border-post hostel! How much is this costing us?"

"I don't know, I expect it's free. If their system makes it difficult for aliens to travel

chaperoneless, it's only fair they put us up while they contact our guides."

Conley stepped back into the bedroom, slid the door back and forth another couple of times. "They go to some effort for their guests, then. Sort of at odds with the feelings projected outside."

"Just the way they are, Con, wary of other cultures. Anyway, it's nothing special, the whole village is plumbed up."

Conley sat beside Roween. "All of it? Hot!" she flopped backwards, legs bent, toes still touching the floor. "Why do you call it a village, anyway? More of a town, isn't it?"

"Well, village, town, does it matter? By Eletic measure, it's a village, but then there are a *lot* of people in Elet. Wait until you see Liagh Na Laerich..."

"So what are the folk here like? They're all good and tall, fair skinned, and I've seen more redheads today than in the rest of my life totalled."

"Nearer the coast they're almost all blondes and light browns — you could probably pass for one at a distance. I've not been this south before, but here and west they're supposed to be 20% gingers."

"That's about what I figured, yes. One thing, though: you told me they were a race of individuals."

"They are, very."

"So why do they all wear the same clothes?"

Roween snorted. "Do they? Gwenathan was in like a lemon smock gathered at the elbows, with leather breeches. Metharaph in the office had a deep blue smock, sort of velvety, and his breeches were bleached linen."

"But they were both wearing smocks and breeches. The people we passed in the street were wearing smocks and breeches. *Everyone* is wearing smocks and breeches! It's a uniform, you can't even tell man from woman, I don't know where to look!" She sat up.

"But it's like that in our country, most of the time. Shirts, breeches, gowns..."

"Not in identical styles, though, and they may be the same basic garment but they're cut different, you can make a distinction. You look at someone from the back here and you don't know what shape they are!"

"So is that important?"

Conley looked away. "Not really, no, I suppose." She clicked her fingernails. "I just, well, can't really eye someone if I don't know what I'm looking at, can I? Sort of distasteful..." She shuddered.

Roween released her knee, fell back onto the pillow. "Goodbye Lowlands, hello Elet..."

* * *

The bed was soft, wide, the mattress stuffed with cloth, not straw or nut-husks. *Luxury!* To Roween, it felt enormous, unrestricted, she could stretch out anywhere, turn, roll, pull at the blankets, indulge herself. On her own, wrapped up, snug! *Better than those damp nights under starlight, better than sharing with Con.* Clean, fresh sheets; crisp, smooth against her naked, newly-showered body.

When had she last slept like this? Ihann's, yes, but it wasn't the same, Conley had been ill, things weren't going well. His spare bed sagged, too, pulled you towards the middle.

She closed her eyes, nuzzled the downy pillow. Rhiev, in the hotel. She'd shared the room with Con, but there'd been two beds, classy, sprung with wire, quilted. She'd drifted asleep so easily that night, alone, Conley out dancing with Sennary. Cried, yes, maybe.

Sennary had been so, oh, charming, witty, sheer delight, he'd never used his looks, his handsomeness, except maybe his eyes. *Mmm!* She knew his ploy, told herself: he was showing me his mind, showing Con his body, playing us both. Con liked his eyes, too, she'd said, so sparkling, so vulnerable. But she has eyes of her own, beautiful, not like mine, not so skewy that Sennary can't even tell when I'm looking at him. Damn it! Gods, if only he saw the inside, not the shell, how could he have fallen for a face?

Perhaps he didn't? Maybe it's me he's been attracted to all along? I'm not *so* bad looking, apart from the eyes, maybe a little scrawny and I'm not very tall, but I'm intelligent, and I listen. Men like women who listen.

But that's because I never know what to say. I just sit there entranced by his voice and smiling stupidly. Con, she has all the experience, she can read a situation, decide what to do next, not blurt out some clumsy remark that makes her look like an idiot. Oh, it's just not *fair!* What would I do if he ever wanted to kiss me? I don't even know *how* to kiss!

Con's not exactly dim, she has a doctorate, even if it's rightly mine. If Sennary is attracted to brains, hers are the more obvious, and she knows how to show them off, not like me, too afraid to do anything in case I foul up. And when he does ask something I can talk about freely, I sort of cloak myself in serious sincerity, like I was explaining it to a stranger.

That's it, really, isn't it? Sennary is just a stranger. We had a wonderful two hours together, but we both knew it was an interrogation. Although, thinking back, he didn't ask anything improper, did he? Next time we met, when we fixed him up with the white gel, he was different, more distant. Or was that me? Did he behave the same as before, but it was me who pulled back? I don't remember. Yes, he was the same, wasn't he... But I knew it was Con he really fancied, and — gods! Maybe he thinks I rejected him? Yes, of course, I suppose I *did* reject him! But I didn't know — how was I to know?

I wish I could talk to my Da...

* * *

"So how did you sleep, Ro?" Conley dunked a toast soldier into her second egg.

"Very well, once I got off. Off to sleep, I mean. I guess I'm worried a bit about my father, he's old, he might have died for all I know."

"Wait until Medreph arrives with his comsphere, you can call through and chat to him."

Roween's cup was so wide it was almost a bowl, she had to pick it up with both hands. "If he knew where I was, what I was doing, it could be dangerous for him. He understands, he's patient. Just wish, well, you know..." She took a sip of her coffee, noisy.

"There's a library here, you see it? Novels, I think, people must sometimes stay quite a while, waiting for their shaps."

Roween looked up. "Anything by Nuagh Casii? When I was here last time, she had a book due out. Rumours were it's a thriller that's written like a biography."

"I didn't look too hard, they were all written in Eletic."

"Maybe if they don't have it, they'll let me go to the bookshop, find a copy there. Oh, I'd need some money, though."

Conley reached for the salt. "It's busy out this morning, I had a look before you came down. People everywhere, even at this hour."

"Readying for war. They're like swallows in the trees, preparing for migration. One day, the branches are drooping under their weight, the next they've all gone."

"All of them?"

"Unless they're too ill to travel, I expect so, yes."

"They won't leave anyone behind on guard?"

"No, probably not. No-one's going to steal anything."

"Weird." She finished the egg, wiped her mouth.

"From the level of activity, I think we can assume their emissary has already met Justan, and that the results weren't good. It seems to me like the Elets are going to rise." She sighed, aloud. "We're too late, Con, we can't pre-empt the issue now by zapping magic. Justan has challenged them, we can do nothing to affect their response."

"So we wait for Medreph, then, if he's not in town yet?"

"We don't have much choice, we wouldn't get far unaccompanied. I hope he didn't play emissary himself." She shook her head, nearly spilled her drink. "No, he wouldn't risk losing the caravan."

"Well, it's nice enough here, I don't mind staying. Is the bulk of the Eletic army likely to come this way, do you think? Or will they mass further north?"

"The Eletic army?" Roween's face looked empty. "They don't have an army, Con, they fight as individuals."

It was Conley's turn to blank out. "Uh? But that's *stupid!* A well-organised army can always trash even the most highly-motivated of rabbles."

Roween put down her cup, nodded. "Individuals, Con. See? They won't *ever* fight as a unit, not even a loose Guelish-like one, they'll just swarm. A lion can kill a man, but even lions are frightened of ant colonies. Justan's army will be continually sniped at by those Elets that happen across it, but the majority will leave it for others to bait, go for civilian targets."

Conley was tapping the shells with her spoon, absently. "A strange scenario..." She was cut from continuing when Maetharach entered.

"Lauthil and Chenii-Imor are coming," he announced. "You might want to pack."

"Maedregh too?" asked Roween.

He turned, didn't look at her, left.

Chapter 73

Porett offered the visitor a chair — she looked like she needed one. He didn't recall ever having met anyone this old before, she must have been approaching her century. Hunched, shrunken, yet with jarringly lush white hair cascading around her shoulders. Surely not spelled that way, but uneasily unnatural. She was spry enough, whatever, as she sat herself down, still clutching the flat, brown package she carried.

"It is good of you to see me, Lord Porett," she said, her strong, musical accent still apparent, despite the cracks in her voice.

"I was intrigued, old lady. You are an Elet, here, in Trilith, wandering free, yet our king has ordered the arrest of anyone who merely speaks your language. You arrive at my door with a battered old parcel, and say you want to bribe me. Me! One of the wealthiest people in the world! Yet you are clearly not mad. Since you are also no threat, I indulged my curiosity. As, I think, you knew I would."

"I shall be brief." She smiled. "In your country, all artistic people, they are treated with contempt. There is no strong historical tradition of patronage, because your forebears, they had neither a powerful religion nor rulers with a desire to flaunt riches. Instead, their creative energies were turned towards the philosophical, the mathematical, the scientific. Even your literature and architecture are poor by international standards. Other peoples regard you as hard-edged, uncultured boors. Rather than accept their judgement, however, your own society adopts an attitude of productive superiority, scorning the arts as a non-intellectual waste of time, an excuse for stuffy elitism by pompous individuals who wallow in the critical appreciation of worthless objects within a self-imposed framework completely without foundation in the real world." She took several panting short breaths; that last sentence had been too long for her...

"Sounds like you don't like art."

"Lord Porett, it sounds like you *do*. In that respect, you are different from your fellows, and I might yet reach you to prevent your doing something very stupid." She undid the knot on her burden, pulled aside the leathery wrapping paper. A painting. "What do you think of her."

Porett gasped, felt himself do it but couldn't cut out. "She's beautiful!" A woman, looking into a mirror, that's all. But the reflection, her face. He was hit so hard it was almost physical. "She looks real, so alive! I can't, I'm, she's *magnificent!*"

The crone nodded, slowly, sagely. "In an hour, she'll be dead, and she knows it."

Dead? "But she looks so proud, noble, she's exuding contentment. Hell, I feel I could touch her!"

"She is Naemi. Her legend is well known among my people; it partners that of Tuudhan, which is their story from his side."

Porett was still reeling. The brushwork was just *perfect*, the composition supremely balanced, but the subject, the sheer beauty of that face. Gods, how he wished he could paint! He glanced at the old woman, simply grateful for her showing him it. She was smiling, nodding. He had to know, asked: "What's her story? Why could she move the artist to such genius?"

She chuckled. "'The artist'? Do you not recognise the work of Bakaresa? He who painted 'The Desire of Being', which you so admired in Taltu's Resdav Collection?"

He stared at her a moment, then at the painting. Yes, there was a resemblance, the use of colour, something about the lighting, the woman's dress... So this must be a couple of hundred years old. But why did he paint it? And how had the *Elets* come by it?

"At a time far in the past there lived a woman," she began. "Wealthy, she was, powerful — a queen, you might say — and her name was Naemi. She was very handsome, and

was often told that she was surely the most beautiful of women in the world. This, she felt was true, and relished it. A travelling minstrel came one day, and hearing of her boast expressed distrust. He knew of tell that greatly beauteous women lived in numbers to the west, beyond the land of tall and slender trees. A man called Tuudhan dwelling there was said to have the skill of 'phacing' — bringing out the beauty women all possess by nature."

She cleared her throat, looked into Porett's studious eyes, continued. "Naemi was outraged! Therefore, she issued grand instructions that this sorcerer be brought to her domain. Upon her words, an expedition was begun, and one year later to the day, it made return. Tuudhan was thus a captive. Naemi ordered him to phace her beauty. He refused, and said she was already beautiful enough. She asked him whether she was the most beauteous of women in the world, but he said no, and so she locked him in a cell.

Every morning, she would visit him and ask if he would make her beauty grow. Yet every morning, he would shake his head. Each time he did so, Naemi hung a thread of gold about his neck, and after many months, the weight lay deep. It hurt him much, but still he kept resolve. Then, at a time one year exactly after Naemi first entreated him, Tuudhan gave his consent. He *would* make her more beautiful, but not redress the consequences of her wish.

So Naemi took away his necklace, wound of golden thread. She sent for oils and aromatic spices from afar, which Tuudhan then distilled to form his special mix. A year it took before the preparation was complete, a period in which Queen Naemi grew forlorn. But then, at last, three years since he was captured, Tuudhan's task was done.

And when she knew? Immediately, Naemi drank the potion, and her features changed. Her hair became more silky, straight away; her eyes turned brighter, clearer than before; her lips took on a deeper tint of red; and her complexion paled and evened. "Naemi," Tuudhan said, "I have to tell you all my phacings are constrained, and should you ever see your countenance in mirror, pool or glass, unstopably your death will come one hour thence." So hearing this, and hesitating not a moment, Naemi took her looking-glass, and viewed her face. She smiled."

Porett waited, but the taleteller added nothing. Yet her story was incomplete! "She smiled?" he heard himself saying. "But why? She had only an hour to live!"

"Because, if even only for an hour, Naemi knew she was indeed most beautiful of women in the world."

He felt open-eye stunned. "I, I don't understand. She *deliberately* caused her own death, for the simple vanity of seeing herself as the world's greatest beauty? And she *cherished* it? That's," he stumbled for a word, could only manage "stupid!"

The old woman covered the painting again. "But is it so dissimilar to what you yourself intend to do? You would go to Elet to learn the secret of magic-destruction, when you surely realise that the power such knowledge endows is only transient. Merely possessing it is nothing: only by using it do you become mighty. Yet, by that very act of utilisation, you undermine magic itself — you start a rot — and, because of this, eventually the whole spell system will collapse. Your desire for primacy, it will have caused you to lose everything; and all for a fleeting moment of being the..." She read his eyes. "Well, you understand now."

He grinned, cynically. "Yes, you're right, I do. A trick. You make up a story, fake a painting to go with it, and allegorise it to what you suppose are my plans. Well in that respect, you're mistaken. I'm not interested in practising antimagic, only in finding how to stop its functioning. That's all. In your story, it would be like Naemi having Tuudhan put to death, rather than allow him to devalue beauty by making it commonplace."

She sighed. "You may lie to me, Lord Porett, but not to yourself. *You* know why you really want the secret, and how you intend to use it. Think well on what I have said. If you stay in Estavia this next month, and launch no expedition into Elet, you can have the Naemi canvas to keep."

"The bribe..." he murmured. "I'm almost tempted to accept, or to take it from you

anyway, but I know it to be valueless. This painting of yours is a forgery, cooked by some mage to look ancient. It's no Bakaresa original."

Were those tears in her Eletic eyes? "You disbelieve, yet you have no proof..."

Foolish old maid. "I own the port of Trilith. Nothing enters here without my knowledge, and I can guarantee that no works of art such as this have been imported since I took control. There's a tight ban, Justan's fob to what you called the 'productive superiority' lobby, coupled with the desire to stop large capital sums leaving the empire without tangible returns. So the only way your precious Bakaresa could find itself here is if this is where it was painted."

She began tying the string. "I was approached the day you visited the Resdav Collection. I came immediately, before you were lord incumbent. I have waited long, here in Trilith, hiding, hoping that I would not be required to offer you the most admired of all the paintings in Liagh Na Laerich." She rose, unsteadily, to her feet.

He iced up. "Nice try, old lady, but if you're so stuck on proof, how can I know that any of what you've said is true? The corny story, yes, you have that off cool like you tell it every day, but that doesn't mean the picture is genuine."

She glowered at him, suddenly, ferocious. He was seized by a wild, panicky thought that she was about to try tear out his throat, crazy! But instead she loosened, strangely, became calm, calm as death. Behind her eyes, the hatred was gone. "Davian painters," she began, her voice whited out of emotion, "were always inspired to their greatest works. One day, the master Bakaresa, on a visit to Seesel, chanced upon an Eletic fishing boat stranded by tides on the Schaaldt delta. There, he heard a maiden narrating the tale of Naemi to a group of Lowlanders, as payment for their help in freeing the vessel. He fell in love with her at once, despite her years — she was but sixteen, he in his fifties. The story she told so gripped him that he knew he had to paint it, and that only the girl herself could be his model. His love for her, and his sympathy with the legend, led him to create the most stupendous masterpiece of his career. After a week of fevered activity, he lay down his brushes, and perceived his work was supreme, that he could never again paint anything approaching its perfection. It was the sublime achievement of his lifetime as an artist, at last he was whole. So it was that he died an hour later, cradled in the arms of his," she checked herself, "inspiration."

"That's it? But what happened to the girl?" She said nothing, walked towards the door. "What happened to the girl? Tell me! What did she do with the painting?"

She turned. "One month from now."

No, how could she be? "Are you the girl?"

She left.

Chapter 74

The temples in Bridges were still recognisable, but they had long since ceased to be used for their original purpose. Shops, schools, hospitals, even private houses, but rarely places of worship.

Porett had chosen such a converted church as his hotel while he was in Bridges. He'd rented the whole of the tower, partly for reasons of privacy, but also because he was wary of flooding if Justan loosed the climatology mages over Seesel. Freak tides, of course, had been the primary reason that Lowlandic ecclesiastical buildings were all equipped with such tall, sturdy turrets anyway. *Practical, these old-time religions.*

As the whitewashed, moulded-plaster ceiling appeared before his eyes, Porett let out the breath he'd held. He hadn't been sure of that last fingers gesture, it'd *felt* like it had locked but he'd lost concentration. Well, he was here, anyway. He sat up in the Trans/Disc device, looked to the door. The binder was still there, good, plus the booby-trapped bolt in case anyone took an axe to it.

He'd have to hurry if he was to keep his appointment with Malva. The old woman from this morning still bothered him, her and her damned painting. It was a fake, of course, and even if it wasn't there was no way *she* had been the model. Clever, though, gave him just enough doubt to hook him on a second tack, promise of longevity.

Closing the door behind him, he muttered a bindword, then strode quickly for the spiral staircase. The ornate interior of the old temple had been preserved, and if he hadn't been so late he'd have maybe paused to check out the curvy carvings beneath the handrail. No time, though. He fumbled for the key to the outer door, spoke the word for its binder. Malva should be in the lobby.

Yes, she was there, waiting, staring absently at a baby asleep in its mother's basket. She smiled when she saw Porett, politely, pleasantly. He nodded back, mildly unnerved. It felt odd to be smiled at by someone with her leanings, sort of belied all the smiles that women had ever given him. Maybe he'd just been misinterpreting, all his life? Perhaps women smiled at *each other* that way? He didn't know, he'd never merged back.

"How's Trilith today?" she asked.

He frowned, motioned towards the door as she rose. "Not so loud..." She'd done it deliberately, of course; a mild admonishment for his keeping her waiting ten minutes. "Trilith was fine. I made my appearances, handled my business, and spoke to The King."

"Told him you were headed this way?"

She always made the effort to appear unimpressed by name-dropping. "Yes, and he sanctioned it. He has his own plans, sending one of his field commanders in on a solo run. Wants me to contact the chap, thinks he may need more persuasion."

They stepped out into the street. Cold, but sunny. "Would I know this man?"

"Perhaps, he's an ex-merc, name of Sennary."

"Sennary?" Approving, "Good, heard of him, Svalan I think?"

"Half Davian, but yes; his loyalties are with Justan anyway. Hold, a moment..." He gazed up towards his room, lenses flashing out the anger from the blushing, late afternoon sun.

"Seen something?"

"Yes, well, no. There was a flagpole out there, I asked them to remove it, security. Just checking they hadn't put it back."

"A prayer mast." They continued their walk. "A lot of former temples still have those, they were used to call people to prayer in the old days. Different coloured flags for different

times of day, you could use them like clocks."

"Nice idea. I can't help noticing there are many of these buildings around, sort of leads me to conclude that the religion here was once quite strong — stronger than anything we ever had in Murak. Do you know why it suddenly broke?"

She shrugged. "The drugs, I guess. People didn't feel they needed an afterlife of promises when they could have their own paradise right here. There's still a Church, of sorts, and a few creakies probably attend its services, but I don't think I've ever seen a priest in all the time I've been here — nor do I ever want to."

"You're of a faith yourself?" He glanced back, after a passer-by who'd knocked against his hand.

She laughed, resentfully. "No god has ever believed in me, why should I believe in any of them?"

"There's a cure, you know, for your condition..."

She wasn't looking in his direction, stared out ahead, distantly. "Thanks for the offer, but I'll skip on it." She half-pointed. "Here's another one of those temples, see? The builders were monotheistic. Some people maintain that the tower stood for the figure one, meaning the one God, Jaarla or whatever his name was. More likely, it represented a damning great phallus." She wrinkled the corner of her mouth into a smile, satisfied. "I think I'll stay the way I am..."

He'd encountered that attitude before, at the Academy, knew the thing to do was keep quiet, patronise her by not saying anything patronising...

They were on their way to the gym he'd rented as a warming-up arena for her team, where they could mettle-test the people they'd bought in from Akrea. No-one had failed, of course, Malva's instincts having proven sound at the selection interviews. Just as well, he couldn't really zip anyone back to Estavia via the Trans/Disc boxes, not without husking their heads empty first...

"Seems kind of strange," he ventured, "that the Lowlanders would have a use for gyms. I'd have thought, since they dose their bodies with whiz-weeds every day, they'd be unconcerned with matters of health?"

"Perhaps, yes, but some like to do a little maintenance work. Besides, gyms are tactile places, you can get a lot of stimulus there. Especially if your skin nerves are fired on Bliss to dancing point."

"So maybe the Lowlanders aren't all the pushovers Justan expects."

They had to cross the street here, waited for the carts and carriages to clear. "It'll be interesting to find out. There's certainly more to them than you'd know to look. Sure, most are so laid back they're the horizon, but there's this order-keeping force they have, and it's hot-like efficient."

There was a gap, they took it. "Seems uncharacteristic. The princes run it?"

"It's way secret, I haven't been able to find out certain, but it must *be* them. Hard to tell it even exists, it's just, well, soft evidence really. A troublesome foreigner disappears, a corrupt official overdoses on sparkies, a nascent criminal gang is wiped in a flash flood. All points to someone keeping the country safe and stable. And I've had experience myself..."

The gymnasium was over a couple more small bridges, and once they'd arrived she'd go into commander mode. He slowed, let her spill her story. "So, what happened?"

"I received a note telling me to keep the size of my band to thirty or below. Caught me by surprise, I wasn't sure how many people even knew I *ran* an outfit. I ignored it as a crank, kept hiring. One day, I took on a couple of new guys, numbers thirty-one and thirty-two. Four days later, a house fell on them. Since then, I've kept to the limit and had no trouble."

"Wild... I'll see if Justan's folk know anything about this."

"Don't take long. With the Akrean recruits and the people I have on other jobs, roll-call this morning numbered forty-three..."

* * *

It was harder to contact Sennary than he'd expected. He kept reaching some Purasan woman who said Lord Sennary was unavailable and then tapped out, without even taking a message. Eventually, though, he snatched at her attention for long enough to learn when her employer was due to return, and so was first in line with a call when he did.

"You're a busy man, Sennary, difficult to reach. Preparing for a journey, perhaps?"

Sennary was about to scowl, but switched to a grin. "You've been speaking to His Majesty."

Porett's image shrugged. "You're going to intercept a pair of mages who do a sideline in antimagic."

"So what if I am?"

"Do you really expect to succeed? You're no great spellcaster yourself, the sword's your weapon. Conley's a dazzler, she could cut you down and bury you before you got within thirty paces. You don't stand a chance."

"I won't need my sword, not once I've reached them: I have another way of arresting their progress."

Cocky, cocky. "Justan mentioned that, yes, but romance is only going to pull you one of them, you couldn't bring them both back that way." He paused. "Maybe you don't intend to — maybe you're not even going to seek them at all..."

"What do you want, Porett?" Firm.

"Information: the information Justan has asked you to obtain, the secret of dispelling magic."

"Well I don't have that information, do I?"

Playing games? "So, I want to make sure that you get it. Furthermore, I want to ensure that Justan doesn't. Whatever he's paying you, I'll double it — he's using my money anyway."

"He's not paying, I *want* to go after them."

"Doesn't sound that way to me." He adopted a softer tone. "Look, Sennary, I've had your affairs investigated, and you're not too well off, are you? Your farm is ticking over, but it needs a shot of capital if it's ever to be a commercial success. Your castle is a hotel, leased to the company that owns all the surrounding land, and, after you've paid the costs of maintaining the fabric of the building, the money left over is barely sufficient to cover the interest on your inherited liabilities. Your only source of disposable income is your army salary, and that's hardly more than a token. You did better when you were a mercenary."

"So what's your point, Porett?"

Playing dumb! "I want to know how Roween Sage wipes zip. If you can tell me that, I'll make you a wealthy man. I can settle your debts, pump cash into your beloved farm, even buy you the company that's paying you toss for the use of Castle Whiting. All you have to do is tell me how she does it."

Sennary nodded, once, sharply. "So you're saying I'm to disobey my king, pass everything I find out on to you. Presumably that means Roween and Conley both have to die?"

"There are some things that must inevitably happen, whichever way you choose solve a problem. Look, I can help you, kit you out with the latest tech."

"Like you did before, yes, well your tags will tell you I still have most of that: all but the sword and armour was practically useless in the field." He rubbed his chin, looked down at the table top where his comsphere rested. "Justan's put you up to this, hasn't he? He wouldn't have told you I was going anyplace unless he expected you to try something."

Porett hesitated. "Very well, yes, he knows what I'm doing. He's concerned that this influence you claim to have over Conley and Roween might be two-way; one or both could have strings on you, and start to tweak them. All that binds you to Justan is loyalty, and it's an incontestable fact that when loyalty comes up against love, it's loyalty that loses out. Economics, though, is another matter entirely. People can be paid to do absolutely anything."

"I see. Well, I thank you for your frankness. It's gratifying to learn how highly The King values my services, but at least now I know I have no conflict of interests: I would lose nothing by accepting your offer, except, perhaps, what little remains of my integrity." There was bitterness in his voice. "Before I do, though, I've two questions."

It was working. "Go ahead."

"First, why aren't you organising your own squad to chase Conley?"

Good, Justan hasn't told him. "I'm stuck here in Trilith. How am I going to recruit people and ship them off to Elet in time?"

He debated a moment, "Point taken." Leaning forward, "Second, does Justan know you haven't destroyed your com-3?"

He faltered. *A trap?* Could he blush in here? "What do you mean?"

"You called me directly, you didn't go through the exchange."

"So? My com-1 has touched your com-2, a boxful of spheres from the mercenary's guild did the rounds to all major companies. What's the glitch?"

"My old com-2 split when I took a fall, I had to get a new one. Try indexing on it by class, rather than by owner, you'll see I'm truthing."

Oh, this just isn't fair!

Chapter 75

General Nolley had hued her hair ochre this morning. Ansle smiled: what did she think she was, a woman?

"If you're sure about this, Chancellor..."

"Of course I am," he snapped. "Despite his limited intellect, Sennary *is* in a position of considerable power, and it would do us well to have him on our side, or at least out of the way."

"But if you can't sway him, and he tells Justan..."

"If it seems to me that I'm unlikely to win him over, I'll change my approach, send him to Elet."

She said nothing, just eyed him, doubtful.

"Look, Nolley, I *have* done this kind of thing before, you know. Trust me, he'll go to Elet if I want him there."

"If you say so, Professor..." She brushed a spider from her shoulder as she walked towards the door. "I'll wait here, out of sight."

He thought of a box, then of a comsphere that was once inside it, tapped in.

Five or six seconds later, Sennary answered.

"Use the glass," instructed Ansle, sliding his encryption screen into place before Sennary could speak. A couple of heartbeats while the former mercenary followed; his face slipped into sight.

"This isn't too convenient, Ansle: make it short."

"Naturally, Marshal, my time is valuable. *Verification* is why I'm calling. First of all, I understand that Justan has dissolved the supposedly secret committee that he'd entrusted with the job of setting up a rival academy of magic. Is that correct?"

"You know it is. If you want me to give you names of former members, I can't."

"Ah. Well, never mind. My next question concerns undead. The first batch arrived for Justan by merchant fleet yesterday, and three more shipments are already on the way." He waited.

"So?"

"What would your reaction be if I told you we had been lucky in production, and have large numbers of undead over — many *more* than Justan was expecting?"

Sennary snorted. "I'd say you ought to kill them again, and burn the bodies."

He bagged his moment. "In case they fell into the hands of subversives, you mean? I follow your reasoning: with a sizeable army of zombies, and Justan far from the capital, yes, they could front a revolution."

"What? I was taking the moral point of view — the whole *concept* of necromancy is abhorrent. If you've accidentally animated too many corpses, well, at least *some* can be returned to rest."

"I understand what you're saying. So the suggestion that someone *may* use them for civil warlike purposes doesn't present possibilities to you, then?"

"No-one would be stupid enough to try it."

Ansle frowned, reproachfully. "Come, now Sennary, *audacious* it may be, but not *stupid*."

"If a gnat lands on my hand, the gnat might be considered audacious. All too easily is it crushed, however. Therefore, audacious or not, the gnat is still stupid."

He stroked his chin. "Just because it *looks* like a gnat, that doesn't mean it *is* one..."

Sennary stared an instant, then threw up his arms. "Gods, Ansle, you'll wring ideas out of anything! You're not thinking of prossing *insects* now, are you? Next you'll be making centaurs out of knackered horses and paraplegics, or werewolving dead human brains in live animals just so you can order them around. This whole resurrection kick of yours is an abomination! Why are you bothering *me* with it?"

He sighed. "I can see I'm wasting my time. Other matters: I want you to go to Elet."

The soldier dropped his shoulders. "Not you as well... Justan, Porett, everyone wants me to go to Elet! Why me? Why not some other merc?"

"I was unaware that The King and his monkey had similar plans for you, Sennary, otherwise I would not have mentioned it. I *think* perhaps you've just been foolishly indiscreet..."

"I don't really care *who* knows. Maybe I won't be going anyway, maybe I'll stay here in Elbienau. Maybe I'll even return to my farm and forget this whole, sordid war."

"And maybe you'll just sulk. Listen, there's a *strong* suggestion that the Elets may have learned some rudimentary magic from the copies of our spellbooks that they have. It is imperative, therefore, if our position as world leader in this field is to be maintained, that the Eletic library in Liagh Na Laerich be destroyed."

"Don't insult me Ansle, please! Protecting the market is absolutely no concern of yours, and we're going to be caught technologically anyway sooner or later. The whole of Justan's empire will be gesture-aware within five years, and there are schools of magic starting up right now in the most unlikely of places outside. No: you want me to go to Elet for some other reason."

"To bring back my daughter."

He laughed, he actually laughed! "*Most* unbelievable, Ansle! *I* think you're scared witless that the Elets will get hold of Roween's antimagic biz, and flick it out so much that magic will end up pretty well useless." He grinned. "And that might be no bad thing."

"Ridiculous!" He puffed, falsely. "Besides, the Elets *themselves* are heavy buyers of artefacts; if they started popping magic off they'd lose the lot."

"Say again? The Elets have been buying zip?" He cocked his head. "How long has this been going on? Does Justan know?"

"Interests you, does it? Well, when I say 'artefacts', it's comspheres mainly, from Cala Bay Town. I've seen the receipts: the Elets don't care if the units are vision-faulty, so long as they can send and receive sound."

"CBT, so they're black-fac forgeries. I've hit plenty of those guys in my time, Ansle, and I wouldn't remotely trust any of their documents, especially receipts. It's ten-to-one a scam: some way to write off sales to people they don't want you or anyone else to know about. Have you seen any export vouchers?"

"Not many, admittedly, but my guess is that they take the goods out across the wilderness."

"Uh? All the way to Elet? I can believe maybe cutting across west from Svala and bobbing up in Dreimen or somewhere, but then they'd still need Purasan licences to move further. The whole journey? Repeatedly? Suicidal!" He winked, sided his head. "You'll have to think again on that one, Ansle!"

The chancellor adjusted his robe, uncomfortable. "It was only a suggestion, Sennary, no-one's asking *you* to try it."

"No, but you're perfectly willing to send me deep into Elet on my own, with war-hungry barbarians everywhere I tread. You, Justan, Porett — if all three of you want me there it *must* be a bad idea..."

"You're experienced in these matters; you'll have *no* trouble."

"I'll have even less if I don't go at all. Justan doesn't trust me, Porett craves after knowledge and power, and you, you're just galled that everything you stand for — none of which is honourable, I might add — could be cut away by your own daughter and her bright-eyed little friend."

"Then Porett will *kill* them both."

"What?"

He smiled, sardonic. "He has a matter transfer device, you've heard of it?"

"Trans/something..?"

"There's a comsphere on it, and one of my ex-students now on the project tapped into it for me. It's in the Lowlands, most probably Bridges."

"You're lying, Ansle..."

"Porett is setting up some kind of combat outfit in the Lowlands, and he's going to go after the girls himself. You know what *that* means, don't you. You *can't* let him kill them..."

"You're bluffing, to get me out of the way for some reason. So Nolley can take over as marshal, get her out of Cala?" He snorted. "Fine, well whatever your motives, now I'm *definitely* going home — and damn the lot of you!"

"It's the truth! Ask Justan."

Chapter 76

Chenii-Imor was Conley's height, and her hair was a similar shade of near-bleached fair. It was coarser, however, and although she wore it long, she braided two intricate plaits beside each temple. Freckles flecked her nose, which turned up slightly at the end, and her wide mouth looked designed for smiling.

She wasn't smiling as she entered Conley's room, but she didn't look exactly worried, either. Just nodded politely as Conley closed the door behind her, and looked for somewhere to sit. The bed was covered in Conley's travelling gear, so she leaned against the table.

"So what's this about, Chenii-Imor? Why have you come to me first instead of Roween?"

"My father, Maedregh, he is dead." Her accent was more melodious than Maetharach's — or Medreph's, come to that. "Probably. His comsphere, it's not responding, and he was carrying several hundred more in his wagons." She rotated the plain, silver ring that she wore on her little finger.

Conley felt she ought to say something consoling, yet Chenii-Imor didn't seem to be asking for it. What did she *want*, then? "I'm sorry to hear that, Chenii-Imor."

"His death, it *will* make your task in Liagh Na Laerich more difficult, that's true, but Lauthil or I will accompany you instead."

"That's, well, if you say so..." *Strange priorities*. "But why are you telling me on my own? Does Roween already know? Is Lauthil speaking to her at the moment?"

"How will Roween react to this news?" She stood straight a moment, tugged down on her smock so it didn't dig where she was stand-sitting.

"Well, she'll be upset, naturally. Medreph was a good friend of hers, he pretty well saved her life four or five years ago."

"And she's relying heavily on his being here, it's an important point in her plans?"

"Yes, of course, that too, but it'll cut her up bad anyway."

She rose. "You tell her. I will wait downstairs." She walked back towards the door before Conley could put words to protestations.

* * *

Roween took longer to calm than Conley had foreseen. Although Maetharach's behaviour had hinted at what was to come, it didn't seem to lessen the impact to any evident extent. At first, it was like she'd been chopped with a hatchet: an instant of stunned, disbelieving confusion, followed by the enormity, the pain pouring in. Later, she'd become coherent, still broken though, shaking all the time. Conley wondered if, had someone offered Ro a sprinkle of Bliss right then, maybe she'd have taken it?

All the while, nobody came to give help. Roween cried her little eyes empty, and yet there was no-one Conley could even call on for a glass of water, let alone for support or kindness. She was on her own here, alien in a hostile land, her best friend distraught and in some need of comfort, companionship, yet only she was willing to provide it, no-one else was interested, not even slightly. Elet was a callous place.

After an hour or so, a thin guy with a droopy moustache introduced himself in Eletic as Lauthil, and bade them follow him down to the carriage.

* * *

"You see how the houses are different from in Suadh Varl Na," Roween said, trying to sound informative. "They use that same greystone all over Elet, but they put it together different. Sometimes the blocks are assorted sizes, or rounded, or flat, and in the capital they have chisel marks so you can tell which district you're in." Her face was still red.

Lauthil was doing the driving, sat outside, on top. Conley looked out of the window, her eyes following the meander of the road down through the fields to the town that ran lengthways along the valley floor. "I thought Elet was a plateau."

"It is, yes, but it's not table-flat, it's just raised above the surrounding lands." She sighed. Chenii-Imor squirmed.

"She's still a bit upset," Conley offered, Roween staring resolutely out across the hillside, knuckles to her mouth.

"So I see. I'm ... sorry." The words came awkwardly to Chenii-Imor. The language?

Conley chastised herself. *Of course, she'll be real cut through inside, too,* and with a pair of her father's foreign friends dumped on her it wouldn't make kicking her own grief any easier. *She must think we're total stropbies.* "That's nice of you, Chenii-Imor," she said. *Chummy her up.* "Do people call you 'Chenii' for short?"

Puzzled. "Do people call you 'Con'?" A shrug.

"Yes, Roween does. I call her 'Ro'."

"Oh," surprised. "No, people don't call me 'Chenii', not for any reason."

* * *

Lauthil had stopped their vehicle at a sign reading 'Buagh Suth Na', and had attached a strange, leather contraption to the back of the horses. Conley couldn't see it fully, guessed it was to catch the dung. While they'd been waiting as he did it, she'd watched a shepherd leave the city along a muck-road parallel to the flagstoned one she expected Lauthil to take. So that's how come Eletic thoroughfares were so damn clean...

That had been, what, five minutes ago? And no-one had spoken since. Chenii-Imor had sunk back in the seat, withdrawn in private thoughts; Roween stared vacantly out of the window, watching the people watching her. After a period of looking from one to the other, and getting no response, Conley capitulated and let her eyes drift to the townscape.

She could read some of the signs on the shops. Bread, books, brooms, feed. She fingered the pieces of printed paper in her pocket, given her by Maetharach in payment for their horses. Whether he'd bought them for himself or for someone else, she didn't know, and neither had she any idea of the value the notes represented. Roween would tell her, when she came out of her shock. *She wallows too long in her emotions sometimes, that girl...*

Oh that's what was wrong with the shopsigns! No pictures! They just had words, describing the products. Maybe what the owners are called, too. Everywhere else in the world, shops have big, swinging boards with drawings on them, depicting their wares. *Must be everyone in Elet can read.*

"Chenii-Imor," it was Roween who suddenly spoke, "these people are readying themselves for war."

"Justan, he means well." She wrapped one of her braids round a finger. "He has long understood the problems of your technology-driven society, and has taken the only path he could see that might keep it from flipping into either lawless anarchy or lawful repression."

"But he's finally stepped too far for the Elets, I know... So what are they going to do?"

Conley expected Chenii-Imor to avert her eyes, but she didn't, she left them trained on Roween. "Kill."

"Even if we can put out magic forever?"

"There was support for your argument, but insufficient. When Justan attacks the Lowlands, the Elets, they will slaughter. We expect it will start within the week."

Roween returned to the window. "Your father lost the argument, then... How many will die as a consequence?"

"Do the numbers matter? Anyone who opposes us; anyone who might oppose us."

"And if we do succeed, if we do destroy magic, you'll still spare no-one?"

"We will eliminate the threat. If there is a cheaper way to do so, we will consider it. Sane people, they do not want to die."

There were tears in Roween's eyes. "None of this was supposed to happen..."

* * *

"You know, Ro, in a way I can see why they're doing it. The Elets, I mean. The situation will only get worse, and over the years many more people could be put to death if no-one intervenes now to set everything to rights."

"Over the centuries... If only Medreph hadn't — " She sighed, wandered to the window. "Well, perhaps things would have worked out otherwise. We'll have to make the best of it. I've said to Chenii-Imor that we'll wait here for her father until Justan attacks. If he's not arrived by then, we'll go on to Liagh Na Laerich without him."

"When did you tell her that?"

"While we were getting out of the carriage. She'll speak to Lauthil about it."

"They seem sure Medreph's dead. I heard them downstairs, I couldn't make out much but they kept saying 'dead' and 'death' — I picked those words up from Ihann's medical writings."

"Yes, Medreph's gone I guess, and even if he's alive he's lost the caravan." She looked outside.

"So why do we wait for him? There's still time to get to Liagh Na Laerich and try douse magic before Justan invades Seesel."

"It won't make any difference, he'll attack whether he has magic or not. He's even *expecting* to lose it on a local scale, probably would like it to pack up completely just as much as I do. It's the source of all his woes."

"How can you be sure of that?"

"I read yesterday's warfare:predictions summary. Take a look later, it's in my bag somewhere. Doesn't matter anyway, the Elets will attack eventually even if Justan keeps off the Lowlands, I told you. He's threatened them, and his empire can only grow stronger unless something is done about it. I just wish it wasn't going to be so bloody."

"I still don't see why we have to stay here. So what if it won't make any difference? I'd rather get it over with as soon as possible, we've come all this way. Life, if we leave it too long I

might not remember enough magic to cast that 'last spell' — I had trouble recalling Chewt-Farmer this morning!"

"We're staying because, even if it's not so likely, Medreph might yet appear. I don't want to leave him behind, I'm his friend."

"Chenii-Imor doesn't mind, and *she's* his daughter!"

Roween sat on the sill, looked back at Conley. "Medreph has eight children, but only one friend."

* * *

'Downstairs' was a bookshop, Chenii-Imor's. She'd had to close it today, of course, but had let Roween and Conley look around while she and Lauthil went off to see some people.

Roween became absorbed as soon as she saw the long, ceiling-high shelves, bowed under the weight of hundreds of old tomes. The smell seemed to calm her, too, like it reminded her of youthful days in the Academy library, struggling to turn enormous, dusty pages, eager to read the exotic stream of words from fabulous, faraway lands.

Conley was less awed, but she was nonetheless impressed that there was enough interest, even in a town the apparent size of this one, to support a shop that only sold second-hand and antique books. She sauntered between the gloomy shelves, lit dimly by a small spell she'd thrown on her hair. Seeing a name she recognised, she pulled out the volume that bore it, looked to the inside cover.

Now that was odd... "Roween?" she shouted, unsure of her whereabouts.

"What is it, Con?"

"There's a book here by Nuagh Casii, she's signed it."

"Signed it? Wait a moment, let me have a look." She appeared at the end of the row of shelves.

"She also dated it. That's something I've noticed before, none of these books ever have a publication date on them."

"True, I don't know why it's so, just is. Let me see..." She held her candle to the side, used Conley's glow. "That's real neat, I've never seen her signature before, the Elets don't go for autographs. What's it say?" She translated, "You, Reelf, and a person, Casii, and makes first second."

"What's that in plain Estavian?"

"Er, Reelf makes Casii a person? What is this book, anyway?" She looked at the front cover. "'The Past of an Imaginary Land', yes, that's one of her early ones, I've read it."

"No, look at the date, Ro." Conley re-opened it, pointed to the fading ink. "When's now in Elet?"

"I don't know exactly, let me think, they're 340 ahead of us, and they start their year on Mid-Summer's Day, so it'll be 2136. Oh."

Conley closed the book, held it cross-armed to her chest. "That's what I thought, there was something about dates in that guide you gave me in Bridges. So, Nuagh Casii wrote these words," she peeked again, "a hundred and seventy-six years ago?"

* * *

"Lauthil, he won't be coming," Chenii-Imor announced. "You only need one of us, and he doesn't speak your language."

"He'd rather be out killing Muraks," Roween muttered. Chenii-Imor looked at her, deadpan, said nothing.

"Roween wants to wait until Justan attacks before we leave," Conley hurried. "I'd personally rather we went as soon as possible."

"The roads, they will be busy soon. I, too, think we should leave early."

"Or wait even longer," Roween added, "when the whole of the country is empty."

Conley was about to chide her, but Chenii-Imor shot her a warning glance. "Every moment's delay in destroying magic, it means more Elets will die," said slowly. "Besides, you are in danger here. There is word that Justan is sending someone to apprehend you. There is proof that Lord Porett is also organising a mercenary unit."

"Lord Porett? Since when has he been a — "

"Who is Justan sending?" interrupted Roween, suddenly intense.

"The biograph:foreign:Justan net suggested perhaps an acquaintance of yours..." She twiddled with her ring, almost nervously.

"Sennary." She bit her bottom lip. "He'll be stopped — " Chenii-Imor's steady gaze told her the truth of it. "Killed, then. Unless, of course, we were to do away with magic before he was captured, then he'd abort his mission. That's cute, Chenii-Imor. Nice pressure."

"Don't let what they'll do to Sennary get to you, Ro, not on my account." *Why's she glaring at me like that?*

"It wasn't meant that way, Roween, I assure you. It's just that the longer you wait here, the greater the risk that someone undesirable will find you, that is all. We weren't twisting you." She smiled, wide, encouragingly, her nose wrinkling involuntarily, freckles frolicking."

"Oh, no, *you* wouldn't snick me up, would you? Where were you last night?"

"Nnn? Last night? I told you: Lauthil and I went to hear the bulletin in Rhudhan Peltheach — Rhudhan Square, I mean."

"Both of you? Leaving us here alone?"

"You were safe, you knew not to go outside."

"Safe, yes, but bored. Thoughtful of you to let us wander around your shop, where I was certain to find, eventually, a certain book by my favourite writer."

"You did? You can have it if you like. I don't see why you're so, er..." She looked to Conley, confused; what was the word she wanted?

"Well this book by Nuagh Casii bears a written dedication from her to some Lowlander type, and it's dated like she'd have to be two hundred years old."

Chenii-Imor's brows lowered, disbelief. "What? Two, but, one of my books? Which one? Can I see it?" "It's a good act, Chenii-Imor; indeed, your surprise might even be genuine. It doesn't matter. Some Elet, aware of where we'd look if left unattended in your shop, decided to plant an old book faked up to hint like there's some kind of longevity out in Elet. Hot, it was a good forgery, too; I know the look of centuried texts, the way the paper goes, and that pen ink fitted the aging perfect."

Chenii-Imor wasn't flustered exactly, but she was strugglingly baffled by something. "I'm not sure, let me see the book. Why would anyone..?"

"There are hundreds of thousands of books and writings in the library at Liagh Na

Laerich. If people in Elet can live to age two hundred, there'll be something about it there. Wanting to find that information might be a powerful incentive to visit the place. If you can't bribe someone with money, longevity is a fair alternative."

"Sounds tenuous to me," Conley scorned. "You're young, anyway, you have plenty of time to search. Why the haste at your time of life?"

Roween closed her eyes. "I'd want it for my Da, Con..."

Chenii-Imor shook her head, in a sad kind of way. "You're set on this, Sage Roween. If I'd wanted to push you to Liagh Na Laerich, then I'd have told you that Maedregh was definitely dead, not merely probably so. Why the need for an elaborate plot? However, it is obvious that nothing I can say will convince you that this isn't an intrigue, so I shall go now, and find a way to satisfy myself that this dating, it has a non-conspiratorial explanation. Do as you wish while I am absent." She took a pencil from her desk, wrote a line in Estavian, left.

Conley reached over, picked up the paper, passed it to Roween. It read: "If the spring of emotion overflows, channel it into the sea of trust." A popular quote from 'The Past of an Imaginary Land'.

* * *

The crystal of Chenii-Imor's comsphere was tinted a pale, rose pink. It was a special edition, then, and therefore a Porett Technologies original rather than a black-fac copy. That meant it had been tapped against the spheres in the Cala exchange.

Roween looked up from the desk, furtive. Life, this was taking some time! Conley was stuck in a picture-book she'd found, but she'd tire of it eventually. Why didn't he answer?

She saw a huge hand part-enclose the com-1 she'd called, and another bringing close a second sphere. In it was imaged Sennary's face. The two glass balls touched.

"Roween! Why in hell are you calling?"

Gods, she got this rush when he said her name! "Lord Sennary, I don't have much time," half-whispered, "look, I have to warn you, the Elets know you're coming after us. Please, please don't do it, they'll kill you."

"There's a risk, yes, but — "

"No!" *Too loud! Quiet, stupid woman!* "Go away, a long way away, take a boat to Panavia. If they find you, the Elets, you're dead."

"They won't find me."

"You don't understand!" *How could he be so brainless?* "There are millions of them, they'll swat Justan, anyone with any authority. They'll be all over the Empire. Sennary, please! I don't want you to die! Not you too." She felt her tears beginning.

"Are you feeling alright, Roween?" *Is he concerned?* "Look, no-one is going to kill me, don't worry. I'm giving up on Justan, Ansle, everybody, going back to my farm. I was supposed to leave for Elet yesterday, but this war has got too dirty for me, too ignoble. The King's loss of trust, that's hardest to stomach. So I'm heading east instead, opting civilian while my dignity is still intact. I'll probably be gaoled for it, although the anguish ought to be plenty punishment." He grimaced. "You're the first to know."

Her eyes opened wide. "Really? Oh Sennary, that's, that's marvellous! If you came into Elet, they'd just..." She smiled, so happy, cheeks salty-wet, then remembered something. "Don't let Porett wheedle you into joining him!"

He frowned. "Porett is in Trilith, he isn't going anywhere near you."

"No, he is, the Elets have found out. He's set up a force of mercenaries in the Lowlands, good ones. He might try recruit you."

"Are you sure about that? Ansle said something about a pair of transporters, but I thought he was lying; claimed he'd called a comsphere on one of them, but it would have been engaged, permanently opened to the sphere on the other one, like those hidden, low-light security globes they use to monitor places."

She dawdled, could have spent hours listening to that voice... "I'm certain Porett will try and reach us, yes. But he'll be prevented, the Elets will — "

"Are you in Elet now?" She nodded, looked up to the door again. "This changes things. Do they know you're talking to me?"

"No, and I know I shouldn't, but I *had* to call you, I'm just so sc-scared, damn Sennary, I'm — " She glanced back to the door. "Listen, I'm going to have to tap out, I think I can hear Conley..."

"*She* doesn't know either? Quick, give me something on your sphere, so I can call you back. They'll need a key to identify it at the exch— "

She tapped out. Conley opened the door, hands in pockets, saw the comsphere. "Who've you been calling?"

"Do you want to speak to your father?"

"Of course not." She approached the desk, lazily. "So, who did you call?" leaned over, looming, using her height.

Roween gulped. "Sennary."

A moment of silence. Then, near yelled, "Sennary?! *What?* Did you tell him where we are?"

"Yes, well, not in detail, I — "

"He's coming after us!" She banged on the desk. "Hot, Ro, he's going to try kill us and you told him, you actually *told* him where we are!"

"I didn't, he's not, I, stop it, you're confusing me!" She held her head. "He isn't coming, he's going back to his farm, he told me."

"And you believed him? What happened to all that paranoia?"

"I believed him, well, I don't know, he might have changed his mind, I said about Porett and... Oh damn no..." She covered her face with her hands.

Conley controlled her anger, just. "You mean if you hadn't mentioned Porett, Sennary would have left us alone, but now you have done, he's coming?"

"Gods, Con, what have I done? Why am I such an idiot?" *He doesn't even like me...*

* * *

When she returned, Chenii-Imor was beaming a grin of melon-slice proportions. How old would she be, Conley mused. Early twenties? Late teens? She noted the ring on her little finger. Roween had told her the Elets wore rings to advertise for mates, whereas the eastern custom was the exact opposite — wear a ring when you're married. So Chenii-Imor was single. *Early twenties...*

"Well," she announced, "I found out what happened. I have no evidence, so you wouldn't believe me were I to explain it to you, but at least my own curiosity, it is patched."

"Let's hear anyway," Roween sighed.

She took off her jacket, didn't sit down. "I spoke to Nuagh Casii, got a priority through to her. She's really clear, direct, a fine mind. She certainly remembers signing the book for Reelf, and would like to own it. I'll send it her."

"And the date?" Conley's interest was sufficiently awakened.

"It's not a date, it's a temperature. Reelf was an artist with whom Nuagh Casii had an encounter, and — "

"An affair?"

She hesitated, then smiled. "That's a better word, yes. 1,960 thermals is the temperature at which diamonds turn into graphite."

"Diamonds turn into what? I don't know what you mean."

Roween answered, wearily. "Apparently, if you heat up a diamond in an oven, it'll turn into like charcoal. Apparently, 1,960 Eletic thermals is when it happens. *Apparently...*"

"1,960 thermals — what's that in degrees? I know water freezes at 0 like for us, but what's blood temperature? It's not 100."

"Oh 1,960 will be right, near enough. They're very thorough..."

"So why would Nuagh Casii write that to her lover?"

Chenii-Imor tipped her head forward, still looked at Conley. "Artists use graphite as the base to mix up black oils for painting. Nuagh Casii, Black Cassie, do you follow?"

Conley groaned. "That's so convoluted..."

Roween sneered to herself.

Chapter 77

"No, you still look the same."

"Never mind, it's sort of handy I guess, I can make calls from in here and people will see my regular face, not the illusion."

"These clothes are wrong, though, I'll have to change and merge again if we want it perfect."

"Suits me..."

* * *

That merge troubled him. Not the actual co-mingling of his two personae, no, he was used to that; it was the thoughts and knowledge he'd acquired in the interim, which had been hard to reconcile in the part of his mind that wasn't expecting them. Half your head thinking of one thing, half another; well, it took a couple of minutes to unscramble yourself.

A quick chat with Harbian, the designer/analyst that Farmer had sent to perform the image-change, confirmed his suspicions. Yes, it was indeed possible, Magicorp likely could snoop on colourboards. If they had the sequences for flat-screen comms units, the odds were that they came out of colourboard technology, and could therefore easily be grafted onto the originals. All Magicorp need do would be send in a mage to gesture for an hour, maybe two, and the chosen colourboard would become a transmitter. Anything written on it, it'd pop out copied on a receiving plate. *Life and damn!* How long had they been able to do that? Which boards in Porett Technologies were tapped? Thanks be, at least they couldn't do it without getting close to the target.

He fingered the small, glass vial in his pocket. Did they know anything about this? Did they have an antidote?

* * *

Malva seemed faintly surprised that he'd arrived on time. She nevertheless smiled her usual expressionless smile. "Ready?"

He walked towards the door. "Just about. You can have them load up the box now."

She was looking at his face, eyebrows gradually trenching. "That's rather good. Still recognisably you, but subtle changes. Eyes slightly closer, skin a lot fairer, hair lighter and with an orangey tint if you catch it right. Straighter, too, less wavy."

"I should pass for an Elet at range, I think."

A couple of her team that she'd brought along crossed quietly over to the tower staircase. Casually, she led Porett outside, thumbs in her belt. "So why can't we all have the same level of protection as you?"

"Illusions? They require fifteen minutes gesturing each day maintenance; since I'm the only mage, that means I'm the only person who gets to wear one."

"That's another thing: why no more magicians?"

He twinged a frown at the archaic term. "The nature of the information I seek is such that I don't wish other trained magic-users to discover it. Don't worry, though, we have crates

of zip with us, plenty enough to see off the odd Elet marauder, or even an army of them."

"Let's hope they allow us chance to use some of it..."

"If not, we still have the transfer box, we can bring in reinforcements from Trilith."

"Be nice if I could pick them myself, not rely on your agent."

"Well we don't have the time, sorry, you'll just have to trust him. He's the best, though, you know that much."

"He has a certain reputation." They passed another Lowlander temple, now a small, indoor market. "Our horses are stabled round this corner. If yours is to your satisfaction, we can set off pretty well immediately."

* * *

The second scout returned, reported much the same as the first: the cloud that Justan had despatched over the Cold Sea was rolling back to land, and fast; within six hours' ride, there existed three tenable roads leading up to the plateau, and none of them had obvious guards; there were many, many Elets in view, scurrying around like beetles, but scant sign of a single, large force; no Elets had yet descended into the Lowlands.

Porett looked up at the tall, greystone cliffs. He could see people, some moving, some just watching. Were they deliberately leaving the way up clear, hoping to throw a net round his mercs? They'd be in for a fight if they did...

He checked his sound-set, it was still in place. If you knew to look in his ear, you could see it, but it wasn't obvious. Discreet, yet powerful enough to pick up footsteps at a hundred paces. He flicked back the loose hair from his face, annoyed he couldn't tail it up. He'd be lucky if he *ever* got more than a hundred paces from anyone in Elet, not if it was as crowded as it appeared to be from here.

"The plan is," Malva told him, "we ignore the first route in, and make camp at the base of the second. Two hours after midnight, we double back and enter Elet the first way."

"Anything noisy we're carrying we'll send back to Trilith until we're safely across the border. Otherwise, good plan, we'll use it."

Chapter 78

Dawn: time for his report.

Sennary had finished eating, but his horse still grazed, hungry after a night of travel. Its tack rested close by; Sennary delved in a saddlebag for his comsphere, found it glowing, tapped it.

"Good morning, Lord Sennary." She was young, looked Galurian, had that irrepressibly buoyant manner that secretaries often crafted to cause maximum irritation to anyone experiencing it this early in the day.

"Start your notes," gruff. "I crossed the Schaaldt into Warnhem at about — "

"No, Lord Sennary, I have The King here for you." She smiled her wide, unemotive smile, stepped back. Justan appeared.

"Up so soon, sir?"

"Today's the day, Sennary, there's lots to be done; we can't all take time off to bicker with our consciences."

Ouch! "Better keep it brief, then, sir. What do you require of me?"

"Regarding the call you received yesterday from Roween Sage — the one that caused you to turn back..."

He grunted. "Spies at the exchange..."

"Coupled with your army tag, yes. My question: do you intend to kill Lord Porett if you meet up with him in Elet?"

Sennary jutted his jaw. "Shortly after you appointed me marshal, Ansle asked me to do so."

"Chancellor Ansle is irrelevant, and your answer is evasive. Do you intend to kill Porett?"

He shrugged. "If I have to, to stop him from offing Conley and Roween."

"Or if you catch up with him after he's done it?"

"I guess so," flinched.

"I don't want Porett to die in the immediate future; not under *any* circumstances."

Sennary stared into the sphere like he was paralysed.

"Come, Lord Sennary, you look worse than one of the chancellor's zombies!"

Meaning returned to his eyes. "The com-3! That's what you want!"

Justan sighed. "Porett's money helped me out of a difficult situation. You may remember that I like to repay people who have been of some assistance to me..." He smiled his half-smile. "But of course, you're correct. Porett's com-3 has certain unique properties, and Porett himself is the only person possessing knowledge of how to use it."

Sennary was thinking hard, felt something was wrong here. "You've known about the com-3 for some time, sir: why the sudden desire for it now, just when Porett's become unavailable? And didn't you personally tell him to smash it?" Ansle had also wanted it broken, insisted on it.

"But late yesterday, I learned of another of its features. A king's time is precious, and an emperor's more so: Porett's com-3 provides a mechanism for keeping awake forever."

"So do wakers, I'm shooting them now myself — even the horse takes them, doubled up."

"Wakers don't work cumulatively for more than about a month, then it's a week of sleep; hardly what I had in mind... Sparing you the technical details, Porett can 'link' to an individual's body and inhabit it passively. He explained this to a certain mage he knows, with a view to linking to his own body. However, this person realised that by taking some of the later segments from husk spells, the link can be made active — *controlling* the body, not merely living in it. Porett doesn't know..."

He was tapping his chin. "What happens to the original owner?"

Justan laughed. "Oh, no, don't worry, it's unlikely you could use it to displace another mind, not even a husked one. You can, however, control your own body while your physical self sleeps." He grinned.

Sennary felt a churning in his brain, Justan was missing something out, it was incomplete... Suddenly, with thunderous dread, he grasped the truth of it. "Zombies don't have minds. You could flit between undead hosts indiscriminately. Hot, even when your own body *died*, you could live on indefinitely, riding in animated corpses! You'd be immortal!"

Justan nodded, still smiling. "I'd have been disappointed if you hadn't guessed. So now you understand why Porett must *not* die. For a while, anyway."

Sennary looked away from the sphere.

The King folded his arms. "Let me guess what you're thinking. 'Justan doesn't want me to kill Porett, because then he can live forever. However, living forever is intrinsically wrong, totally immoral, and, especially for someone who is in control of an empire, completely undesirable. Therefore, Porett must die, and as soon as possible.'"

Sennary glanced back at him. "Close enough."

"Perhaps I can dissuade you by divulging further details of how I came by my information." He paused, sympathetically. "Did you know that your cousin Roenna spoke Eletic? She was picked up by the police in Cala, in accordance with my recent order. Routinely, she would have been put to death, but to avoid that fate she generously offered me the means to eternal life."

His face was grim. "So, Roenna was Porett's confidante. It fits." His lips were drawn tight. "Am I therefore to assume that you've spared her life for now, but that if I kill Porett she'll die?"

"What would you do in my position?"

His smile was crooked, ironic. "Find how Roween nullifies anything cast at her, then tell everybody the trick. Rid us of magic's curse forever!"

Justan raised a single eyebrow. "That's a bravely radical solution, Lord Sennary, but on balance I think that I'd rather live forever..."

A memory screamed for his attention. "Porett! He can tap into comspheres! What if he's just heard everything you said?"

"No," Justan raised a hand, "his com-3 is jammed: Lady Zovia has a call through to it right now; she's helpfully appraising him of her army's intended movements, so he can account for them in his plans."

"He'll know it's a diversion, but not what from..." *Thorough.*

Justan was handed a piece of paper, nodded, handed it back. "I have things to do now, Lord Sennary. Good luck, and don't do anything silly." He turned away; someone else tapped out his comsphere before Sennary could reply. *Wonderful.*

He reached for his saddlebags, took out the map. Only hand-drawn, not illusioned, so its scale was fixed, but his route showed clear enough. He looked up, towards Elet, imagining Justan's black, malignant cloud poised omnipotently above it. What hope had the people who would soon stand beneath its shadow? Justan, with his own armies, the democracies',

the career soldiers from the Messenger's regiments, plus thousands of undead massing in the north, well, he'd flush into the Lowlands and overcome the defenders within days, simple weight of numbers — not even the *need* for magic! What chance did Elet have against that kind of might?

He called to his horse, thoughts of Roenna, Conley and Roween sailing across his consciousness. *Conflicts...*

Chapter 79

Why wasn't Chenii-Imor interested? Roween was describing what it felt like to smell *magic*, to sense its very presence, and Chenii-Imor was just sitting at the front of the covered wagon, reins loosely in hand, reading! Conley despaired.

"It's a shame there won't be any comspheres there. When you tap into one, there's like this, well it reminds me of apples, sort of fresh. Hard to explain, but it's strong, lasts only for a flicker of an instant. If you're expecting it, you can easily ride it without firing your reflex."

Try to lower the level, maybe bring it into Chenii-Imor's range. "So what's your favourite such scent, then? Of the five main sorts?"

Roween laughed, no hesitation. "Magic-destroy. Energy-to-energy can be nice at times, but magic-destroy is sensational, it really gets me, it's absolutely dreamy. You'll *love* it. Mmm!" She hugged herself.

"Not if it's the same as happy shots..."

"Well, of course I can't really comment on that, but it's not like addictive, it leaves you feeling, oh, it's as if you're relieved, like when you've been trying to remember something and it suddenly comes, or when pain goes away. Yes, that's the kind of pleasure you're left with — residual release."

Pleasure? They were sitting on the box-like bench at the rear of the vehicle, facing away from the front. Conley looked over her shoulder, through the red-painted door, saw Chenii-Imor still hunched over her book.

"The worst smells tend to be matter-to-energy and energy-to-matter. Some of those can be nauseating, or make you dizzy, and others can really hurt, deep in your head."

"What do you think of normal scents, the ones that everyone can smell? Me, I like floral ones — roses, sweet peas, honeysuckle," she turned again. "What about you, Chenii-Imor?"

She slipped in her bookmark, glanced back to Conley. "Cinders, toast, anything fiery." She smiled.

* * *

To the north, it was overcast. When they'd pulled into a waystation for horse grain, Conley had climbed onto the roof of the caravan, glimpsed the darkening skies in the distance. That had been just half an hour ago, and yet now the awesomeness of the cloud was plain for all to see. Her father was sending it in *very* quickly.

"Good idea to use a covered wagon, we'd be soaked in an open-top." She'd left Roween at the back, perusing some kind of news-sheet she'd picked up from the stop.

"It's for sleeping, too," answered Chenii-Imor, "that's why it has a strong superstructure. Canvas, leather, they offer no protection from nocturnal beasts."

"Sleeping?" *No road-side hotels?* "Oh, you mean we take shifts at the reins? One drives while the other two kip some shuteye?"

Chenii-Imor's nose wrinkled. "If you or Roween sat here in my stead, you'd be stopped before you'd gone five minutes."

Conley frowned, confused. "So why can't we stay in hostels overnight?"

"Presently, there will be a tide of Elets washing across from the west." She smiled, pleased at her foreign-language metaphor. "Those without accommodation, they'll sleep in

the houses of those who have already moved east, but the rains will lower the rate of vacation, causing overcrowding. I have a horse-drawn cabin, most people don't; therefore, we will sleep in here, and leave the inn rooms to those who need them."

"I see, well, I'm not complaining — it may be small, but it's homely, cared about. Even the wheels are decorated, I noticed; is it Eletic? Or did it come from elsewhere?"

"It's local, but my father took it to Berea once. They put the traveller markings on it there."

Life, should have thought! Of course it would involve Medreph, would remind her of him. *Shrug it.* "I think the patterns are beautiful. It's a very fine wagon, Chenii-Imor."

"If you like such things."

* * *

Late afternoon, the setting sun's rays pinking up the black-wool northern skies. It was suddenly busier, cart after cart heading Lowlandward, people on foot, horse-riders galloping up both sides of the road, overtaking on the grass verge when they met Chenii-Imor's oncoming caravan.

And everyone, without exception, had a weapon.

Conley sat next to Chenii-Imor, vaguely bemused. Some people seemed to have nothing with them but a quiver and bow. Others had backpacks, but whether they contained provisions she didn't know. There were so many folk on the move — how could they possibly *all* live off the land? Or were those wagons stuffed full of grub?

A man walking past waved his sword, smiled as he paid her some compliment or other in Eletic. She smiled back: he was about the twenty-dozenth person to do that today. She liked it, really, knew it was sincere, that it was really meant. Came from both sexes, too, which was a boost. But most people said nothing, though, as if some stricture imposed a threshold on when to speak one's heart. And Lauthil had never thrown a glance in her direction, let alone spoken to her.

Thinking about it, those arms everyone's carrying are the real thing, not just makeshift. Proper metal swords, not clubs or scythes or pitchforks; ancient-looking battle-axes, but ones meant for felling people, not trees. Spears, the odd trident, even blowpipes, but mainly swords. Shorter ones for the women, and for old folk with less reach. No shields or armour, though. *Weird.*

"Chenii-Imor," she asked, "just how many people live in Elet? We must have passed thousands on this road, and I can see lights where there's more walking through the fields."

She kept her eyes ahead, but lowered them, hesitant, almost bashful. *Uh? Embarrassed?* "Enough," she answered.

Conley dropped her shoulders, raised an eyebrow, sighed. "Come on, Chenii-Imor, you can do better than that..."

Her voice flattened and she spoke quicker. "What's the population of your own country, Conley? Do you know?"

"Not exactly, no, but — "

"Or Justan's whole empire?"

"You can't expect me to — "

"Let us try put a figure to it." She closed her left hand, for counting. "Estavia and Akrea are both heavily populated, with at least ten million people each, probably more fifteen."

She raised her first finger and thumb. "There has to be at least ten million Purasans, perhaps five million Purians, a similar number of Voths, and your own four states — ten million? Add another ten million for the smaller nations — Northmen, Davians, Nairads..." She looked at her hand, two smallest fingers down. "Seventy million? Or so."

Conley nodded, satisfied. "And roughly how many Elets are there?"

She smiled, relaxed the reins. "Still enough."

* * *

Roween woke to a familiar patter on the roof of the caravan. *Rain*. She opened her eyes. Chenii-Imor was still asleep, leaning on a flap-down seat in what looked a highly uncomfortable pose. Conley, beside her, seemed to be smiling in her slumber, wistful. *Probably dreaming about all those sweetie remarks people said to her yesterday*. Roween hadn't had a single one; still, at least no-one mocked her eyes in Elet.

She looked outside. Large drops of water dripped from the overhang of the eaves, spattering off the lid of the tinderbox that she'd been sitting on the day before. Beyond, Elet was blue-grey, the whole of its sky blotted by Justan's bruise-coloured cloud. *Justan's, yes*: she'd read about Ansle's isolation, knew now it wasn't his doing.

People were about, even this early — it was maybe seven, though whether the sun was down or barely-risen she couldn't tell. It wouldn't get much brighter later, either; the darkness of the magic was terrible...

The rain suited her mood, her fear, her anxiety, the inevitability of it all. The rain, constant, regular, morose. The rape, Maedregh's death, the rain, her hopeless love for the man who was going to end her life. The rain...

The roads were paved — well, flat-cobbled — but rains were patient. There'd be minor accidents at first — carts skidding off, people slipping, horses colliding because of the poor visibility. That kind of thing would slow everyone down, but not unduly, just inconveniently. Only later, when the roadsides got waterlogged, when mudslips pasted the surface, when bloated rivers welled over their banks, it'd be then that the going would really deteriorate. *A week, maybe?* She closed her eyes. Still time enough to reach Liagh Na Laerich, put an end to this accursed spellworking, forever. Justan had left it too late.

She pulled at her blanket. *Life but it's getting cold...*

Chapter 80

The arrow slashed through the sleet and caught the Akrean mercenary just below the ear. Even as it quivered Malva sounded the alarm, and three of her Lowlanders peeled off, charging in the direction of its flight.

Porett watched them go, into the gloom. "There might be tracks this time."

Malva frowned after her riders. "Or an ambush. These Elets are practising on us, testing out ideas before they come up against Justan's army." Ice was forming on her furs.

He nodded. "Possible, yes. They can't like what they're learning, though; even from snipers, we're pretty well invulnerable."

Malva glanced down at the body. "Tell that to him."

Porett didn't follow her eyes, began gesturing. "Point armour has to be close-fitting, and it works by instantly stiffening when it's penetrated." — fist, fist, palm — "That tightens it up." — wrist, palm — "Therefore, you can only use it on parts of the body that can tolerate sudden, wrenching jolts." — fingers, fist, wrist — "Put it round someone's neck, and a pinprick would snap off their head." — fingers, point! The corpse burst into flames.

Malva grunted. "Why couldn't you have done that to the assassin?"

"I inverted the retardant in his armour..." *Idiot.*

The three horsemen returned. Malva didn't bother to ask; even Porett could see that their faces shouted failure.

* * *

Her surveillance of environment routine was interrupted by Porett's voice.

"I have a theory," he announced, "that there's only one sniper hassling us. There's never more than a single shot per attack, and the choice of target has been gradually refined, like someone's been patiently searching for a suitable weak spot."

She grunted. "If you'd let us put on our helmets..."

"Then your heads would be numbed full of cold-aches. Metal and low temperatures don't mix; even the thickness of padding wouldn't stop you feeling like you were wearing an ice box." He leant back, unbuckled the top of a saddlebag. "Use them only when we're under sustained attack."

She looked about. Her troops were quiet, their cloaks drawn about them, heads down, thoughts private. Ahead, through the falling snow, she could make out the shapes of her two secondary scouts in the darkness. Beyond them, invisible from here, would be the three primaries. Safe enough: so far, the sniper had struck only at the group's main body, either side of the mule-towed wagons.

Porett was holding something out to her. She took it. "An arrow? What's this for?"

"It's zipped, it won't miss. If you release it in roughly the right direction, and don't undershoot your target, it'll hit. Be careful, I only have the one."

She slid her bow off her shoulder. "Reusable?"

"I have to pass a few gestures over it after each shot. Five minutes?"

"I see." She cocked her bow, gave a test pull. "So what do we do if there's more than one sniper?"

He grinned, pointed to his ear. "Only one set of footsteps; heavy, so probably male. They fade in and out, he must keep a horse just beyond my hearing. He takes a shot, then he rides off before we can react, waits for us at the next ambush point along."

"And are the footsteps in or out at the moment?"

"The snow deadens them, but they're in." He pointed. "Over to the ri — "

The arrow thudded into the rib-cage of the leading mule. Instinctively, Malva drew, loosed her reply more in rage than intent. It curved a beautiful trajectory, disappearing behind a clump of trees.

She heard a small cry — an infant's?

The three flank guards followed her as she galloped through the whitened rough, towards the sporadic bawls. Was Porett behind her? She didn't care, discarded — lost — all thoughts, all notions from her mind, but one: *save him!*

The sniper had taken it in the back. Her long, braided hair was already accepting its covering of snow, giant flakes aging the blonde to silver. Under the tree was her baby, wrapped in ragged folds of linen, whimpering. Malva became aware that she'd dismounted, was running to the youngster. *Gods, let him be unharmed!*

* * *

She looked up. Porett was standing before her, magic arrow in hand. How long had he been there? Where were her men? Ridden off? She cradled the baby, soothing, snuggling. "He's hungry," she said, like it explained everything.

"You want to go back to Trilith?"

Trilith? "No, of course not, I..." She stopped. What in heaven had happened?

He reached out, ready to pull her up. "They had you sussed good and proper, didn't they? Cracked you open like a coconut."

"They? Who's they?" She took his hand, still clutching the babe to her, tightly. "We can't leave him here."

"The Elets. They must have been watching you for months, cooked a neat way to neutralise you without creating a martyr to unite the rest of your mercs. I'll have a hard time holding the band together now, without your leadership to bind them."

"What? But I'm staying! How could — " The baby had cried again, sudden, she'd broken off to calm him.

"It's over, Malva, you've got the miracle you always wanted, you're useless here now. Take him with you, stay on as my agent in Trilith. Tell Kenrith he's now relieved of that duty — it'll only please him, he never liked it anyway. Better, have him call me, I want to arrange the death of an erstwhile associate of mine..."

* * *

The snow was drifting. Sometimes, Porett thought he could hear distant horses, their whinnies carried by the wind. Where *were* the Elets? Were they deliberately keeping away? Surely they'd have to use the road now, with this life-awful weather? Carts can't possibly be moved over unpaved terrain with a knee's depth of Winter dumped on it! Did they have sleds? Where were the tracks?

He'd sent a volunteer out on a sortie, to find someone — anyone. She'd not returned. He'd tagged her, knew roughly where she lay, but didn't retrieve the body. It was too close.

Things were tumbling out of control, free, spiteful. And yet, he still preferred the malevolent cold, the dark skies, the gnawing danger, to the safe, bland solitude of com-3 isolation.

Chapter 81

Sennary was riding hard when his comsphere glowed. Behind him were three of the Eletic warriors he'd run into in the gorge — the rest were dead. Or maybe it was a different three? They'd been after him at full gallop for half a day, and his tireless, prossed horse ought to have out-distanced them by now. Yet they were still there, following, apace. Had they switched to fresh steeds somewhere?

The comsphere continued to glow, tinting the back of his own mount's mane.

Damn! What if it's Justan? I'll have to stop, find out. A look over the shoulder, they were still behind, ten seconds at most! *Best just answer, see who's calling.*

He timed his movement, aimed for the comsphere, bobbed down with a quick tap. Someone's face appeared, life, it was shaking so much, distorted too, coming through the exchange, who — Roween? *Gods, what's she saying?* Drumming hooves, too much noise! He pulled his horse to a halt, drew his sword. "Wait!" breathless.

The first Elet charged past, swinging low towards Sennary's belly; he turned the blade up so it flicked past his arm, then raised his shield to meet the second rider's sword, stuck his own weapon beneath, hit air. He felt another blow, glimpsed a man's leg standing in a stirrup, chopped for it. Contact! His sword discharged the power of nine breaking rods into its victim, bounced him dead to the ground.

Sennary spiralled to meet the third Elet, but he didn't attack. Instead, he signalled to his comrade, who Sennary now realised was female. A slicing gesture, 'break off'. She nodded, took the reins of the riderless horse, pulled it away. The body on the ground was ignored.

Sennary was momentarily dumbfounded. Battle instincts were still spinning in his head, but his two foes had calmly disengaged after pursuing him since breakfast! *Breakfast?* Hot, but he was hungry!

"Sennary? Are you alright? Did they hurt you?"

It was so dark where she was that he could hardly make out her face. "Roween! No, I'm fine, I'm, I just killed a man..."

She seemed to empathise. "Sometimes, you have to."

"Still..." His eyes scanned around for cover, none close by. Exposed enough that he wouldn't get ambushed, anyway, and it'd take his attackers time to rustle up reinforcements.

"Sennary! I warned you! Turn back, please. The risk!"

He smiled, grimly. "It's too late for that, Roween. Justan sent out two groups of mercenaries, one aside of me, one following on. The Elets got the first lot two days ago, the others late yesterday. There's no escape for me now." He raised his eyes, checked around for danger.

"For pity's sake, Sennary! We'll beat you to Liagh Na Laerich anyway, you're too far behind us. Forget your mission, think about yourself!"

In a single movement, he unstrapped the comsphere from its saddlemount, held it out to the right. *No sense in showing her the corpse.* "What do you see?"

She paused. "It's not snowing where you are?"

"Perfect weather." He returned the com-2. "Justan's cleared me a channel all the way to the capital."

Roween was holding her finger to her lips, waited a few seconds. "Someone was walking past the caravan, they'd have heard. There's some kind of hold-up ahead, Conley's gone to find out what's causing it, see if she can help. I just wanted to call you."

"To warn me off? But you must have known I wouldn't change my mind."

She looked to one side, unknowingly exaggerating the convergence of her eyes. "I suppose so, yes. I just, I don't know, something happened in Zoderdhua, it was..." She bit her lower lip. "I haven't been thinking straight since then...". He couldn't quite see them, but her voice betrayed the tears in her eyes.

"Roween..." soft.

She glanced back at him, then away again. "Sennary, I'm so afraid. I'm afraid you're going to die, and there's nothing I can do to prevent it. Liagh Na Laerich is huge, there must be ten million people live there, you don't have a *hope* of getting through before someone stops you. You'll be killed and they'll leave you in the snow and it'll be all for nothing." She covered her mouth with the back of her hand.

"And you, Roween? Are *you* safe?"

"I'm dead already, there's no escape for me. My soul's been torn out and fed to beasts." She sobbed.

"I have to find you, Roween, don't you see that? It's not to cover myself in glory, or out of misguided loyalty, and I know the odds are I'll die, but I just want —".

She'd seen someone coming, tapped out.

Chapter 82

The industrial radblowers were effective, yes, but the road wasn't built to drain off such torrents of meltwater, and the wheels of the carts were dragging heavy in an ankle-deep stream. Porett had played with the idea of constructing some kind of mounted shovel to divert the main flow away, but there was nowhere else for it to go; except for where his forward scouts were clearing a path, the whole of this part of Elet was under a cake of snow. The flakes still fluttered, fell.

He reached inside his coat, felt for the small bottle. Warm, good; if its contents were to freeze and crack it open, a lot of people would be very dead, very quickly. What if it took him, took everyone? His com-3 soul would wretch in desolate solitude.

He began to gesture, readying the Trans/Disc box to bring in grain for the horses. There was a wood ahead, evergreens, a place to shelter from the pitiless weather. Convenient, but what kind of a country was this that had roads running *through* clumps of trees instead of around them? Didn't they have bandits? A pinch point like that was a gift to outlaws! Yet in Elet it was almost commonplace: today alone, there must have been five or six such copses straddling the highway. It was suspiciously like they were placed there deliberately. Strange, though, that the main routes bypassed towns, but not —

His sound-set picked up people, running in, quick. He broke off mid-gesture, shouted, "Helmets on, we're under attack!" His hand slid back to his saddlebag, reaching for a flash thrower as the enemy came into view: *Elets! Hundreds of them!*

His mercenaries had reacted instantly, were at their posts within moments. The Elets checked their advance, were drawing bows. Close enough for accuracy, but the point armour could take it, and helmets would deflect any shots to the head.

There was no word of command, but the Elets released their arrows together. Porett felt himself brace, instinctive, ready for the momentary tightening that followed impact. He heard the peppered thuds as the flight hit, but found himself tumbling to the ground, a sudden tumult of pain screaming around him.

What? He hadn't felt — *hell, they've gone for the horses!* He'd thrown himself clear, saved a crushed leg, but others weren't so lucky. There were arrows studding everything, but maybe half were in horseflesh. Someone was helping him to his feet; he realised that he still gripped the flash thrower in his hand, peered determinedly through the icy swirl, sought a target among the onrushing foe, furious to show an immediate response...

Nothing met his eyes except the white and grey of the featureless, focus-teasing snowscape. The Elets were gone.

He noticed his whole left side was soaked, looked down. The river of radblown water ran red around his boots.

* * *

Malva would have been able to hold the mercs together better. Porett wasn't a soldier, didn't know the right things to say to them, or what they'd been trained to expect. They were scared, clearly, so reasoning wasn't going to work, and that meant he'd have to use threats.

So, when four of them approached him, weapons drawn, demanding to be transferred to Trilith, Porett made a few quick gestures and burned the leader alive. His victim co-operated splendidly by reacting in a most spectacular fashion, although when you're wearing flameproof point armour that's been inverted then even rolling around in the snow isn't ever going to save you.

That gave Porett the respect of the others, but how long it would last he wasn't sure. He encouraged them to believe he'd port in more horses, but just how you'd get even a mule to fit in a Trans/Disc box he didn't know. Maybe he'd try arrange something once the device was out of the open.

Most of his men were now hauling the carts towards the clump of trees up ahead, where the group would be unobservable, safe from arrows. Guarding the flanks and directing the radblowers were the remaining men and all the women (only three: despite her disposition, Malva apparently regarded others of her gender as potential challengers). Porett had sent a small party forward to check for waiting Elets, but they'd found none. He didn't doubt that the attackers were still nearby, staying out of sight, but at least they weren't waiting in the wood. He'd have time there to think out the situation, decide what to do next. Maybe he'd merge with the com-3 and set two minds working on it.

* * *

It was dark, and he'd lit a fire. A simple sequence of gestures, but impressive to his magic-illiterate mercenaries. The branches of the leafy trees made wonderful tinder, even though damp from the snow; they had a sticky, sweet-smelling sap that caught ablaze the moment it was shown a spark. Great for grilling pony steaks, or whatever the hell that was in the wrap-pouches.

Skis would be the best way of getting to Liagh Na Laerich. That would mean dismissing the Lowlanders, of course, but the Akreans should be competent. How to move the Trans/Disc transmitter, though?

He sighed. What an expensive folly this had turned out to be! The Elets had him pretty well beaten: he couldn't really continue the expedition without his sole means of returning to civilisation. He'd been prepared at the outset for a reasonable level of risk, but not the amount entailed by abandoning his only lifeline. Maybe he could flick a porter spell to propel the box along? *No, you have to be stationary when you use one of those, or you never know which direction you're moving it.*

Would it really be so bad if he didn't find out how Sage overcame magic? He could wait, learn later, after Justan had done for the Elets. She'd still torment him, though, pain him with ever-worsening side-effects she didn't even know about. Perhaps, if she did know, she'd stop? Was there some way to bargain with her? Not for a while, no; not before she'd killed him...

What if he didn't merge, just overwrote the sphere, spoke from there but never recombined his dual experiences? Daily suicide? *Ha!* At least then there'd be no risk of Sage hitting him mid-merge — and the thought of *that* had haunted him for days.

It's over, better admit the fact and go home. Merge with the comsphere now and —

"Fire!" Sentries, all around, panicked. *Flaming arrows, must be, despatched simultaneously.* A trap!

"Stay your ground" he bellowed. "You're safe in your point armour!" A fire-dripping branch fell before him, he heard crackling above. *Damn, the foliage is alight!* But it should be too wet, shouldn't it?

More timber was crashing down, *hell, this has taken hold quick!* His mercenaries were running for the open, ignoring orders, desperate to avoid being cooked alive. He heard shouts, screams — the Elets were waiting for them, beating them to death with clubs, maces, morning stars.

The Trans/Disc box! The air was thickening with fragrant smoke, hot, rasping to the throat. He struggled to his feet, felt the sting of airborne ash in his eyes. There was fire

everywhere, spitting, cracking — how had it got such a hold? They must have used pitch or something. *Life, where's that box?*

Breathing was difficult, hell, the flameproofing would stave off fire but he was going to suffocate! His eyes were steaming tears, his lenses aggravated, he could hardly see. *Is that the T/D? Yes!* He staggered, groped for the side, hot to the touch but not alight. Good, strong, Muraki oak! He clambered in, began gesturing. Above him, the sky was raging with intense yellow flame, flowing patterns of gold and orange flooding chaotically across. Breathless, *keep calm, make the gestures, get out of here...*

* * *

He opened his eyes, slowly. They hurt. Slate-grey clouds were overhead, slipping silent snowflakes into drifting descent. He turned his head. About him was the charred fossil of what was once woodland. Smoke rose in wisps from glowing cinders, winding with the steam that hissed whenever a flake touched. His throat was scrapingly sore.

He realised the Trans/Disc box was still smouldering, that it was why he wasn't covered in more than a dapple of snow. Was he burned? Or had the suit saved him? He remembered starting the gestures, but not finishing them. *Must have passed out, else the spell would have blown me.*

He moved his hands: no pain. Slowly, he levered himself upright. There was still a good deal of heat around, mainly fallen branches, burning like Winter logs. He figured that the Trans/Disc cabinet had saved him, kept him away from the flames at ground level. Luck, though, that nothing alight had dropped in from above.

The box had been on the back of a cart; most of that was gone now, just a fragile black frame with pinpricks of dying red when the wind blew. As for the transmitter itself, well it was useless. The cheap glass com-1 once fixed on the top was broken, split in two. Maybe the heat, more likely the fall that did it. He felt for his com-3, he'd had it hanging from his belt last night. It wasn't there, but his eye caught it in a corner, where it had rolled when its pouch had scorched open. *Relief!* His other self would have had hours to think of some way out of this, he could merge now and... What was that noise?

He threw himself back, flat against the rear panel of the Trans/Disc transmitter, breath held, heart pumping wildly. His still-functioning sound-set had picked up the squelching of feet on slush, over to his right, along the road. He'd only glanced, but it was mortifying: Elet after Elet, a vast column, trudging eastwards, grim, purposeful, muted.

Chapter 83

Conley knew the answer before she asked. "What's that behind your back, Roween?"

Her eyes were wide, her mouth open. "Nothing, Con," attempted smile, "you found some hay, then?"

"There's a salt dump just down the road, we can cadge some from there. What are you hiding?"

"Hiding?" She held out her hands, hopeful. "Empty, see?"

Conley looked down for a moment, then back to Roween. "If you want to act like a child, then I'll have to treat you like I would a child." She clambered into the caravan, glaring.

"No, I'll show you!" She reached into the folded blankets behind, rummaged for the comsphere.

Conley stood over her, hands on hips, sighed. "What are we going to do with you, Ro? Sennary again?"

She nodded. "I didn't get through, Con, I swear it, but — "

She was shaking her head. "I don't understand you, Roween. You set up this whole elaborate scam, trick me into traipsing across half the continent with you, you have a whole *nation* relying on the outcome of your plans, and yet you jeopardise it all by secretly speaking to the enemy!"

"Sennary's not the enemy, he's..."

Smiled, sarcastic. "He's what, Roween?"

Her face was red. "I just don't want him killed, that's all."

Conley laughed. "He's making a fool of you, Ro! He's flashing you fake signals, and you're reading them as true!" *Can't she see?*

"He's not, he's, I need to *believe* — "

Oh damn... "Ro, look; you've not had much experience with men, have you?" She crouched down, next to her. "You've got a crush on Sennary, and he's playing you along because it suits his purposes. He's far too mature to — "

She shook her head. "No, no, it's not like that, I know he doesn't love me or anything, but... oh I don't know, I just feel I have to *see* him, I..." She looked so small.

Conley put an arm around her shoulders. "Why's that, Ro?" She felt so awkward doing this kind of mothering stuff.

"I need... I need to feel wanted, Con. Not just wanted, *wanted*, if you see. Those," she swallowed, hard, "bastards in Zoderdhua, they were everything I always dreaded, they were just, if they'd, oh Con!" She buried her head in Conley's shoulder, sudden, wept.

Conley let her sob awhile. She recalled her own feelings vividly, the outrage, the anger, the strange need to understand. Roween had seemed indifferent the next morning, even to her having been hit, like it was all a not-particularly-interesting story she'd read in a fortnight-old newspaper. Conley, though, was driven by a desire to know: *why* they'd acted that way, what had *caused* it, what they'd *wanted*. If she hadn't been able to rationalise it all, she'd have unhinged.

Roween bore scars that weren't so quickly healed.

* * *

"You feeling better now, Ro?"

"Lots, thanks Con." She nibbled her bottom lip. "What did Chenii-Imor say? She must think I'm..." She let her words die.

"I tried to explain, but she wasn't bothered, said your emotions were your own affair, and that if you'd decided to surface them then you must have had your own good reasons."

Roween looked over to the Elet girl's back, long hair disappearing behind the scarf around her neck. "She's never travelled, doesn't quite appreciate the extent to which we're different. She's not a specialist."

"She speaks Estavian..." Conley lowered her voice further. "How do you think *she'd* have handled Zoderdhua? Could something like that happen in Elet?"

Roween shrugged. "Same as me, killed the lot of them, one way or another. When they attacked, most likely — or maybe she'd have switched herself off during it, got them individually later."

"Switched herself *off*..? You make emotions sound like tap water."

"We all do it at times, Con, just with the Elets the pressure never seems to get so high that it ever forces open a valve. Take me, for example: I've lived with the fact I'm unattractive for years, would probably have stood it forever if it hadn't been for those Lowlanders. It wouldn't have come out in an Elet, though, whatever the provocation."

Conley raised an eyebrow, slowly. "Now come on, Ro, you know you're not bad looking. You may like to use those eyes of yours as an excuse, but —"

"Oh I'm not bothered about my eyes. Well, I guess I am, but I know there are *men* out there who aren't — my grandmother had a lazy eye, and she had suitors, some. It's just, well, I'm *boring*, Con. Uninteresting. Men like women who listen, not ones who argue; women with a sense of fun, not drab introverts; they want a woman who knows about life, not a self-taught academic who lives in books. No man would want me for *who* I am, just for *what* I am — a woman: a human being with certain basic physical characteristics that a man can find entertaining for fifteen minutes. That's my lot. I see it, now, those Lowlanders made it so explicit." She grimaced. "I'm a book with coffee spilled on the cover that you might use if all you wanted to do was show a friend what print looked like, but that no-one would ever read more than a few pages of before looking for one that's more interesting. Prior to Zoderdhua, I still had hope. Now, I realise the truth of it: any man who wanted me would be equally satisfied by any other convenient woman."

Conley was nodding. Roween was wrong, she felt sure of that, but she was also stable now, had found her own way to explain what had happened that evening. *Although...* "Yet you see Sennary as the exception here? The one man who is attracted to the real Roween, not the generic female?"

"*Saw*, Con. I was trying to recapture some of my hope, I guess, but not any more. I'm wasting my time."

* * *

"That junction ahead," called back Chenii-Imor, "it's where we meet the coast road of Liagh Na Laerich."

Conley scrambled forward. "Coast road?"

Roween joined her. "She means like the belt road that circles Rhiev. If Liagh Na Laerich is metaphorically an island in the lake that is Elet, this road is its coast. Inside, Liagh Na

Laerich; outside, the rest of Elet."

"I see. So this is where we have to give up the caravan?"

"They won't have cleared the roads in the city, Con, we'll make better progress on horseback."

Conley was shading her eyes from the glare of the sun reflecting off snow-covered rooftops in the distance. "And someone else could make better use of the wagon, yes..." She frowned. "Tell me, Roween, is what we're doing important?"

Roween spluttered. "What a question! Of course it is! Millions of lives depend on our success! The Elets are *relying* on us!"

"So why haven't they *organised* things better? We weren't expected at Suadh Varl Na, poor old Chenii-Imor here was coerced into taking us to the capital, there's no official escort, we plod along in a little cart, we have to stop at nights, and there isn't a snow-free road between here and the library. We could have been there days ago if we'd been given more help, and this business of swapping a caravan for three horses wouldn't then even have arisen."

"I know what you mean, Con, but it's just the way they do things here, it's hard to make a group of Elets work on a task because they're all independents, they — "

"Not so," interrupted Chenii-Imor. "All Elets, they know that magic is going to be destroyed. Anyone with an interest in the subject will also know that you two are the ones who will bring about its destruction, but they don't know how it will happen, nor where, nor exactly when."

"And you?"

"Ordinarily, I could have asked for the details, but there's a block on them. That's serious: it means that the information is so sensitive that no risk can be taken of its being acquired by the wrong people. I have to take it on trust."

Conley rubbed her temple. "You're saying that you don't know anything specific about what we plan to do?"

"All I have been told that Elets in general have not is that you need to reach the library in Liagh Na Laerich. I guessed as much anyway — I think most magic:technical takers have. When we arrive there, I'll leave. I'll go westward, to avoid capture — I don't want to violate the block inadvertently."

Conley looked at her in amazement.

"Chenii-Imor," said Roween, "I've never heard of such information blocks before. How often are they imposed?"

"This is the first one I've ever known."

* * *

Conley was staggered by the size of Liagh Na Laerich. They'd ridden for two hours before stopping; not at great speed, of course, but at a trot nevertheless, and in all that time there hadn't been more than just a small park that didn't have something built on it. Everywhere were houses, shops, small factories, all huddled together close, most several storeys high, and always built from uniformly-carved two-brick sized blocks of granite. They'd passed a huge stadium at one point, and further along there was a tall, domed structure that Chenii-Imor said probably had a pool in it. Further along there'd been a maze of a construction, set in the middle of a square, with greybrick, bookcase-like shelves covered in small, snow-covered terracotta jars that Roween told her contained the ashes of the dead. It

occurred to Conley then that she hadn't noticed anything yet that might have been a church or a temple.

They'd met few people, but the city wasn't entirely depopulated. They'd been stopped a couple of times by locals asking if they knew that this was a walking road, and that the horse and livestock road was through there. Chenii-Imor had replied that they were looking for somewhere safe to stay, and that seemed to be an acceptable response.

And such a place was where they were now. When it had grown dark, they'd pulled up outside a big house, Chenii-Imor had just opened the door, shouted to find out if anyone was home, and then simply walked in when satisfied that the place was empty. They took the horses round the back to the stable block shared with adjacent houses, and returned to choose their rooms. Conley's was on the first floor.

Roween entered. "Settled, Con?"

She gave an exaggerated shiver. "I'd have preferred it if Chenii-Imor had lit the boiler, I'm going to have to flick a bodywarmer tonight."

"She said that there's no fuel. I imagine they need it for the war."

"We could chop up a chair or something... Anyway, why do they need logs for fighting?"

Roween shrugged. "I think it's so they can attack walled cities. They build these catapults; they light big fires in the pans, then lob them over the ramparts and onto the houses."

Conley frowned, disbelieving. "Incendiaries are no way to take a town, Ro. You have to make sure that the folk inside can put out the flames, because if they can't then there's not going to be anything left to capture after the resulting conflagration."

"I *know* that, I told you myself!" She began a grin, dropped it. "But remember, the Elets don't want to conquer, Con, just to kill. It doesn't matter to them if they raze a city flat, so long as the occupants are dead."

Conley snorted in incredulity. "Are you sure we're on the right side in this war, Ro?"

I made a deal... "It's not important at this stage, Con. All we need concern ourselves with is the permanent removal of magic, as quickly as possible. If there's an information block in force, that means the moderators are real worried; we ought to waste no time."

Conley sat on the bed; it felt slightly damp. "See if I understand this: Elet has like hundreds of magazines, all covering different topics. Anyone can send something to whatever magazine they like, and the moderators are the editors who decide what goes in and what stays out. Near enough?"

"Well, there's a lot of overlap between topics, and they can be divided indefinitely into subtopics as well, and the moderators are also the owners of their networks, and the magazines mostly come out daily, but the analogy is otherwise accurate, yes."

"And there's a block on the details of what we're going to do because the moderators feel that if copies of their magazines were to be read by the 'wrong' people, there could be nasty repercussions?"

Roween flustered. "Well I don't know exactly *why* there's a block, but you can be sure there's a very good reason." *Hot, what if she guesses who counts as 'wrong'?*

Conley folded her arms, thought a moment. "Maybe someone else is close to figuring true magic. Porett, Magicorp, my father... Could be there's even an Elet who wants to be a god."

Missed! "Well you could be right there, Con. 'God' is the wrong word, though — it's too weak. When the time comes, when you can use true magic, what you'll have is nothing short of absolute, *complete* power. Gods can't strip people of free will, but to you that would require little more than fleeting fancy. And it's yours until you relinquish it, no-one else can touch it. I

can well understand why the moderators don't want that kind of information known." *Or the rest.*

"So almost all Elets have no idea what happens next. I assume you'll eventually get round to telling me, though?"

Roween tugged at her ear. "Well, there's not much to say, really. We get to the library, Chenii-Imor leaves us, and we make for the collection of magically-bound books. We take a couple of them for practising with, and start to awaken your dormant sense of magic detection. That might take a few days, but I can help you, I went through the process myself. When you can smell magic strongly, you enter the bound-book room alone, wait until you pulse your reflex, and then — well, then you have the power to do anything."

"Something's going to go wrong, I just *know* it..."

* * *

Breakfast, scrambled eggs on bread. Roween was still asleep, or if she wasn't then it didn't matter, Conley had the comsphere.

"Thanks, Chenii," she said, accepting her plate.

The Elet hesitated, studied her face. "I am called Chenii-Imor, Conley. Why did refer to me as Chenii?"

Conley opened a hand. "It's a strange culture that doesn't have nicknames."

Chenii-Imor smiled, widely. "Names! Now I understand! But I thought that your philosophy judged them important? Yet you halved mine."

"It's something we do sometimes; it means we like someone."

She nodded. "A custom. Is it true that in your lands there are separate names for men and women?"

If Conley hadn't had a mouth full of egg, her surprise might have been more apparent. As it was, she managed to swallow; when she spoke she sounded almost casual. "So there are men in Elet called Chenii-Imor?"

"There aren't men in Murak called Conley?"

She merely shook her head; nobody with a brain gets into cultural debates this early in the morning. "Well then, you're heading west when we arrive at the library? Have you been in those parts before?"

Chenii-Imor was suddenly animated, her voice even more up-and-down than usual. "Oh, no Conley, it'll be my first time out of Elet, I'm really looking forward to it. There's a ruined Nayal city on the shore of one of the blue lakes, and tribes of Nachatee roam the plains with their herds. It'll be wonderfully exciting!"

She grunted, swallowed again. "So it's not all bad, your having to chaperone Roween and I, then. At least it gives you the excuse to explore some of the world after you're rid of us."

She wrinkled her nose. "I didn't have to come with you, that's true — I don't *have* to do *anything*. If I'd mainly wanted to go east, I could have risked just putting a notice on you like I did for Lord Sennary, but I decided that since you didn't know the way — ". She stopped, frowned. "Are you alright, Conley?"

She was half choking, eyes watering, took a drink, recovered. "You did *what* to Sennary?" creaky.

Chenii-Imor was instantly wary. "Roween, she asked me to. I put a safety notice on him, he won't be bothered by Elets for the next five days. She said it was vital."

Stupid girl! She was about to thump the table, stayed herself. *No, calm yourself, Conley, she has an excuse.* "She did this two days ago, right?"

Chenii-Imor nodded, once. "Early morning. I should have referred it to biograph:foreign for assessment?"

"Is the notice reversible?"

"Under normal circumstances, yes, but to do so now would be difficult; the moderators, they left Liagh Na Laerich yesterday. Until this is all over, communication over distance will be slow and patchy. If we knew roughly where he was, we could — "

"No, forget it. We'll just have to be on our guard, that's all. And hope he doesn't have a map."

Chapter 84

Count Feathe stroked his Adam's apple. "No, Ansle. Your seat on the grand council must be tied to your position as chancellor of the Academy. If you were at present the foreign minister, or the minister for science, I might perhaps entertain your meriting an extra vote; supplies, however is a portfolio that becomes worthless once hostilities cease, and it should not be accredited with a level of influence disproportionate to its status."

Ansle glanced around the table; no face betrayed any spark of support, not even Nic's. "I concede," he announced. "The grand council will consist of Count Feathe, the present minister of agriculture; Lord Tenrin, minister for health; Duchess Lusia, the treasury minister; myself, chancellor of the Academy; General Nolley, marshal of the south — and, shortly, of the east; a board-level representative from Magicorp, yet to be decided; likewise one from Agritech. All to have one vote each."

There was a murmur among the assembled leaders. A thin-faced man with slicked-down hair raised a hand. "Non-voting chairman to be rotated every four months between the baronies of Chrest and Ulgrey..." His voice was nasal.

Ansle strummed, irritably. "Yes, Baron Ulgrey, as you say. So, then, it's agreed?"

All at the table indicated acceptance.

He straightened his papers. "Well, now we've finalised the control issues, I think it's time we discussed just how this whole campaign is going to work. General Nolley, you've been spending a *lot* of time preparing the details, so if you'd like to explain our plans?"

She stood. "Thank you, Chancellor. Now if everyone could just move their notes away from the centre for a moment, please, I've set a relief map where we can all see it."

There were a few seconds of disgruntled complaint as cluttered pens, cups and dim-glow name-plates were removed from the middle section of the conspirators' heavy, square table. Nolley made some two dozen rapid gestures that twinkled into being a large, illusory, three-dimensional representation of Murak, Svala, Galur and Soat. She'd built it over the past few days, but hadn't given it visibility until this moment. Ansle was impressed — he always fell for blind design — but didn't let it show.

"So," she said, coolly, "I'll start by outlining our military objectives for the first day, then I'll go on to describe briefly the procedures we're adopting for the arrest of specific individuals. I'll finish with an appraisal of the situation after one week. Is that alright by everyone?" She looked from side to side; no argument.

"Carry on, General," said Ansle, self-important.

She gave a tic of a smile, continued. "Well, it's been difficult to move the troops into place without thereby signalling our intentions. However, of our primary targets, only the White River dam need wait until day two. At the end of day one, we expect to hold the barracks and naval dockyards at Zovia," she pointed, "the royal palace, the comsphere exchange and the newspaper printworks in Cala," she pointed again, "the Summer palace in... what is it, Captain?"

The younger woman who had entered was obviously nervous, saluted to compose herself. "There's a call on your field comsphere, Ma'am."

Nolley scowled at her. "I told you we were *not* to be interrupted! Leave us immediately; inform the caller that I cannot be disturbed." She turned to resume her talk, noticed the officer hadn't moved, span round on her. "*Immediately!*"

"B-begging your pardon, Ma'am, but it's The King."

There was a moment of shared surprise. Then, just as the panicked questions began to break, Nolley raised her hand, authoritative. "Silence!" She looked at Ansle. "I'll have to

go, or he'll be suspicious..."

"Permission granted." He glanced at the young captain, away, then back again, looked for longer.

Nolley straightened her tunic. "You know enough to give the remainder of the overview, Chancellor? I'll try to be back in time to do the battle projections myself." Hurried.

"Of course," he answered, rising. She took her helmet, followed her officer impatiently towards the door.

Ansle waited, testily, until they'd left. The captain's face had definitely seemed familiar, but he couldn't place where he'd seen it before. On a former student, probably, or a failed interviewee...

He affected his lecturing voice. "Well, I'm afraid I'm rather old-fashioned in that I usually prefer chalk to Chewt-Farmer, but on this occasion General Nolley has provided us with a most useful illusion. Indeed, prior to this meeting she confided in me that she even has some surprise animation sequences prepared. I confess that, despite this information, I still failed to suppose that the unexpected flow of motion she had promised was to be her own..."

There was polite laughter in the room.

Nolley and her captain were running as fast as they could down the corridor outside.

"Continuing where she left off, then..." He surveyed the illusion, slowly, as if gathering his considerable thoughts. "The other key points we will hold before the end of the first day are the Rodya border crossings with Davia," he pointed, "and with Vothland," he pointed, "and the Leskina bridge to Chaïen." He pointed.

The explosion blew away a third of the East Wing of the Academy of Magical Sciences.

Five seconds later, General Nolley picked herself up from the stone floor at the corridor's end, dust still filling the air. Her chitinised helmet lay spinning where she'd thrown it, sprinkled in glitters of broken glass.

"Are you alright, Noll?" The captain was cut badly, bleeding at the temple and cheek, but she didn't look to have anything broken. Nolley was inestimably relieved.

"Fine, fine, but get those wounds of yours seen to this instant — and *that's* an order!"

Her sister was happy to obey.

* * *

It was thirty minutes before Nolley felt she had seen enough to be able to make a preliminary report to Justan. Everyone knew what had happened, it was obvious: someone had been casting a spell, and it had backfired.

The scale of the devastation was such that the forensics people were bound to surmise that its root cause was probably the colour loss of a heavily-enchanted artefact, but whether they'd figure it was the table that had gone up, Nolley didn't know. However, since fortune had splintered it to oblivion along with everything else in the room, she rather doubted that enough evidence existed to prove anything at all conclusive about the 'accident', save that it had occurred.

As for Ansle, well, Justan had summed him up nicely: "He wants to be a leader, but he doesn't want to lead."

In her briefcase was a leather wallet with two mirror-like panes of fine, Akrean glass

bonded to each half. In the left she could see Justan, waiting; she cleared her throat.

"I regret to inform your majesty of the sad death of three of your most senior ministers, two of your most loyal barons, and your dear friend Ansle of Malith, chancellor of the Academy."

He looked up, nodded, slowly. "General Nolley, my distress at hearing this news cannot be measured." He smiled.

"It was a freak mishap, there were no survivors. I was lucky to escape death myself." She grinned.

"Then perhaps you should work on your sprinting, General!" He frowned, suddenly. "Oh, I *also* have bad news to impart. Count Feathe's son died last night in Bridges; we think he was assassinated by a member of an underground resistance movement, but the killer left no clues. I only learned of it myself an hour ago. Unfortunately, my staff could not inform the Count, he was apparently detained on important business in Cala."

She feigned concern. "Then he had no heir when he died, so his title and lands are forfeit to the Crown."

"I believe that such is the law, yes. However, the Crown is presently enjoying a surfeit of titles and lands, and, furthermore, it cannot allow an estate as important as Count Feathe's to remain unattributed for long. I wonder if perhaps I should grant it to a worthy follower. Someone like yourself, General Nolley?"

She chuckled. "I, sir? A noble?"

"It's not so bad. There are certain privileges enjoyed by those of rank..."

"Nobles can marry royals..."

"And when my year of mourning Mitya ends..."

Chapter 85

He'd had to kill to get the horse. Of course, he *had* killed before — even before he'd started on this ruinous expedition — and it *was* the same thing, at a level of abstraction, definitely. Last time, he'd been the victim himself, been his own murderer. Yes, he *had* asked for his death, consented to it, but it made no real difference, he'd taken a life to ensure his own survival. So this time the principle had been the same, he'd merely removed an obstacle, hadn't had any alternative. Yes, it *had* been someone else, an innocent, but it wasn't as if the killing had been mere opportunism, unjustified laziness, anything like that.

Porett stared out along the road. Travelling in the opposite direction was a multitude of people, determined, individual. He looked like one of them — even the right height now — but, wary of violating some unknown custom that might betray his foreignness, he was careful not to show any emotion other than mild boredom. Occasionally, if he had to stop and make way for oncoming riders, someone would address him in the flint-like Eletic tongue; he didn't understand, couldn't reply, just smiled and shook his head. Well, it had worked so far.

The woman whose mare this had been hadn't even known what was happening. She'd been asleep when Porett had stumbled across her, outstretched on a leather sheet spread beneath a leafless beech. Her horse was roaming free, nosing and kicking at the snow in search of hidden grazing. Porett could have simply taken the beast and ridden off, but the maiden would have raised the alarm when she awoke. So he'd killed her, cast a quickbind that would hold her heart motionless for all eternity. It'd look like she'd had a seizure, like it was something natural. That was the beauty of quickbinds. That's why assassins favoured them.

Would the me that I chose to eradicate have allowed my metamorphosis to monster?

The signpost read "Liagh Na Laerich, 32". He had no knowledge of Eletic, but a lot of the time it seemed to be written using the same letters as Estavian, except it maybe missed a few of the newer ones. He took the integer to mean the distance he had yet to travel. Exactly how much it translated to in Estavian units of measure he wasn't sure, but the signposts appeared frequently, and he was able to calculate that at his present rate of movement he'd reach the middle of Liagh Na Laerich in around two days' time. Less, if there was no snow.

Involuntarily, he felt inside his coat for the vial of plague. Well, the coat was his *now*, yes, but a day ago it had belonged to her, the woman he'd murdered. The clothes were hers, too, spares he'd found in her saddlebags. He'd kept his point armour underneath, but the rest of his own kit he'd burned. And that was how it had happened: the woman had been his size, and Eletic men were invariably taller, so he'd tinkered with his illusion a little. Now, he looked just like any other female Elet on her way to the capital.

Was it only a couple of months ago that the version of himself in the com-3 had — ? No. No, not the same thing at all. Passing yourself off as a woman is hardly comparable to inhabiting an actual woman's body. *But might it be just as corrupting, in time?* Not in a country where everyone dressed, behaved identically, whatever their gender. *And yet...*

Up ahead there was a junction, with buildings beyond. Some kind of signalling was in operation, a snow-powdered man standing on a dais, pointing and waving a flag. The road running across had two carriageways, both teeming with people, many of whom were leaving at the crossroads and joining the line that led eastwards, past Porett, on to the Lowlands.

Getting through this lot, he decided, would call for caution. If he disobeyed a signal, or if the traffic officer shouted instructions, it might compromise his disguise. *Huh*. Almost amusing: traffic officers, in a land of supposed anarchists...

He watched the flag-waving, tried to follow the man's intentions. Elets apparently kept to the left, and on the northbound section of road there was a short extension for people who wanted to turn right. The flag-waver waited until this was full, then stopped the

southbound road and directed the assembled right-turn people across it, onto the highway that would take them to the Lowlands. No-one seemed to be going where Porett was headed, on towards Liagh Na Laerich. Should he cross the southbound carriageway when the flag-man signalled it to halt?

He chanced. When he reached the middle, the traffic officer said something, short. Porett smiled, shook his head. The other man shrugged, waved his flag; people on the northbound carriageway stopped, and Porett rode across.

The large-lettered sign read: "Ihlh Liagh Na Laerich." It bore no accompanying number.

* * *

Caltra looked less than happy when Porett called from the com-3.

"More unrest?" he asked.

She was calm, but obviously concerned, like it was all her fault. "Another three design houses switched to Magicorp last night."

"That makes eight." He nodded. "Same method?"

"Intimidation, yes. Another five in the vicinity are at serious risk. Can you not come back and take charge, Lord Porett?"

He clicked his illusory teeth. "I'd like to, Caltra, but at present I'm detained here on business."

"In a forest?" She didn't sound incredulous, just surprised.

Where I last merged... He cocked his head to one side, like her question wasn't even worth an answer.

She blushed. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..."

"Never mind. What about other set-ups in the same territory? MedSpell run a couple of facs, don't they? And Tetra? And the smaller places?"

"MedSpell haven't been touched, there's a report on your desk assessing the situation."

"Have you read it?"

She smiled, worriedly. "I will if you want me to, but it's marked confidential, and there's so much *other* information — it really all needs to be taken together. The rumours are that Magicorp will buy out the MedSpell establishments once they've driven out ours, but I don't know anything of what's happening to the smaller places."

"Who's handling our defence? Bordoat? Firgues?"

"I... I understand that Magicorp have been applying some pressure to their families..."

"Threatening them, you mean?"

She didn't answer.

"And you, Caltra, have they been threatening you?"

She glanced away. "No, no they haven't. Not yet."

* * *

Porett knew that Justan was in for trouble: the city was truly vast, its buildings squeezed together like they were trying to make room for others yet to come. Rather than risk riding openly down the wider streets, he was taking the back roads that ran parallel to them; even here, though, there were edifices several storeys higher than any in central Cala. How much bigger would be the ones downtown?

If the city had been planned, it didn't show it. Although the main boulevards were fairly straight, they were criss-crossed with innumerable narrow streets, running diagonally out of nowhere — maybe going off to nowhere, too. Other roads snaked around like you'd normally only see in corroded slums, but here the buildings were in fair order, constructed using the same, slate-grey stone. The uniform caking of snow made them all look incredibly clean.

Porett wasn't oppressed any by the scale of the city, but he did begin to wonder just how far it extended. How many days could you travel in a straight line before you came to a field? And if you strayed to the side-streets? You could lose yourself in the zigzags forever!

But Porett wasn't lost. Ten years or so ago, when he'd had the copies of his thesis printed, he'd tagged every single one. "Just to see who was interested, really," although now they were scattered all over Murak. Someone, however, had thoughtfully acquired one for Elet. It felt about a day away, straight ahead.

Where else would it be kept but in the library?

Chapter 86

"Thanks for all your help, Chenii-Imor." Roween meant it.

The Elet didn't react, seemed uninterested.

Conley touched her on the arm. "It's been nice knowing you, Chenii-Imor. Enjoy yourself in the western lands, and let us know how you get on."

She appeared startled. "The comsphere! You should take it with you!" She opened her bag, dug around in it, hasty.

Conley glanced to Roween; Roween shrugged.

"Here it is, I knew I had it." She produced the rose-pink com-2, smiled, then sensed Roween's incomprehension. "There was an open appeal last week, I remembered it this morning but it slipped me again. Here, you should have this now." She offered the ball to her, trustingly.

Roween took it, still muddled. "That's, er, yes... So, why exactly do we need this, Chenii-Imor?"

She was surprised by the question, emptied all expression from her face. "I don't know why the appeal was made, Roween, I'm just complying. My sphere, take it to the library; that's where the rest will be."

Then, Roween understood.

* * *

"I thought you'd been there before?" Conley was impatient.

"I have, Con, it's not far now, don't worry."

She looked around. "Well *I* don't see any library. I know these buildings are big, but how many books did you say it contained?"

Roween grinned. "It's right beneath us. They hollowed out a cavern inside the hill, put the library in it. Less risk of fire, no risk of flood or vermin, and they can expand it whenever the need arises. Bit dark, but there's lamps and stuff."

"And there's only one entrance?"

"There are several — four, I think — but we're going to the main gate; that's where the comspheres will be."

"The comspheres..?"

Roween smiled, knowingly. "I can feel them already, *hundreds* of them! This is all going to be so much easier than I'd earlier feared."

* * *

Conley had never seen so many com-1s, com-2s and black-fac lookalikes together before. Roween had underestimated: there were maybe four or five thousand of them. "The Eletic philosophy is founded on the premise that communication is the key to freedom," she'd said, "so of course, people such as Medreph imported a few comspheres from Cala." *A few? Hot! And what about the thousands more that haven't been handed in?*

Roween's face was twitching with concentration as she slowly descended the stairs. "I think I can manage it now, Con, the smell isn't quite so overpowering..." She kept her back to the wall, stared intently at the comspheres like they were the eggs of giant spiders, huge, deadly, ready to hatch.

"I can move a few more away if you like," said Conley, stooping to scoop some up.

"No, they're fine, leave them, the disturbance..." She took the last step, closed her eyes, edged into the space to her left. Conley followed.

"When I can sense magic, will comspheres have the same effect on me?"

Roween was bent over, panting, looked up. "This many? Yes, they'd better, or it'll all have been a waste of time..."

* * *

The librarians had relocated the bound books from where Roween remembered them as being. The new room was smaller.

"There's less of them now," she explained. "The Elets don't reseal a book once it's opened, there's no point. The writings left in here are the ones no-one has yet asked to read. Obscure research reports, things like that."

Conley was looking at her, suspicious. "You don't seem to find them very strong-scented."

Roween hesitated for a moment, like she was listening for something. She nodded. "They're not so bad at first, but they sort of get worse the longer you stay with them, happens quickly. There are still enough here to provoke your reflex capacity into being, but the presence of all those comspheres will make it much, much easier."

"I wish you could help me shift them, or we had a barrow or something. There's so many..."

"Carry them piled up in your arms, it doesn't matter if you drop a few. While you're walking, reach out with your mind, try to imagine what it's *like* to sense their magic, try to *see* them with your eyes closed. It'll come after a few hours, if you want it to, believe me."

"Believe you?" Conley pulled a book from the shelf, random. "Ro, I believed you when you told me that trash about recording gestures. How do I know you're not snicking me up again?" She read the title.

"You don't," answered Roween, coldly.

Conley replaced the book, turned her head sideways to look at the spine of the next one. "I still don't understand why I need this built-in demagicking ability *anyway*. Why can't I just cast the spell that'll get rid of magic all at once, and be done with it?"

Roween was suddenly red-faced, backed towards the door. "Con?" She was gulping for breath. "Sorry, the books, they've come on, starting to get to me," apologetic. She fumbled with the handle, almost fell into the corridor.

Conley ignored her. "If I accept at an intellectual level that this true magic of yours is a reality, but I don't believe it deep down, then how does acquiring this conditioned reflex really change anything?"

"When you get it, it's not all you get," said Roween, dizzy. Her eyes were half-closed, like she was enduring pain. "It wakes up the part of your brain that's meant to deal with magic, the bit that nature built to just *know* how magic really works, instinctive." She stumbled against the wall. "Con, I can't stay here, I'll snuff this all out..."

Conley walked over, dutifully, no enthusiasm, helped Roween away from the room. "I'm still unconvinced," she stated.

"It'll only take another day, then you'll have your proof. After *all* we've shared in getting here, Con, can't you humour me for just twenty-four more hours? Please?"

* * *

"Well, I've barricaded the main entrance now. How are things going with you?"

Conley wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. "I've moved about a fifth of them, I think. I thought you said there were four ways into this place?"

"There are, but I can seal us off from the rest of the complex by blocking a couple of stairwells. Do you sense anything yet?"

She closed her eyes, bounced the comspheres in her arms like she was guessing their weight. "I'm not sure, maybe. Or it might only be that I'm thirsty."

They both smiled. "Fine, fine, let's have a break. I'll get the canteen." She turned.

"I fetched it already," nodding towards the chair beneath which it lay.

Roween sighed, stage-whisper loud.

"Well, we left it near the comspheres, and I was over there anyway..." Mock-protested.

"Let's have something to drink..."

* * *

Conley was sitting, her scarf tied so as cover her eyes.

"Where is it?" asked Roween.

Conley pointed.

Roween walked behind her, held the comsphere out to her left.

"Where is it?" she asked.

Conley turned slightly, pointed. "Sneaky."

Roween pocketed the com-1, undid the blindfold. "You get it right every time now."

Conley combed back her hair with her fingers. "I know." She was shaking. "So I'm ready?"

"It's late. I'm — we're *both* tired. We'll do it in the morning, when you're sharper. We ought to get some rest now."

"I could sleep in the bound-book room..." Expectant.

Roween shook her head. "With true magic, you can fulfil any desire, create *any* thing, world you're able to imagine. If you were to have a dream..."

Conley gave in. The terrors that exist in the reality of dreams were something she remembered all too well.

Chapter 87

The instant Sennary's com-2 glowed, he tapped in; kings do not like having to wait, especially if you've inconvenienced them already.

Justan's face was impassive. "You'll appreciate, Lord Sennary, that although the Lowlands are now secured, and the leading traitors in my kingdom dead, neither matter is ended, and there remain significant demands upon my time. I trust, therefore, that what you have to tell me is important." He folded his arms.

Sennary grunted. "It's certainly that, sir, but I doubt whether the careerists who've been listening to my reports have had the wit to recognise the fact. Do they believe all your agents to be five-year-olds?"

He sighed. "Recently, I have been uncommonly busy, Lord Sennary, as I'm sure you are aware, and yet nevertheless you demanded to speak to me whatever I was doing. Despite your inexplicably acquired beliefs to the contrary, you do have my trust, and hence here I am. Now, presumably you didn't summon me merely to complain about my com-ops, so perhaps you would be kind enough to make your point?"

He flickered a cheek, inhaled, slowly, organised his thoughts. "I'm in Liagh Na Laerich, sir, and I have to tell you, it's huge." Voice calm, measured. "Not just big, I mean it's a really *phenomenal* size. Its area must be twenty times that of Cala, at the very least, and the buildings, they're so tall, so crowded together — I've never before seen anything like this density of housing, *anywhere*."

Justan's expression hadn't changed. "What you say confirms reports I have received from other sources: we may have underestimated the population of Elet."

"Not just 'may', sir, we're *definitely* out — and by a more-than-considerable factor. There are ten million people live in this *one* city; as I told your com-ops, I've seen lines of people, thousand upon thousand, heading towards the border. They're armed, all of them, and, well, there's something *about* them, their attitude, I don't know what it is, they seem so..." he struggled, searching for the word. *Edgy*? No, they knew the fate that awaited them. *Purposeful*? No, no, there was something more... "So *dangerous*, sir."

"Dangerous." He nodded. "And yet they haven't harmed *you*..."

Sennary flinched, flushed. "There's something strange going on, yes — I feel like I've been *allowed* to get this far, to move unhindered as if under someone's protection. There are Elets around, but they keep away, distant, like maybe I'm carrying a plague."

"Perhaps they think you're Lord Porett... Tell me: where exactly are you?"

Sennary curled his lip, glanced to the side. "Well, I'm quite some way into the city, but it's like being in a forest. Every building is different, yet after a while they all look the same, and you can't see where to go because they're all so high, packed so close."

"Is there any chance that you can find Conley of Malith and Roween Sage before they..." He deliberately ended the sentence short.

Sennary shook his head. "I'm lost. There's a hill I sometimes catch a glimpse of, I've been making for that, might get a better view from the top. Thing is, I don't know what I'm looking for; all the direction signs are in Eletic and none are pictorial."

"You're still able to travel at night?"

"Well, yes, but without a city map... There's been snow here, and although it's melted at ground-level the rooftops are still coated; if the moon gets up, there should be light around, in which case I can make further progress. If it clouds over, though, well, I don't want to risk losing my only landmark."

"I'll ensure the skies remain clear." Justan rubbed his chin. "In view of what you've told

me, Lord Sennary, I think it's imperative that you find the two women as soon as possible. I know it may be compared to seeking a single stalk of barley growing in a wheatfield, but I've had other reports of the size of the Eletic army and it may be that if our magics were knocked out then we could be in for a hideously long, protracted war."

"If we lost magic, sir, I fear any war would be very short indeed." He became conscious of the grimness in his voice.

"Then, Lord Sennary, it would be better if you succeeded in your mission." He moved to tap out.

"A moment, sir! My cousin — how is she?"

Justan smiled. "She isn't aware that she's a hostage. She was seconded to the magical support regiment, and appears to be enjoying her new position immensely. Of course, if magic was inoperative, she might not be quite so happy..."

"Has she figured out the gestures that operate the — "

"No, Sennary, she has not." He stretched. "Look, if you find Dr Conley before Lord Porett does, you won't have to worry that he might try to kill her, will you? And *then*, you won't feel that you have to kill *him*. Of course, if he's currently listening in on our conversation then he might think it wise to use his undoubted tag on your equipment to keep well ahead of your position... Now you must excuse me, I have a meeting." The image of his finger grew large as it approached, then Sennary's comsphere blanked out.

Justan, Ansle, Porett; Roween, Conley, Roenna; his loyalty, his honour, his honesty.

So many winds blowing from so many directions; if he didn't bend one way soon, he'd snap. But which way to go?

Sennary realised that he'd decided long ago.

Chapter 88

Daybreak. Roween lifted her head, saw Conley, a different Conley, the Conley she'd first met on a wet Summer's day in Svala. Hair sun-bright blonde, her face colours rich, subdued — and those eyes, those fabulous eyes...

"What do you think, Ro?" she asked. "If I'm going to destroy magic, I want to be at my best while I do it."

Roween just gazed. "I'd forgotten how, how you looked..."

"My little vanity, last time, promise." She smiled; it didn't seem to fit the old conceit of the makeover image.

Roween sat up, awkward. "You know that your poor eyesight will return, don't you? You won't ever be able to correct it."

"I'll manage," she replied, cheerful. "Just won't have to look at anything more than a couple of paces away, that's all."

* * *

Porett determined that he was standing directly above the nearest copy of his thesis. He'd noticed earlier that there were bottle-glass windows and iron ventilation gratings built into the cobbled streets; so, the library was in a vault. But where was its entrance? He could use his blow shots to try blast a way in, but that would be prohibitively noisy...

Maybe he should snatch an Elet, use truth shots; show a book, ask directions with a few hand signals, might work. He'd keep that as an option, next Elet he saw.

He walked over to where he'd tied his horse. What artefacts did he still have with him that might be of use? The com-3, his sound-set, a flash thrower, various shots. *Ah*. See-through lenses. If he put two in one eye, that might extend the range so he could see the passageways underground, follow them to the entrance. It'd hurt, but not intolerably.

He allowed himself a smile, stroked his chin. No beard, he'd had to shave it off.

* * *

"So how long will this take?" Conley was nervous, couldn't hide it. *Excited?*

"Hard to say, this few books. No more than a couple of hours, though."

"You mean I have to stay in there alone for *two hours*?"

Roween took her arm, led her towards the bound-book room. "I'll only be down the corridor outside, we can talk. You must lock the door, though, slide the key underneath. The scent of the books will become unbearable, has to or your reflex won't cut. You'll want to escape, to leave the room, to get away somehow even if just for a moment, but it's *essential* you stay, force your reflex to emerge."

"Two hours, locked in a stifling room..."

"Well, make a few last calls on a comsphere, then — or you could always read a book!" *Jest, lighten her up.*

Conley looked at her right hand. "I'm shaking too much to read anything... Hot, I wish I

had an Evergreen, calm me down."

"You probably wouldn't like the smell now, they're none too pleasant." She stopped walking. "I can't go any closer than this."

Conley blew, hesitated. "Can I wait here for a minute or so, get used to the idea?"

"If it helps."

She considered a moment longer, grinned. "No, may as well get it over with. Wish me luck!" She turned, strode slowly to the door.

"Good luck, Con." *And forgive me.*

* * *

The entrance was blocked. Tables, benches, bookshelves, lying where they'd been dragged, pushed. Amateurish work, though. Might take a man a few hours to clear on his own, but Porett was a man with a horse.

* * *

Roween could feel the books and comspheres lingering at the edge of her perception. She sifted through the multitude of scents, sharpening her sense of magic, exercising it. She had to be able to concentrate, had to prepare herself, be ready for the moment when Conley's reflex burst through.

"Hot, I see what you mean, these books sort of nigger at you," echoed a voice down the corridor.

"Oh, it gets much worse than that, you wait," shouted back. "But when it happens, when you drive out all local magic, it's so joyous, so profound, you won't have experienced anything like it..."

"I'll throw a few light-primers, I think, steady my hand up. I don't want to make any mistakes when I finally use true magic."

"Good idea." *If it keeps you quiet.*

* * *

Porett found his thesis in a room full of other works on magic. No sign of Conley or her pal, though. He listened intently, his sound-set amplifying every noise that whispered through the dungeon. Footsteps, distant, and — what *was* that? He felt a surge of glee. Voices: women's voices.

* * *

Roween was leaning crouched against the wall now, holding her knees, head down. All her attention was directed to the detection of magic, to absorbing the sickly headiness that came from the bound-book room, waiting, agonised, for that flash of elation that would change

the world forever. Ten, fifteen minutes longer? She had to keep calm, be ready...

Another source! She became aware of it suddenly, like it tugged for recognition. Hard to tell its nature, but it was approaching, slow, cautious. Her first thoughts concerned her reflex — if it fired from here, she'd blank everything in with Conley. She had to move, get far enough away for safety!

Rolling to her feet, she looked back once at the door of the bound-book room, warily. Then, she set off down the corridor, towards the new magic.

Round the corner was an Eletic woman. Roween halted, heart pounding painfully in her chest. *Protocol, she's probably looking for something.* "Laegiala laeRoa-iin."

She smiled, shook her head.

"Hua caigiala na?"

The other woman kept on walking. "So you're Roween. Where's Conley?" A man's voice.

"Is — Porett?" *My god!* "Stay where you are. You know what I can do?"

"Oh, I know *exactly* what you can do," grim, "I've suffered *unimaginable* torment because of it! You can *undo* magic. But that isn't going to help you here, is it? Because frankly, Roween, I'm bigger than you, stronger than you, faster than you, and better armed than you." He rested his hand on the hilt of the Eletic sword slung from his belt. "Now take me to Conley."

Roween shrank back. "No — it's too late, you can't stop her."

Porett grabbed her arm before she could react, pulled her towards him, then pushed her full force against the wall. There was a strange-sounding click as the back of her head struck the granite; he let go, watched her crumple to the floor.

Down the passage, he could hear moaning; *Conley*, it had to be! He set off, running, turned the bend and saw a lamp-lit door at the end. *So that's where she —*

"Porett!" boomed a voice.

He stumbled to a halt, turned, looked back round the corner, saw a figure approaching. "I ought to check tags more often," grinned. "So: are you with me or against me?"

"I'm going to kill you."

Porett laughed as Sennary stepped closer. "Followed me, did you?" He began gesturing.

"No, too many roads to search for tracks. I made for the hill, figured it and the library both had to be central; found a horse, entrance, bookshelves, knew this was the place." He continued to advance, past the rags that were Roween, eyes on Porett's hand.

"Suppose you do kill me? I'll still live on! The com-3 is indestructible: you can't crush it, splinter it, even a diamond-tipped drill wouldn't — "

"Hell!" Sennary flicked a knife from his wristband, slit the buttons on his point armour, ripped it off his back an instant before it splashed into flames.

Porett shrugged. "You know your spells... But now you have no armour, whereas I'm still wearing mine." He reached inside his coat.

Sennary advanced, about four paces away.

Down the corridor, Conley was whimpering, sobbing.

Sennary's eyes narrowed. "You didn't *just* give me point armour..." He drew his sword, the breaking sword, leapt forward, swung it round, fast, low. Porett froze with the desperate realisation of what it was, what it would do, tried to jump back, too slow, it clipped his leg.

Nine discharges: one death.

Sennary stood over the body, turned it face-up. There was a small vial its right hand, death-gripped tight: Porett could have dropped it open, deliberately hadn't?

Sennary left it, sheathed his sword.

Behind, he heard movement, whining, like someone brought to consciousness with smelling salts. He turned.

"Well," she said, lurching to her feet, "you've found us. What are you going to do?"

His eyes widened at the horror of her. "Roween? Are you alright? I thought he'd..."

There was blood on her hand, more running down her neck. "What do you care? You've succeeded, haven't you? Conley doesn't know what the life she's doing; you've saved magic."

"What? No, Roween, you've got it wrong, I want magic to go as much as you do!"

She limped towards him, holding the back of her head. "Do you *mean* that?" For a moment, she looked hopeful, then it dropped. "Liar! You're Justan's man! You've killed Porett, now you're going to kill me, take Conley back to Ansle."

"Ansle's dead, Nolley did for him. Hot, Roween, you're hurt real bad..." He stepped towards her.

"Keep away!" she screamed.

He faltered at her sudden intensity. "But if you don't get that stitched — "

"Stay where you are!" She winced, touched her wound. "If you're true, you'll let me pass, go away someplace, far, just out of here."

"You're in no state to — "

"There isn't time! Conley's nearly — get back!"

He'd taken another step forward. "Here, let me look at that knock..."

"Please, no, not now, not now!"

"Don't be so — "

She drove her dagger into his chest. There was a brief moment when he stared at it, like it was someone else she'd stabbed, then he fell to his knees, swaying.

"Why?" croaked through searing pain.

"Because you love Conley," bitter, untrue.

Sennary twisted a smile. "You silly..." He lurched to one side, slumped against the wall.

Moments later, the corridor began to shudder. Roween sank beside Sennary, knees squelching in his blood, as the sudden, sickening stench of sorcery hit her mind. *A wallshaker?* But who? And the timing?

So hard to think, so dizzy, *can't let it kick my...* But she could still feel another source, immense, powerful, close by. *Porett's com-3!* She crawled to his body, grimacing with the effort of holding onto her reflex, head awl with distorted impressions, redness, pain, a convulsing world, remembrance. Pain...

The sphere was in a pouch, she didn't have to search, could feel it burning her senses near to ignition. She loosened the laces, scooped it out, but was clashed onto her face as the shaker quaked to a higher degree.

The image in the comsphere was speaking to her. "Do it, damn you! Before he brings down the walls and dooms me here forever!"

"Wh-who?" She tried to move as the library thundered about her, tasted blood in her mouth, a lip gash, swelling,

"Gigus! We figured everything, in seconds this shaker will force you to cut your anti, wash out the kit you've stashed to spark Conley. I'll be killed, but I'm killed already, and — "

Con! She staggered up, hurled the com-3 away down the corridor, lessened the squeeze on her mind.

Conley was crying, beating at the door. Roween's swirling thoughts suddenly focused. *Gods, she's about to get it!* She ran towards the pitiful wails, fearful, the rumbling masonry, injuries, love, murder forgotten. *She'll pulse, I have to be ready, have to prepare, have to be ready...*

She stopped, out of breath, felt the oppression of the sealed spellbooks. *Not yet, I have to be ready, ready with the spell, ready with the spell...*

The world seemed to stop. Roween's mind filled with terrible images — of flimsy dams bursting death, of buildings tumbling, of limbs withering to meat, of a million light-sets turning as one to darkness. *For love, what am I about to do?*

Conley screamed in torment.

The wash of counter-magic buoyed Roween with the most glorious sensation she'd ever felt...

Magic ceased to be.

* * *

Roween awoke, unsure how long she'd been out. The lump at the back of her head was raging throbs, and she felt so weak, so sick. Conley was wailing from inside the bound-book room.

"Con, are you alright?" She stood, wobbly, made her way towards the door.

"Ro? Oh Ro, let me out, please, Ro..."

She swallowed. "Sorry, Con, I can't do that."

Did she hear? "I'm dizzy, real dizzy, I don't feel well. There was this rush of pleasure, beauteous, but it was too much, I passed out." She sobbed. "I failed you, Ro, I'm sorry. I must have dreamed..."

"Con, I want you to understand, I — " *Damn! I can't just leave her in there!* "Wait, I'll get the key." She picked it up from where Conley had pushed it, turned it in the lock.

Conley was lying on the floor, the good Conley, the decent one, not the spoilt, arrogant Conley who she'd plotted to use, to humble, to break.

"I'm sorry, Ro, I muffed it." She pulled herself to her knees. "It was too strong, the reflex, I couldn't ride it." She peered at Roween, fuzzily. "Hot, Ro, what happened to you?"

"Don't worry, Con," said through tears, "you did enough. I cast the final spell myself, magic's gone forever."

"*You* cast it, Ro? But I thought you..." She felt so giddy.

"I was *always* going to cast it, Con, it's what I planned for. I spent four years working up to it, thinking about it, gearing myself for it. I didn't know the kind of person you'd turn out to be, Con, I thought you'd be, well, like you were at first. I *had* to cast it myself, don't you see? I couldn't trust it to you, I had to be sure, had to cast it myself, *had* to."

Conley tried to stand, fell back onto her hands. "Gods, I feel so woolly..."

"The true magic spell, the one to end it all, I couldn't know how it would smell, so I had to pick a trigger that would definitely be good, lessen the effect if the other was bad, my own

reflex might kill it. So I chose as my trigger the best smell I knew, a wipe reflex."

Conley didn't say anything, just tried to stand.

Roween offered her a hand, hauled her up. "Only I needn't have worried: when I did cast the final spell it was divine, so clear, pure, but strong, too strong to bear, it stunned us. It wasn't your *reflex* did that, it was my *spell*."

Conley had difficulty standing. "I wanted to keep my promise, Ro, I wanted to fix your eyes. I was going to, when I had the power, before I cast out magic, but I was exhausted, I couldn't do it, I just fainted, and now magic's gone and I've let you down..."

"Con, Con, you did all you had to. I set you up, I didn't have any choice, do you understand? I needed to scent antimagic, a first use, unfettered, maximum strength. Anyone's would have done, but I wanted to use yours, because" *life, it sounds so hollow*, "you stole my ideas." She knuckled a tearful eye. "Please, Con, forgive me, I had to do it, there was no other way..."

Conley's eyes flared, wild, then suddenly lost all emotion, immediate, like how Chenii-Imor did it. "What happened," she said, calm, rational, "is that although the intensity of my reflex knocked me out, I still obtained the power to use true magic. I applied it to destroy itself from within a dream, while unconscious."

Roween felt strangely afraid, relaxed her supportive hold on Conley's arm.

The one-time mage nodded, walked unsteadily down the corridor, away.

Chapter 89

Castle Whiting
Flostevol
Davia

24|4|98

Dr Roenna of Vasnau,
Room 6c, Hotel Tol Savna,
224-226, Sapphire Square,
West Fall,
Taltu,
Estavia.

Dearest Roenna,

Many thanks for your recent letter. Taltu sounds a truly beautiful city, and I simply must visit it myself some day. I've heard that the bookshops on the Heavenly Course are stocked with wonderfully old first editions, but I guess they're very expensive. Still, no-one's going to mind a little wishful browsing!

I'm glad to hear that you are well. Is it really two months since your stay with us ended? Not much has happened hereabouts since then, except for Flostevol's Spring fair (at which we were guests of honour). Some of the singing was of excellent quality, but the closing ceremony was hopeless; these old-style fireworks just aren't as special as the magic ones I remember from my childhood. I suppose I only have myself to blame!

Remember how I envied you your trip to Elet? Well, soon I hope to be undertaking a little foreign travel of my own! Nothing too exhausting, just a fortnight or so in Prydec (we're setting up a new Soat office), but it'll be a pleasant break nonetheless. I'll be taking my son Maedregh with me, and staying for a few days in Cala at my father's. I'll pass on your regards, and tell him how you're getting along — he always likes to hear news of his "favourite academic"!

We're still very busy here, of course. The new Eletic presses went live last month, and immediately made an enormous impact — they're twenty to thirty times faster than the Akrean machines we'd been using! We won't be able to organise any interest groups for some time yet, unfortunately — we don't have the distribution network fully in place or tested. We're also having difficulty finding a reliable supplier of the continuous paper we need, but we've written to a Northic development agency which might be able to put us in touch with some suitable mills.

We're hoping that by this time next year we'll have a pilot scheme installed in Vadessa. If that works out, then within five years we'll have similar local nets in major cities throughout the eastern world, and perhaps even some degree of cross-net interaction. Realistically, I doubt we'll ever match the large-scale sophistication of the Eletic system, but I suppose we can always dream!

Back to your letter...

I hadn't heard about Elidia Scribe, no, but since the Elets were fully behind her claim, her eventual success in the High Court was something I rather expected — not that she didn't deserve to win, of course. I believe this judgement makes her the seventeenth-largest landowner in Estavia (well, someone has to be!). When the Crown holdings are removed from trust and placed on the market, we may acquire some property there ourselves as a long-term investment. Land values are set to rise over the next few years as the economy recovers, and we ought to make a good return if we wait until, say, 1815 before we resell.

Incidentally, I understand that rulings made in the Estavian High Court can now be cited as legal precedents in Murak. This means that the validity of Lord Porett's will must also be accepted in the *Cala* Court of Probate. Young Elidia is about to become an

extraordinarily wealthy woman! Buy shares in Hease and Eller's — satisfying her appetite for the latest in high fashion will easily double their turnover!

The Eletic summaries you sent me were exceptionally interesting. How did you come by them? I don't doubt that the moderators know they went missing, but I disagree with your suggestion that you were used merely as a conduit, a means to deliver to me the full facts of Justan's supposed rehabilitation. That he convinced the Elets that the best way to keep down his kingdom was to allow him to continue as its leader, I'd already surmised. True, I was completely unaware of Countess Nolley's suicide; I knew that the Elets would want her neutralised before they consented to Justan's remaining as king, but I hadn't even considered that she would willingly remove herself in such a complete fashion! Like everyone else, I'd just assumed she fled to Chaïen after Cala fell. It seems she was far more loyal to her monarch than any of us had credited.

However, although I can believe that the Elets might have felt confident that they could trust us with this sensitive information, the biograph:foreign:Justan:predictive entry that mentioned "extended tenure" is something else entirely. I *can* explain that choice of phrase, yes, but it is not something I would ever dare put in a letter. If you can't endure the long wait until next we meet, I suggest you read back through the biograph:foreign:Justan archives at some stage during your stay in Liagh Na Laerich. Prepare to be very surprised...

I have another favour to ask of you. As you'll have already noticed, most former Followers of the Message have adopted the Vitalist variant of their faith, awaiting the appearance of the Messenger Redeemer. I am perplexed as to why the Elets are condoning this, and would much appreciate it if you could make enquiries once you have access to (I guess) warfare:plans:20.

As you've probably heard, the Elet-sponsored Davian Assembly has finalised our new constitution, and we'll have our first election towards the end of the year (the exact date has yet to be fixed). Although he has experience of democracy, and is highly regarded in and around our local constituency, my stubborn husband is not considering standing for parliament. In order to achieve high office, he would need to align himself with a major political grouping — something which he absolutely refuses to do, for reasons I cannot divine. I have tried to convince him that entering into such alliances is sometimes justified if the consequences of not doing so are even less desirable than those of so doing, but I have met with little success in this endeavour. As you know, your cousin can be infuriatingly principled at times! Had I been born in Davia, I might have contemplated a parliamentary career myself, but alas, foreigners are barred from candidature.

I shall end this letter with a request concerning a matter of some importance to me. When you departed on your journey to Liagh Na Laerich, I entrusted you with a letter for Conley of Malith, and a locket for her containing a recent miniature portrait of Maedregh. I have since received correspondence from my friend Ihann, and it seems that Conley is shortly to change address. She still lives in Bridges, but she has left the school and is now working as a private tutor. The demand to learn Eletic is high, and she has many well-to-do students. Consequently, she hopes to move to more comfortable accommodation sometime in the next month or so, but where, exactly, Ihann does not yet know. I suggest that when your ship docks in Bridges, you go immediately to his surgery and present his secretary with the note of introduction I gave you. Ihann will by then be appraised of Conley's new whereabouts, and be better able to gauge the likelihood that she will receive you.

Ihann tells me that Conley still takes regular doses of the drug 'Bliss', a fact it distresses me deeply to learn. I feel so responsible for her sadness, her dejection. I shall never be rid of the fearful guilt I carry in my heart, nor cease to mourn the friend that I destroyed. The real magic of our existence has always been, and will always be, what goes on in our heads, yet for Conley I broke even the joy of that. I don't expect she'll care to read my letter, but perhaps she'll accept the locket. If the detail is too fine for her to see, please tell that my son has his father's eyes; it's most important that she knows.

Well, the courier is waiting, and if you're to receive this note before you leave for Trilith I really must put down my pen! Write to me from Seesel if you can. Oh, and don't forget to look out for a copy of "Hua Laegiala Na?", by Nuagh Casii — I shall be expecting a present upon your return!

Your dear friend,

Roweena,

The Lady Sennary of Castle Whiting.