

A Promising Career

A Story of Maiyim

By

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Foreword

The idea for the following story came in an odd manner for me, at least. I'll admit to being somewhat lazy. At least I try not to make extra work for myself without good cause. So when I got to the end of *The Staff of Aritos* and noticed I'd unintentionally left a fairly obvious loose end, I had a choice. I could go back and write a paragraph or so and tie that end up or I could let the matter extend into the next novel of the series, *The Tears of Methis*.

I thought about that for a while. A single paragraph could do the trick, but it seemed a little too pat. However, the next story takes place several years after the last. Worse, when I looked at what was planned, there was no place for the character involved to fit in there either. It was too minor a matter and would be too removed in time from the second book. Neither choice had much appeal.

Then two other possibilities crossed my mind. The first was to let the whole matter slide and leave it as a mystery that was never resolved. That happens in real life all the time, but that seemed like sloppy writing and it was such an unimportant matter in the scheme of the series, it was hardly worth making a mystery of, but I still could not get myself to write that one paragraph. Finally the solution became obvious; write another story.

That, of course, does nothing for my claim of laziness, but there you are. Once I had decided on doing it the hard way, the rest was obvious. I had the perfect character already in line (Countess Ksanya) and a story in which to set her and in telling that story I could settle that one little matter from *The Staff of Aritos*. It's not one of the main stories, just a side note to the rest of the series, so a minor detail could take on greater significance in what felt a bit more natural.

For anyone interested in continuity, this story takes place soon after the last chapter of *The Staff of*

*Aritos* , but well before the epilogue.

As always, this book really is offered to you free. However, if after reading it you feel it was worth a dollar or two, rather than sending it to me, why not make a donation to the Greater New Bedford Women's Center whose mission is to affirm the choices and independence of all women of all cultures in Greater New Bedford and to build support for action toward a healthy violence-free community. Contact them via their website: <http://www.gnbwc.org>

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A Promising Career

One

"Be careful what you wish for," I told myself out loud. It was hardly the first time I had done so and the fact that I was talking to myself was a clear sign of my frustration. I was not quite under lock and key. I was free to come and go from the Granomish embassy in Randona if I so desired, but where could I go? I was here to serve as deputy ambassador, but my new boss was far too reactionary to accept a woman in a position of such responsibility.

At least I thought that was the problem. In honesty it could be that my reputation had preceded me once again. I made some mistakes when I was still in school a few years ago. What kid doesn't? But as a member of the Royal Family of Granom, I had far less leeway to do so than most students. The tabloids would hardly have been interested in my foolish behavior if I were the daughter of a carpenter, would they?

Well, getting drunk at a party or two was practically expected, even of a royal, but I was silly enough to think I could tease the tabloid reporters. Those men and women have no sense of humor and thought I really was the wild child I was pretending to be.

I'm not stupid; I figured out my mistake pretty darned quickly, but by then it was too late and I was their favorite party girl. The cameras followed me everywhere, just hoping for yet another embarrassing picture.

Why they thought it was such a scandal that I visited a topless beach in Bellinen, I will never know. It would have been more of a scandal had I kept myself covered. Certainly the Orenta would never have understood, not the kids my age, anyway. Nearly all the beaches there are topless these days and I was just one of hundreds of women of all species there. Why was my picture worth more that day than that of Senator Jonala?

Members of the royal family are taught from birth how to behave properly in almost any situation. The problem is behaving properly is no fun and everyone, especially children, deserve to have fun on a regular basis. So most of us rebel at one point or another; I'm just the one who got caught.

I looked around my suite. It was not a bad set of rooms, really. It was even larger than my quarters in the Wurra Palace. Actually the whole building looked a bit like the Wurra. Granomen have the reputation of being skilled and imaginative craftsmen, but not when building our embassies, it seems. They always look like the palace. Smaller, of course. The Wurra barely fits in Querna these days and we hardly need so much space in foreign capitals, but yes, so far as I'm aware all our embassies look like miniature versions of the Wurra Palace. I could be wrong. I've never been to Ellisto or the Wennil Archipelago. I know we don't have an embassy in Saindo. How could we? There isn't any government to send a representative to.

So here I was, stuck in a beautiful room, when I really wanted to get to work as deputy ambassador. Problem was, Baron Genrik Parrasov didn't believe a word from my mouth. I have never met a more conservative Granom in all my life and, considering who my family is, that's saying something.

"I cannot introduce you to the Royal Court of Emmine so soon, my lady," he had told me just this morning. "You do not yet have sufficient experience with human behavior. The Emmine court plays by different rules than those of Granom and you will need a lot of coaching before you can attend the court of King Hacon Ancel without fear of embarrassing Royal Granom."

I did not challenge him on that. In fact, I am rather proud of myself for holding my tongue considering word of my behavior in court back in Querna had gotten to Baron Genrik even before my plane had touched down at Jorric International Airport.

"We are sending you to Randona to act as deputy to our ambassador. He will be retiring in a year. So after suitable experience, if you are agreeable, we would assign his post to you," Ksaveras XI had told me.

I suppose I should have curtsied gracefully and murmured something along the lines of, "I will serve Your Majesty to the best of my abilities, sire," or some such. Instead I jumped to my feet and squealed, "Really?"

Then I threw my arms around him and hugged him. In court! Now that was embarrassing. It just was the sort of etiquette breach I had been taught to avoid. The entire court laughed at me, but Veras did not mind. He's my close cousin and we grew up together. He just chuckled and replied, "We'll take that as a yes."

If the king forgave my little lapse, shouldn't his ambassador do the same? But Genrik just pointed out that it was proof that I needed more training before I could serve Granom without threat of scandal. "You need to understand how humans think," Baron Genrik tells me repeatedly.

I think he's gone "native" after all these years in Randona. You will notice that I call him Baron Genrik. That's the official informal Granomish style of address - title and first name. I am generally called Countess Ksanya. The formal style of address is to use our entire names, but in Emmine the terms of address are different. Baron Genrik just as often refers to himself as Lord Parassov, which is the Emmine equivalent of his title and encourages friends to simply call him Parassov.

That, however, seems to be the greatest difference between our two peoples aside from the basic

differences of species. Most, although not all, citizens of Emmine are human. They are taller than we Granomen are and their skin colors range from light pink to black. Granomish skin is invariably chalk white and we are far more heavily built than they are. Even I seem quite muscular compared with a human woman and among Granomen I'm considered to be light-boned. However, the humans look like body-builders compared to the average Orente. They are much taller and thinner than the average human and their skin is almost always a rich dark brown, which looks quite becoming with their shiny black hair.

Oh, I've met a few Orenta with light brown and even blond hair, but while I was never rude enough to ask, I think they all bleached and dyed their hair. I'm sure they thought I did too, although I don't have to. Most Granomen have naturally dark brown hair, but mine is light brown. It is a legacy from my great-grandmother, although from what I've learned about genetics, there must have been a light-haired beauty somewhere on the other side of my family too as that color is determined by a rare recessive gene.

Human hair colors vary as widely as their skin colors do. I must say I'm particularly entranced by some of the red hair I've seen here. If I were to dye my hair, I might try putting a touch of red in it. It is very un-Granomish, but I think I might look good as a redhead.

Oh, listen to me going on about skin and hair colors! Trust me, I could have arrived with green hair and purple and pink polka-dotted skin and it would not have made a difference in how Baron Genrik treated me. Okay, it might have at that; I doubt he would have tolerated me as a jester. At least he has not refused my assignment outright. Well, he cannot without good cause. I am here by the King's command. Refusing to accept me at least on a trial basis would be treason.

So this is my trial. I'm back in school or I might as well be. He had a truckload of books delivered to my suite and I'm to read each and every one of them. They cover a multitude of subjects; human psychology, history, philosophy, law and those are the interesting topics. Some of them are so dry they would make the Great Desert of Ellisto look like an oasis and so far none of them have managed to refute what I already know after spending several weeks in the company of my human cousin, the Lady Oceanvine and her boyfriend, Journeyman Sextant. Except I don't think she's figured that part out yet. He certainly hasn't, but it's just a matter of time, I think.

Of course I've known Uncle Candle all my life and he's human too, though to tell you the truth, I've always thought he was part Granom. He has that sort of personality that just makes you think, "He's one of us," no matter who you are and what you look like. Besides, he's buddy-buddy with the Gods. They might have done something strange and unusual with him for all I know. It doesn't matter. Uncle Candle is my favorite older relative even if there is no direct relationship between us. Even Oceanvine is more closely related to me and then only because her great-grandmother adopted my great grandmother as her sister. It's not like different species can interbreed to produce fertile young. That's part of the definition of a species. See? I do remember what I learned in college! Anyway, Uncle Candle was apprenticed to Wizard Silverwind the Great and thought of him as a sort of father. But he thought of Silverwind's wife, also named Oceanvine, by the way, as more of a sister and she thought of him as another brother so she became "Auntie" to all of Candle's descendants, and he became "Uncle" to practically everyone on her side of the family.

I found myself wishing Oceanvine, the younger and current one that is, were here with me now. I acted as a guide to her during her first few weeks in Querna and I could really use someone to do the same for me here. These books were so confusing. Many of them disagreed with each other. The more I read them the more they invaded my dreams. I woke up almost screaming just last night because I had a nightmare in which the books started arguing with each other and wouldn't let me read them until they had sorted it all out between themselves.

In retrospect, I should have let them have at it. They were tearing pages out of each other and all I would have had to do is shovel up the shredded pages. That's not the way dreams work though, and at the time I was horribly concerned that they were destroying vital information I would need to pass my exams. What exams? Baron Genrik is not about to make me take a written final when I've read all this. I wonder if he had to read all these too. I doubt it. He's a man and much older than I am. He probably just arrived here one day, shook hands with his predecessor and took over. That's the usual way, I think. I know he had diplomatic training somewhere along the line, but so far as I know it was in Merinne and Rjalkatyp. This was his first posting to a predominantly human government.

I needed a guide and I really needed to get out of the gilded cage I had been installed in. Well, my keepers had left the door to the cage open; it was time to get out and see the city. I looked out the window to see dozens of human women wearing light blouses and miniskirts so I knew it must be warm outside. Still, I opened the door to my balcony and experienced it for myself. For an early autumn morning, it was still very much like summer. I couldn't see wearing a miniskirt, however. Never mind that it would not be appropriate for a deputy ambassador to wear such an extreme fashion. Minis just look silly on Granomish women. Besides, even Oceanvine doesn't wear skirts that short, although maybe this was the latest fashion. She had not been back in Randona in months. Still, I decided on a similar costume although the skirt was a more conservative length and I was glad to have thought to bring a few skirts. Current fashion in Querna was to wear dresses and that always seems so formal to me. Maybe that's why I've always enjoyed my trips to Bellinen. Nothing knocks the stuffiness out of you like wearing a sarong. Of course it took me several attempts to be able to do so unconsciously, and frankly if there's any get-up a female Granom looks sillier in than a miniskirt, it has got to be a sarong, but when in Merinne...

Then I slung a bag full of books over my shoulder and headed for the great outdoors. Even if my plan didn't work out, I could still find a nearby park bench to read on. I had a bit of trouble getting through the front doors when two of the embassy's guards thought I was supposed to be under house arrest. "No," I told them, carefully not adding, "you idiots." "I'm allowed to go outside unless you're worried I might get sunburnt."

"I'm sorry, my lady," one of them told me, "but I do have to verify that."

Once again I exercised self-restraint – so much for living up to my reputation – and kept my mouth shut. I was the king's cousin for the Gods' sakes. Why the heck would I have been sent to the other side of Maiyim just to be a prisoner? I sat down on a nearby chair and started reading an arid little treatise on Emmine dating customs. I think it had been written by a man who had never actually met a woman. I wonder what island he had grown up on. From the look of his writings it had to be one of the more isolated ones. Finally, Baron Genrik made a personal appearance.

"You want to go out?" he asked.

"I wasn't aware of being under orders to stay in the embassy," I replied evenly, "just that I was not being introduced to the Court of Emmine."

Genrik nodded. "True enough," he told me. "Have a nice day out."

"Thank you," I replied, unable to keep all the acid out of my voice. Then I thought of something else, "I'm not going to need your permission every time I leave this dump, am I?"

"Of course not, Madam," he replied.

“Madam?” I asked.

“That’s the Emmine term of address for a Countess,” Genrik informed me.

“It makes me sound like an old maid,” I opined.

“You may as well get used to it,” he retorted. “This isn’t Querna, you know.”

“No,” I laughed on my way out the door, “The water in my tub swirls out in the wrong direction for one thing.” I don’t know why I said that. It’s a fallacy that water swirls out of a basin in different directions depending on which side of the equator you are. Oh, yes, some basins have a naturally predisposition built in as to how water should drain out of them, but attributing it to one’s position relative to the equator is sheer bunk.

When I lived with my parents in Bellinen, they took me one vacation to the island of Thirdi. I forget the name of the town, but there among the various tourist traps was an enterprising Orente who, for a modest fee, would gladly demonstrate the direction in which water would swirl on different sides of the equator. He had painted a white line on the floor of his shop and told us it was the precise location of the equator. Actually, I later learned the actual equator was over a mile to the north.

Any, he would carry a small tub of water to the north side of the room and pull a plug from the bottom and sure the water would swirl out clockwise. Then he would walk to the south side and repeat the performance except the water would swirl out counter-clockwise. It was an almost convincing demonstration if you didn’t know better. When I got to prep school, though I learned where the gentleman got it all wrong.

First of all, the force he was demonstrating, called the Coriolis Force, does work, but usually only over rather large areas. It’s a very minute force and while I am reliably informed you can demonstrate it in a perfectly round basin, you also need to let the water in it rest for a week or more to insure there is no inherent motion in the liquid and then open a tiny hole in the bottom so that the water will drain out very slowly. The demonstration I saw used an oval-shaped pan.

Secondly, he got the directions wrong. It should have been counter-clockwise in the north and clockwise in the south. So how did he do it? Simple. It was all in how he turned to face his audience. Whichever way he spun around to face his audience would affect the way the water swirled out of the pan.

However, even though I knew better I went ahead and said it anyway. You’ll notice, however, that Baron Genrik didn’t correct me on it. He would have had he known.

It was really good to get out of the embassy. It’s not all that bad really; a little touch of home in an alien land, but I really wanted to get out and meet the local people, take in the sights of Randona and just get my new life started. Baron Genrik’s strict rules regarding my behavior in the embassy chafed badly and were more than a little insulting really. Did he really think I was still only eighteen years old?

I strolled through a nice little park just a few blocks from the embassy where nannies and mothers watched their children play on the swings and slides. It seemed just like similar parks in Querna to me. I made a mental note to come back here. It looked like a pleasant place to sit on the grass and read. Today I had other plans and continued on. Just outside the park I stumbled across a public phone booth, a seven-foot tall glass and steel cabinet. It occurred to me I ought to call ahead and a good thing I did

too. The woman I was planning to visit was not in her office this morning. I was able to leave a message at the main switchboard, but I was not yet ready to return to the embassy, so went back into the park and made another attempt to understand human behavior as presented in the books Baron Genrik insisted I read.

The more I read, the more confused I got. Had Genrik read any of these? I decided he probably had not. The psychology book mostly dealt with abnormality. I was fairly certain the Royal Court of Emmine was not a cleverly disguised sanatorium, in spite of allegations made by certain tabloid journalists. I specify the tabloids not because their Granomish colleagues had made me their favorite target but because from what I could discern, the more conventional media reserved accusations of that sort for the Parliament. Freedom of the Press, indeed! In Granom we also had an article in our constitution allowing free speech, but I'd never heard of a Granom taking it so far as to publicly insult his monarch.

I thought about that a bit as I returned to the park and sat down beneath a tall elm tree. Was this a real difference between humans and Granomen? Perhaps. It might just be one of those little things that did not really mean anything. I had to find out for certain. Certainly the psychology book was not going to tell me.

I looked through the books I had grabbed at random. The one on human dating was on the top of the stack. Did I want to date a human? Not hardly. I don't have anything against humans by a long shot; Cousin Oceanvine became my dearest friend in an amazingly short amount of time, but there's no sexual attraction between humans and Granomen. Maybe it's the wrong pheromones; different species and all that. Interspecies sex is very rare no matter what the reason. Interspecies love? Well, yes there is a bit of that. It's rare but there are some mixed marriages, but all the ones I'm aware of are based on friendship and intellectual companionship. One thing my Dad does not have to worry about is his daughter dating outside her species.

I tossed that book aside as possibly useless and the only reason I did not classify it as a definite waste of paper was that I had to admit I might be wrong about its accuracy. I finally decided the history book had the best chance of giving me some information I might find useful. At the very least, it would give me a human perspective on the events I had learned about in school.

I was particularly interested in this book's take on the Battle of Carlifa where Granomish and Orentan armies met for the final time before the Treaty of Sinid was signed. If I were to believe this account, most of the credit for the treaty went to the Wizard Crossreed, a human employed by the Orentans. The version I was taught gave equal credit to Master Swageblock, a Granomish mage. Well, it was Crossreed who invented the translocation spell, so perhaps he does deserve the lion's share, but Swageblock worked with him to keep the two generals locked up until they had managed to come to terms. Well, all that was a long time ago. Maybe none of the accounts are entirely accurate.

I looked up from the book to see a pair of human boys standing in front of me. They didn't say anything; they were just staring at me. "Yes?" I asked, with a bit of a grin on my face. I was rather amused and something about their stance suggested they had dared each other to approach the "strange lady." I half-expected them to suddenly bolt and run away as fast as they could.

"Are you a troll?" one of them finally asked me.

My first instinct was to merely nod and reply "Yup!" but it occurred to me that courtesy and manners were something that needed to be taught from the cradle and while I didn't take any personal offense from the question, the word "troll" is a very insulting term when applied to a Granom. "We prefer to be called Granomen," I corrected him gently and I decided that sounded horribly stuffy and added, "but,

yeah, that's right."

"See?" he said turning to his friend. "I told ya!"

"I'll bet you're going to tell me I talk funny too, huh?" I asked. The people of modern Maiyim spoke a common language for the most part, but the accents vary drastically from island to island. My own accent is considered genteel and educated in Querna. Cousin Oceanvine's accent, similarly considered in Randona, sounds strange and exotic to my ears although I flinch at the way she pronounces some words. I'm sure she feels the same. Both boys laughed at that. I took it as a "Yes." "So what are your names?" I asked. They told me and then I introduced myself, "I'm Ksanya."

"Nanny tells us we aren't supposed to call adults by their first names," one of them replied hesitantly.

"You're not supposed to talk to strangers either," I pointed out, "are you? Well, you see, actually I'm a countess and in Granom it is proper to call me by my first name so long as you include my title. Understand?" They nodded, but I could tell they were trying to be polite so I decided to continue my little lesson in court etiquette. I didn't know who these two were, they might well be noble for all I could tell.

"But what is your family name?" the other one asked.

"It doesn't come up very often, but I'm of the House of Granova, same as King Ksaveras, so I guess my full name would be Ksanya Renata Dorofea Petronelle Granova, but it's hard to say all that in a single breath, don't you think? Anyway unless I'm in court, I'm addressed as Countess Ksanya although my friends just call me Ksanya. Now if I were a countess of King Hacon Ancel's court, I would probably be called Countess Granova since here an earl or a countess is addressed by his or her county or, in some cases, family name. My county is a small and unnamed island in the Granom Archipelago because every county needs some land to go with it, but no one actually lives there and in fact it's a dry island."

"What's a dry island?" they asked.

"One without fresh water," I explained. "I'm not even sure it's entirely above water during a spring tide."

"How can it be a dry island if it's under water?" the first one of them asked, genuinely puzzled. I was spared having to try explaining that again when their nanny showed up just then.

"I hope they didn't bother you, Miss," she told me.

"Not at all," I laughed. "We were just having a little chat about court etiquette. See you around, guys."

"Bye bye, Countess Ksanya!" they told me.

"Countess?" the nanny asked, her eyes widening in surprise, I think. Maybe it wasn't all that common for noblewomen to hang out in the park here.

"An accident of birth, I assure you," I chuckled.

"Well," the nanny hemmed, "thank you again for not taking offense from the boys, Madam."

"I'm never going to get used to that title," I laughed and explained, "In Granom, it's 'my lady.'" I waved at the boys as they left and went back to my reading but after a few minutes I decided that my initial



opinions were correct. Humans and Granomen aren't all that different at all. I had no trouble imagining a pair of Granomish lads approaching Oceanvine in a park in Querna to ask her about being a human. She probably would have tried teaching them how to levitate a ball or something, but that's not among my talents. Just the opposite in fact.

I spent the next few hours alternating between reading and musing on Granomish-human similarities until the sun passed behind one of the taller city buildings and the air grew cool.

Two

"You had a call while you were out, my lady," Lorenia told me as I returned to my suite. Lorenia is a sweet young woman from Kif who seems to have assigned herself to me. She's not the only maid in the embassy but, so far as I'm aware, only Baron Genrik has regular personal servants here and those he brought from his own estate when he first came to Randona.

I don't know this for certain, but I think Lorenia decided that since I was a countess and technically ranked the baron, although that sort of thing these days only applies to the order in which we present ourselves in court, then I ought to have a lady's maid. I do admit it was a service to which I had become accustomed while living in the WurraPalace, but none of the three women assigned to me did so with the obvious willingness Lorenia did. Frankly, I think they took turns depending on who drew the short straw.

Cousin Oceanvine did not seem too comfortable being waited on and I got the impression that body servants were not as common in Emmine as they were in Granom. The embassy is officially Granomish territory and I suppose I could have brought servants with me, but, even before Vine had set the example for me, I was capable of dressing myself and a long handled brush is all I need to wash my own back, so I chose not to. I suspect Lorenia felt I had somehow been remiss and took it on herself to fill in where she perceived a need. To date, for example, I had only entered the kitchen twice because usually she was at my door each morning with a breakfast tray.

I made two mental notes; one to get Lorenia some sort of thank-you gift, and the second to not take her service for granted. I was fairly certain she had other responsibilities which might suffer if I were to start putting demands on her.

"Thank you, Lorenia," I replied, accepting the folded paper. "Oh, she called back!"

"Who did, my lady?" Lorenia asked with polite curiosity.

"A friend of a friend," I told her. "I called her from a pay phone a few hours ago, but she was out at the time. Hmm, according to this she'll be out again by now too, but she'll be in tomorrow morning and invites me to stop by for morning coffee. I should bring something. Is there a good bakery anywhere around here?"

"Yes, my lady," she replied instantly and gave me directions to a place that made Kif-style delicacies not too far from the embassy.

"Handy having a Granomish bakery so far from home," I mused.

"Not so unusual, my lady," she replied. "There's even a pub just up the street that serves *Margaalse* with real *kamo* biscuits. There are a few Granomen doing business here."

“*Realalse*?” I considered. “It’s been a while since I went to a pub. No, better not,” I decided. “I’m sort of on probation. Getting seen drinking in a pub probably would not uphold the honor of Royal Granom. There are a lot of Granomen here?”

“Not a lot, my lady,” Lorenia told me, “and most are citizens of Emmine, of course, but they are here and if you go to the neighborhood just north of the embassy, you would swear you were back in Querna. For a block or two anyway.”

“Interesting,” I admitted, “Given the state of affairs between Emmine and Granom I wouldn’t have thought there would be many Granomen in the capital.”

“Well, they are Emmine citizens, my lady,” Lorenia pointed out, “They have every right to be here. I think most of them come from other islands though and a fair number are from the Isle of Fire.”

“True,” I nodded, “but prejudices being what they are... Oh well, maybe I was wrong. That happens a lot, I fear, and our differences are mostly political, after all.”

“Yes, my lady,” she agreed.

I wondered if she was agreeing for politeness sake or if maybe I was actually right. I couldn’t think up a nice way of asking, but as it happened that’s what I hoped to find out over coffee and pastry.

I left the embassy early the next morning and managed to find Lorenia’s bakery on the second attempt. There were a few tables where customers, an even mix of humans and Granomen, sat enjoying their purchases. On another day I might have joined them, but I do have to watch what I eat. “New in the city, miss?” the man at the counter asked when it was my turn to order.

“Fairly,” I replied. It had been three weeks, but as it was only my second day out, it felt like I had just stepped off the plane.

“Found a permanent place to stay yet?” he asked, “If not, we have a board by the door with all sorts of messages including apartments for rent.”

I looked over without thinking and saw a corkboard covered with at least three layers of paper in most spots. Turning back, I smiled and replied I was staying at the embassy.

“Oh, so you’re a real Granom!” he chuckled.

“Why? Is that a costume you’re wearing?” I blurted out automatically. “Darned good if it is.”

Evidently it was the right thing to say. He started laughing and was quickly joined by several others within earshot. “I didn’t know anyone at the embassy had a sense of humor,” he admitted at last.

“Some do,” I replied, “but most keep them in glass jars on their desks.” That earned another round of laughter.

“So what happened?” one of the other customers asked. “Did your jar break?”

“Nah,” I laughed, “I don’t think they trust me with anything that can be made into a sharp object.”

I eventually ordered four open-faced pastries of a sort native to the island of Khordel and the baker insisted I take a full half dozen. "I wouldn't want you to lose your sweetness," he told me. I agreed, although he only charged me for the four I'd actually ordered. "Come back anytime!" he invited as I turned to leave.

"I will!" I promised.

My next step was slightly more difficult. Flagging down a taxi in Querna is no real challenge; they line up on every other street corner, fairly eager to catch a fare. In Randona the cabbies seemed to have the notion that they were doing their fares a favor to even be out on the streets. I watched a dozen such vehicles go past me without even slowing down. "Am I doing something wrong?" I asked a passerby finally.

"Only in expecting one of them to stop," she told me. "Most of their jobs seem to be from call-in customers."

"I need to call them first?" I asked.

"It would make it easier," she shrugged. "You might try catching one outside a large hotel, or if you aren't going too far, just take a bus. They're cheap and not too uncomfortable."

"A bus?" I mused. "That would work. But how do I know which one to take?"

"Well, where are you going?" she asked practically.

"The University," I replied.

"Which campus?"

"Uh?" I was stumped. I didn't realize the University at Randona had more than one campus. The ones in Querna and Merinne do not. Lamely, I pulled out the note I had received the evening before and showed her the address.

"Oh, the Milla Campus," she read. "That's the main one. Good. Just go down to the next block and take the Number Nine, Fifteen, or Twenty-two, The Milla Campus should be the third or fourth stop. Don't worry, you'll know it when you see it."

She was right, of course. I walked back toward the embassy and arrived just in time to meet the Number Twenty-two. Fumbling with pocket change, I managed to come up with something small enough to cover my fare and then I found a seat. That last was the easiest thing I'd done all morning. The bus was hardly full, but then it was only mid-morning and more people were still filtering into the city than out and I was definitely headed in the out-bound direction.

I never quite got out of the business center of the city, but sure enough when we reached the fourth stop, there was a clearing between clumps of skyscrapers and in that relative clearing stood the main campus of the University at Randona. I got off the bus along with several students and was about to ask for directions again when I saw the building I was looking for on the far side of a grassy quadrant. My directions were quite clear on that count, "Look for the Onestone Building." The letters on the sign on the building's side were clear even from this distance. I don't know why I expected it to be a small red brick, ivy-encrusted building with pretensions of looking like an old-fashioned castle. My own prejudices, I guess. No, this one was eight stories tall and made of steel and silvery-blue glass. Very modern-looking

really.

I entered the lobby and checked the office listings unnecessarily. I already knew I was headed for Office 712. It took forever for the elevator to arrive, but when it did I wondered why someone hadn't installed acceleration couches like the ethernauts use. It started and stopped that rapidly. Fearing for the fates of my pastry, I found my way to the right office and poked my head in the door.

"Countess Ksanya?" a serious-looking young human woman with short, sandy-colored hair asked. I say she was young, but actually she's two or three years older than I am. "I've been looking forward to meeting you. Please come in."

"Hi," I replied hesitantly. "You're Maia Denfirth, right?" She nodded. "Cousin Oceanvine said I ought to look you up."

"Yes," Maia nodded again, a polite smile on her face. "She did tell me to expect you. To tell the truth I expected to hear from you sooner, but I suppose life in the embassy is pretty hectic these days."

"Is it?" I asked without thinking. "Hard to tell from my vantage point."

"I thought you were the Deputy Ambassador?" Maia observed questioningly.

"Somewhat without portfolio, I'm afraid," I replied. "Well, that's not quite true. I have a very good portfolio, it just that I have not yet been allowed to present it,"

"The price of having a reputation," Maia commiserated. "Yes, I know. The Lady Oceanvine assured me none of it was true, but I have seen your picture in those horrid little newspapers they sell in the supermarkets."

"Vine was wrong," I replied honestly, "It was true once, very briefly, but I grew up. Too bad the reporters did not."

"Indeed," Maia chuckled. She had gone from businesslike to older sister so fast I hadn't even noticed the change. It was nice though. I wondered if it was a human thing or maybe an Emmine thing, since so far most of the people I'd met here had been quite friendly. "Well, let me make coffee and we can talk all about it, or whatever else you had on your mind." She accepted the pastry box from my hands and led me into a small conference room. "Oh, she prefers to be called Oceanvine, by the way. Our Oceanvine does not seem to like nicknames for some reason." She had been loading a coffeemaker of Emmine design. From the size of it, I think it could have served a small restaurant. Evidently it was attached to the water pipes in the building because after loading ground coffee in a paper filter all she had to do was flip a switch and hot water started flowing over and through the grounds.

"She told me to call her Vine," I replied carefully.

"Really? Good! Maybe she's finally starting to loosen up a bit. I love her dearly, but she does seem to be tightly strung at times."

"Uncle Candle has quite an office, doesn't he?" I remarked, mostly to change the subject.

"Oh yes!" Maia agreed. "It's not as large as the one he used in Sutheria, but since he is technically the head of the Magic Department, this is also the main office for the entire department."

“Looks small for a department office,” I commented. “Is it a large department?”

“No,” Maia chuckled. “Wizard Candle is the only full time faculty member in the department and he called in to announce he’d be spending this semester in Querna. Well, we only have five students even interested in the first year curriculum and the wizard was not going to teach either of the classes. He brought a couple of old masters out of retirement for that, although Oceanvine and Six were originally going to be teaching the lab sessions. I’ll run the lab sessions instead this semester. I’m not much of a mage, but I know more than the freshmen do.”

“Can I help?” I asked. I did not really need a job, but dealing with human students might help with my other problem.

“Oh? Are you a mage?” Maia asked.

“Just the opposite,” I snickered, “but if your students can perform when I’m around they’ll all be wizards one day.” Maia looked puzzled. “I’m a magic-null. I can nullify magic for several feet all around me. I’ve had a bit of training,” I continued and then realized I could tell Maia the full story. “It was Vine who got me started, but it was only after a few lessons with Methis that I was able to control the ability.” Methis is one of the younger gods of Maiyim. She’s quite keen on inspiring inventors, but I was a particular challenge for Her. She’d never tried to train a magic-null before.

“That’s impressive,” Maia agreed, “but I fear that’s more of a challenge than our students are up to at the moment.”

“That could be,” I agreed reluctantly. “So far only one mage has been able to perform while under the influence of my null-magic field.”

“Wizard Candle?” Maia asked.

I shook my head. “Oceanvine,” I told her with a smile. “Uncle Candle thinks it’s because we’ve spent enough time together that we’re in tune with each other.”

“Or maybe Vine just has a talent he doesn’t,” Maia replied with a twinkle in her eyes. She was probably right. “To tell you the truth, though, I never knew there was such a thing as a magic-null.”

“It’s a very rare condition,” I admitted, “although it seems to run here and there in my family. Well, royals have been inbreeding off and on for centuries so considering all the rare recessive traits I might have inherited, I got off pretty easy. Anyway, these days with so few mages there aren’t a lot of times when a magic-null might even discover his condition. I only did when I happened to hug Vine while she was levitating...”

“A hex nut around her head?” Maia asked knowingly. The coffee had stopped dripping and Maia got up to serve us. “I have a whole bowl of them on my desk, you know. I practice with them too.”

“Actually, I’ve never seen her do that with a hex nut,” I replied. “Queen Orya sent her a very large pearl as a gift. She felt the pearl would be more fitting for a noblewoman than a hexnut, and of course now she lets the pearl circle her head on formal occasions as if it were a tiara.” I accepted a cup from Maia. She makes great coffee, by the way.

“Only on formal occasions? And how many formal occasions does she have in Querna?” Maia asked.

I laughed, “Almost everything in the Wurra palace is a formal occasion. Dinner especially. Anyway the first time she sent the pearl into orbit around her head I hugged her in congratulations and it fell right down. It was only after Uncle Candle explained what had happened that I even knew what a magic-null was. After that I started exercising with Vine until my null-magic field expanded so much I started having trouble turning on the lights in my room. When the royal family was forced to flee the Wurra Palace, Uncle Candle spirited us out to Methis’ place on the other end of the island. I’m the only one in the family who figured out who She really is, though. Veras just thinks She’s a wizard friend of Candle’s.”

“That’s probably for the best,” Maia told me. “Methis likes Her privacy. If you think you’ve had trouble with the tabloids, imagine what She would go through if Her identity became known.”

“So you’ve met Her too?” I asked.

“Oh yes, a couple of times, and Aritos stops in regularly, at least when Candle is in town. He’s only been here once since graduation last spring,” Maia dropped her voice to a mere whisper. “He took me to lunch.”

“How about Nildar and Wenni?” I asked curiously.

“Not to talk to,” Maia admitted. “They were at Vine’s commencement ceremony and I saw them from a distance but had I not seen them standing next to Methis and Aritos I wouldn’t have known who they were. So, why are you really here?” she finally asked me.

“Having someone to chat with is important,” I replied.

“And all your friends are on the wrong side of the world,” Maia concluded.

“Most especially Vine,” I admitted. “She’s my dearest friend in all the world.”

“You practically just met,” Maia pointed out.

“So?” I countered.

“So how did you two get so close so fast?” Maia asked.

Now I knew why Vine had suggested I seek Maia out. The woman was amazingly observant and insightful. Was she psychic? Could a psychic read the mind of a magic-null? I wasn’t even sure I believed in psychic powers. There are a number of foundations in Querna supposedly studying such phenomena but as far as I know there’s not yet been so much as a shred of reproducible evidence that any such ability exists.

“I don’t really have a lot of close friends,” I admitted. “Most Granomish nobles think I’m strange. Can’t say I blame them. I sure gave them all something to talk about when I was younger. Was it really only three and a half years ago? Seems a lot longer. Well, the point is I grew up but I’m still the bad example mothers point to in order to keep their daughters in line.”

“And yet Ksaveras XI sent you to Emmine on a diplomatic mission,” Maia pointed out.

“When the tabloids find out, it may well be seen as final proof that Granom and Emmine are going to war,” I groaned.

“Oh, stop that!” Maia snapped at me. “You’re not a bad person.”

“How do you know?” I countered. “I’ve only been here a few minutes.”

“Oceanvine would never have befriended you if you were,” Maia told me confidently.

“Well you have me there,” I admitted.

“So why is she your best friend?” Maia pressed.

“We have a lot in common, you know,” I told her. “Our great-grandmothers adopted each other as sisters. I’m a countess, she’s the daughter of an earl. She helped me when I killed a woman during the fight to take back Granom from One Maiyim.” Maia, just sat there looking at me. She was not being judgmental, but I could see she was waiting for me to tell this in my own time. “I killed a woman and then made a joke about it.” There! I’d said it and waited for a reaction.

“Who?” she asked.

“She called herself Justice, but she was the lady wife of the one-time Lord President, Baron Kaspar Wallono. She was also a rogue mage and a leading member of One Maiyim in Granom, though this time around they were calling themselves the People’s Party, but I suppose you know all that.”

“It’s been in the news,” Maia told me dryly. “Actually, except for the successful rescue of the Gran 4 crew, the revolutions by the People’s Party on the Isle of Fire and Granom have been just about the only big news this past summer. What if you hadn’t killed her? What would have happened?”

“I don’t know,” I had to admit. “She and her husband, who was calling himself Wizard Victory by that time, were giving Uncle Candle and the others a hard time. Six had been thrown out a window at the top of the big tower. He caught himself before he hit the ground but I didn’t know it at the time. All I knew was he wasn’t in the tower room. Uncle Candle was on the floor gasping for breath and Vine was fighting both Justice and Victory on her own. They caught her up in some sort of binding ward and that’s when I struck. I had an old cavalry saber in my hand and I swung it as hard as I could at Justice’s neck. I think I was trying to chop her head off. That’s not as easy as the movies make it look.”

“I never thought it was,” Maia replied quietly.

“I wasn’t really thinking much at all,” I continued. “Justice had a ward up to protect herself, but my null-magic field shut that down. It took her a minute or so to bleed to death. By then, however, Victory was doing his best to kill me. Good thing he only used magic. I was too stunned by what I had just done to have stopped him had he just tried to throttle me.”

“What was the joke?” Maia asked.

“I told Victory ‘There ain’t no Justice,’” I replied.

She almost laughed, and then quickly brought her hand up to cover her mouth. “I’m sorry,” she told me, between bouts in which she struggled not to laugh. “I’m very sorry, but it is funny, at least if you didn’t have to actually live through it.”

I smiled and realized she was right. It had been funny. I think that’s why I felt so guilty about it. “It’s not nice to make jokes about someone you just killed.”

“Humor has always been a way of dealing with intense pain,” Maia replied.

“I wasn’t feeling anything just yet,” I told her.

“Yes, you were,” Maia corrected me. “You just didn’t know it. I understand Oceanvine made a joke just after she killed Adamant in Silamon.”

“Did she?” I asked.

“Yes,” Maia nodded. “She killed him by burning him to death and Wizard Candle complimented her with a ‘Well done.’ She turned on him and told him that better not be a pun.”

“Then what?” I asked sensing there had to be more to the story.

“Then she got sick for a while,” Maia shrugged.

“Maybe that’s why she rushed me off to a private room as soon as she could,” I commented. “She knew I needed to get away for a while, but she wouldn’t embarrass me by telling Veras that. Instead she told him she wasn’t feeling well and asked if it would be all right for me to help her find a place to rest for a few minutes.”

“He probably saw through the request,” Maia suggested.

“Maybe, but maybe not,” I replied. “Veras isn’t often given to subterfuge. He’s a fairly open and honest man.”

“Good qualities in a king, I think,” Maia replied. I nodded agreement. “So you stopped One Maiyim cold and saved the world. Doesn’t sound like too great a sin. I’m sure you’ll be forgiven in time.”

“Did we stop them cold?” I asked. “Some of them might have gotten away. There were quite a few people missing by the time we retook the city, a lot of them were probably killed in the fires, burned beyond recognition, but we know there was Senator Petrana Hawakamala from Rjalkatyp who left there for Querna just before everything started falling apart. She never turned up either.”

“She will eventually,” Maia assured me. “That sort always does.”

Three

I spent most of the day with Maia and we chatted the entire time except when she had to actually answer the phone, but with Uncle Candle out of town, that didn’t happen very often. Eventually she showed me the “nut bowl” on her desk. I don’t know how I missed it on the way in. She even levitated one around her head for a few minutes, Oceanvine-style. She was not capable of doing so when I exerted my null-magic field, but then I didn’t expect her to be able to. Cousin Oceanvine really is an extraordinary person – magic is just one example of that.

It was not until lunch that I finally got down to the real reason I had come to meet her. “I just don’t get these books I’m supposed to read,” I admitted. “According to them, I do everything wrong and should be insulting every human I meet merely by breathing.”



“Let’s see what you’ve got,” Maia suggested, reaching for my book bag. She opened the one on human dating and after a few moments started to giggle. Flipping back to the beginning of the book, though, she laughed and said, “Well here’s the problem. This book is nearly as old as both of us put together.”

“That might make a difference,” I allowed.

“A big difference,” Maia chuckled. “I’m not sure this information was accurate even back when it was written. It looks like the sort of thing parents would make their children read in the hopes they might actually behave this way socially, but almost no one ever does. Even the socially inept would never behave this woodenly.”

“I had wondered,” I replied. “Okay, so this tome is worthless.”

“Some museum might give you something for it,” Maia laughed.

“If you know such a museum,” I retorted, “I’ll be happy to donate it outright.”

“Are the others this old?” she asked me.

“I never thought to look,” I replied, wondering how I might have missed such a crucial point. I opened the history book and discovered it was over thirty years old and said as much.

“That’s probably all right in a history book, although our perspective on the past does seem to change each decade. This won’t give you our current view on past events, but I’m sure there are points of Emmine history it will open your eyes to. I wouldn’t place too much faith in that psychology book if I were you though.”

“Why not?” I asked. “I thought the author was considered one of the leading experts in the field.”

“He is,” Maia agreed, “or was about the time Candle was our age. This book’s a reprint of an old classic. There are some who still follow his work on the subject, but there are a lot of other theories that suggest he was incorrect on many issues. Face it, Psychology is nearly as complex as people are, but until it is exactly as complex as people are there are going to be inaccuracies. It’s not so much a science as it is a discipline; disciplines are studied with a scientific methodology, but results are not always reproducible, at least not yet.

“Besides,” she continued, “this is on abnormal psych. No matter what I have to say about the Parliament some days, you aren’t likely to find it of use.”

“That’s what I thought,” I admitted. “I just brought that one along because Baron Genrik keeps pushing it at me.”

“Well, push it back at him,” Maia told me. “His selections couldn’t have been more designed to cripple you as a diplomat if he had tried.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Before I came to work for Wizard Candle,” Maia told me, “I was in the secretarial pool of Government House in Silamon. I worked with a lot of different men and women, including visiting dignitaries, so yes, I think I have a slight understanding of the sort of information you need to know. Just between you and me,

if you know which fork to eat the sherbet with you'll be two steps ahead of most new diplomats."

"Start on the outside and work your way in," I replied remembering hours of etiquette training I had been forced to endure as a child. I was amazed to realize how much of it had actually sunk in.

"Exactly, and never wipe your nose on your sleeve," Maia added.

"Yuck," I retorted flatly.

"I'm a colonial girl," Maia shrugged. "Life's not as refined on the outer islands."

"You seem to have cleaned up well," I laughed.

"I wasn't particularly fond of having my knuckles rapped with a straightedge," Maia replied and I realized she wasn't joking.

"And I thought my upbringing was strict!" I commented. "So what do I do with all these books?"

"Donate them to a library," Maia suggested. "Hey! There's an idea. You can get more up-to-date literature from the University's library."

"Don't I have to be a student or a faculty member?" I asked.

"Or staff," Maia shrugged, "but I'm sure I can swing guest privileges for you. Visiting royalty and all that. I'm sure the dean will be thrilled to allow you to use the facilities. And if you really need to be on staff, I'll give you that job working in the lab with the apprentices after all. Like you said, if they can practice with you trying to block them, they'll all be wizards someday."

"Great!" I replied and meant it. "I don't know why Baron Genrik tells me humans are so different from Granomen, though. So far the only differences I've seen is that humans are a bit more open and friendly and informal, though I'm well used to informality. Veras and the rest of the family are very informal once we're not in court."

"Well, I imagine you'll notice some differences once you observe Parliament or the Emmine royal court," Maia told me, "but really, behavior in Randona is very formal compared to that in Silamon. Anyway, while King Hacon Ancel is a serious man, he is not so serious that he doesn't understand a joke when he hears one and wise enough to be able to recognize an unintentional gaff from an intended slight. It's too bad we can't just slip you into the palace for tea one afternoon. Well, I could actually..."

"No!" I blurted suddenly, causing heads in the University's cafeteria to turn our way. "Baron Genrik would have a seizure if I did that. I am under orders not to approach the palace until he decides I'm ready. If he hears I've broken that command, I'll be back in Querna on the very next flight. Could you really arrange that?"

"Maybe not," Maia shrugged. "Oceanvine is the one who gets all those invitations, but I've occasionally played secretary to her, although a college student does not normally have a secretary, you understand, but as a student of this department this office is where most of those invitations arrive. I have replied for her a couple times when the king thought to send a herald to get an instant reply."

"Strange thing to send a herald for," I remarked.

“Vine, in spite of being an earl’s daughter, did not have much experience in court a year ago,” she informed me. It was hard to imagine Vine being that unsure of herself. “And was hesitant to accept His Majesty’s invitations. She tended to put them off until the last minute in the hopes something else might come up. Of course, nothing ever did and she got over it after her second dinner at the palace, but the younger pursuivants know this office well. Now I think he still sends his invitations that way as a private joke between them.”

“If Veras sent a herald after me, it would probably be ‘cause I’d just insulted the prime minister or someone like that,” I remarked.

“You grew up in the court,” Maia pointed out.

“Yes and no,” I replied. “Dad’s the ambassador to Bellinen and I’ve spent as much time in Merinne as I have in Querna. That probably explains some of my weirdness.”

“Your perceived weirdness,” Maia corrected me. “Apart from your heavy accent, which I think is delightful by the way – I’m aware my pronunciations are so plebian – you don’t seem all that strange to me.”

I didn’t correct her notions about her accent. It was somewhat harsh to my ears, although I’ve heard far worse. “Okay, my perceived weirdness. The fact of the matter is I’m naturally slimmer than your average Granomish woman and my hair is lighter too. Not as light as Great-grandma’s, but still noticeably lighter than average. Some men think that makes me exotic, but I notice that most Granomish women avoid me like the plague.”

“Jealousy might be part of it,” Maia pointed out, “and, yes, I think your childhood in Merinne shows a bit too. You do act a bit more like an Orente than most Granomen I’ve met, and of course there’s your reputation. But don’t worry; I’m sure you’ll live it down in time.”

“Gee, thanks,” I laughed. I realized I had made friends with Maia almost as quickly as I had with Vine. Why can’t I do that so easily with Granomen?

Four

The next two weeks I spent as much time out of the embassy as I could. That was all for the best because the ambassador and I were getting along as negatively as Maia and I were bonding positively. Equal and opposite reactions? My old physics teacher might have been proud, but it wasn’t doing anything for my standing within the consulate. I must admit that as I got to feel more relaxed with the average human I encountered I got increasingly less tolerant of the way I was treated by Genrik and his people in the embassy.

I’m not proud of my behavior during that time either. I lost my temper on several occasions and was downright rude to His Excellency just as often, especially when the subject of my reading matter came up. It only hurt my case that I was ready to be allowed the responsibilities of my official post.

“How can I trust you to behave in the court of a foreign sovereign, when I cannot even trust you to behave here in the embassy?” Baron Genrik asked me innumerable times. I had a dozen ready answers for him and none of them endeared me to him. You can take that to the bank!

“If I let you loose in the court of Hacon Ancel, the slightest wrong word from you could result in war.” That was something else he told me more times than I care to recall. I seriously doubted that was true. From what Maia told me Hacon Ancel was a very wise man and easily capable of forgiving a verbal faux pas. A slip of the tongue cause a war? Only if that slip was something along the lines of “We will bury you!” A man as wise as the Emmine king was reputed to be would certainly understand an innocent mistake for what it was and while I might inadvertently put Granom at a disadvantage at the next trade talks, although I should hope I wouldn’t, I seriously doubt anything I would say could cause a war.

Actually, as I understand the Emmine political system, the king does not have the power to declare war any more. Isn’t that odd? I think it would take an act of Parliament or maybe both must agree on going to war. As Maia was so quick to point out, the books I’ve been reading are old and that particular point of law has been changed several times, but somehow I doubt the Parliament, once they had the power, would have simply relinquished it back again. Governments don’t do that sort of thing, just the opposite. Give them an inch of power and they want the whole nine yards and that is just to make a down payment on even more power.

I asked Maia about that, but she was only slightly better acquainted with Emmine politics than I was. Now had we been in Silamon she could have given me not only details but who to go to in order to get around someone else. The Sutherian Colonial Government, however, was not a carbon copy of the Emmine System and had been heavily modified to make up for the lack of an hereditary aristocracy.

I was fairly desperate to spend time outside the embassy since I was only getting myself into trouble there. About the only people who didn’t seem to hold any grudges against me, and in fact, never failed to greet me in a friendly and respectful manner, were the embassy servants. That was actually a good thing. Certainly they were nicer people than most of the political toadies of the diplomatic corps. If I had spent more time in the embassy it would have been in the kitchen where at least I could count on a friendly face to talk to, even if it would have mean peeling vegetables while we talked.

Maia’s office made a nice haven, but I started feeling guilty about taking up all her time, especially since we started having lunch and dinner together most days. So I took her up on her offer to get me guest privileges in the University library.

I love that library. The stacks of the public library in Querna were closed to the public. If you wanted a book, you had to submit a request on a paper form to one of the librarians, who would then go and find it for you. The stacks at the University at Querna were only open to graduate students and faculty. Undergrads had to go through the request submission routine there too. But in Randona, the University’s library was completely open. I was able to roam at will through the long aisles filled with books. It was almost as much fun as it had been delving through Methis’ personal library. She told me She owned every book ever published and I know She had a fair number that hadn’t been yet, but somehow Her library looked smaller. I doubt I saw all there was to it while I was there. For one thing I was not Her only guest so I’m sure She went to some pains to make Her place look normal. Some day I’d like to go back there and see what it looks like when She isn’t trying to act ordinary.

So the University library, even though it contained fewer books, actually felt much larger and I had hours of fun just exploring the five floors filled to the brim with books. Even better was that most people there were so wrapped up in their own studies that it was assumed I was just another student working on her thesis. By the time I was done I probably could have written one on student studying habits.

Then one day, while absorbing a dry, but highly recommended history on the foundation of Sutheria, I spotted a familiar piece of jewelry. I always have had a tendency to peek at other people’s rings. One’s choice of a ring often says something. Sometimes the message is simply, “Married,” but even the choice

of wedding ring can be interesting. Am I being nosy? I don't think so. Why wear an ornament of any sort if you don't want people to see it?

The ring I saw that day, however, made my blood run cold. I must have noticed it out of the corner of my eye without even realizing it, because I suddenly looked out of my book and whipped my head around to get a better look. When I did however, I wished I'd never seen the foul thing. A lot of rings just like it surfaced in Querna after the revolution failed. My cousin, the king, didn't want to let them become collectors' items, especially since Uncle Candle had informed him that some of them were enchanted to be able to cast spells. So they were rounded up. I must say Veras put a high enough bounty on the things that I doubt many people failed to turn them in for the cash.

To the casual observer they were heavy gold rings with a stylized breaking wave symbol on top. There was blue enamel inset on either side of the gold line that formed the wave. Perhaps it was the combination of blue and gold that had caught my attention. The rings in Querna had not yet been destroyed by the time I left Querna, but I know Uncle Candle had promised to take care of that chore so I was certain this wasn't one of that lot.

The ring wearer was a tall human man with only a little hair along the sides of his head, but with a large bushy gray mustache which pretty much dominated his face. It wasn't a look that appealed to me in the least, but then Granomish men can't grow such a thick mustache and if they wear facial hair at all it usually manifests in the form of a full beard. I didn't know who the man was, but I knew by the ring he was a member of the One Maiyim organization. I also knew I suddenly had a new research project.

One Maiyim started out before even Uncle Candle was born. In the beginning it was dedicated to uniting all of Maiyim in peace and mutual cooperation between the intelligent species. It also had an ecological agenda that was decades ahead of its time. Sadly, the movement was subverted a generation later when the leaders decided that mages were the leading cause of Maiyim's ecological problems. That was fairly ironic considering the founders were the leading mages of the day.

It was only sometime later that the motive behind that new agenda came to light. The movement had been hijacked by a secret inner circle, many of whom were rogue mages – mages who used their talents illegally. I asked Uncle Candle about that. It doesn't merely mean they used levitation to commit bank robberies or pick pockets, but practiced the more advanced spells without a license. Back when general practice mages were plentiful, there were laws that required students of magic not to practice the more advanced forms without proper supervision by a master or wizard. Some of the mages of One Maiyim did have University degrees, but most were taught entirely in secret.

Uncle Candle tells me they learned a few tricks he is still trying to figure out and one of them involved the storing of a spell within those rings. Another is storing spells of cooperative magic, a very high level of spell, in those rings. I didn't know what, if anything, was stored in that chunk of gold and enamel in front of me, but I knew I had to find out who this man was.

The One Maiyim organization had been outlawed and its leaders were under death sentences all over civilized Maiyim after the ultimate goal of the inner circle became apparent. That shouldn't have been much of a surprise to anyone, of course. It doesn't matter if you live in a monarchy, a federal republic or even the town hall-like organization of the Wennil Archipelago, governments just don't appreciate efforts to supplant them. It sounds horribly melodramatic for anyone who wasn't actually caught up in the events of the day, but they really wanted to take over the world.

Uncle Candle, along with the Wizards Silverwind, the first Oceanvine and Doctor Southgate, foiled attempts by One Maiyim in all three major archipelagos and it was thought by some that One Maiyim had

been destroyed because it was decades before they were heard from again. However, a year ago, One Maiyim reappeared in the guise of one Terabawa Grovinsk, a Granom thought to have come from the Isle of Fire and who called himself Adamant. He had learned how to create volcanos and was trying to do just that in the city of Silamon. He was stopped by my cousin, the second Oceanvine along with Uncle Candle and Sir Sextant. Hopefully Adamant never got around to teaching that volcano trick to anyone else, although what the mages of One Maiyim did next may have been even nastier.

They resurrected an old enslavement charm known as the Hook and combined it with the most powerful curse ever known. Then they formed a new political party, the People's Party, in both Granom and on the Isle of Fire. They tried ousting the legitimate governments of both nations and nearly succeeded. I'm still getting over that, in fact. I did not much like having a price on my head simply because of being related to the king, but I suppose it turned out all right in the end.

I watched the man with the One Maiyim ring as he made his way through the library. You might have thought that a lone Granom in a city full of humans couldn't have stood out more if she were wearing an illuminated gown, but like I said; in the library everyone was too concerned with their own research. Oh, I'm sure some bored students might have sat at their tables and watched me for a few minutes at a time, but I'm really not all that interesting to look at; not for human men anyway. So I was able to follow the man around the library without being noticed.

I wasn't sure how stealthy I could be once he finally left the building, but he was oblivious to my presence and I was able to follow him into the Political Sciences building until he entered a classroom and began to lecture. I made a note of the room number and rushed over to Maia's office to see if she could figure out who he was, based on who was supposed to be teaching in the room at this time.

"I should be able to," Maia replied, "though I don't have a class list for the entire University. Let me give the Dean's office a call."

She picked up the phone while I stepped into the next room to help myself to a cup of coffee. It was mid-afternoon and I knew she normally took a break around this time, so I filled a cup for her as well, mixing in a spoonful of sugar and a dollop of cream in hers. She was just hanging up when I returned to the front office and placed her coffee in front of her.

"Thanks, Ksanya," she told me. That was another thing that endeared me to her almost from the start. I only had to ask her to call me by my unadorned name once and she stopped calling me "Madam" or "Countess" or "my lady." "Sharla thought it was odd I was asking," Maia told me. "I thought I was going to have to claim Wizard Candle had asked and that might have gotten her wondering why he'd care considering he's still in Querna. Anyway, the man you saw is Doctor Phillip Tall. Now would you like to tell me why you needed to know?"

"Oh, it's something of concern to Royal Granom," I replied. It wasn't that I did not trust Maia, but I didn't want to drag her into this if I could avoid it. It was not the wisest decision I'd ever made, but at the time I really did think it was of more interest to Granom than it would be to Maia. The man was wanted in my kingdom simply for having worn that ring, or at least he would be if I could prove it was more than just a pretty bauble, and in spite of cold relations, there was still an extradition treaty between Granom and Emmine. That I even thought we'd be able to extradite only showed how little I knew at that point, but it's the way I was thinking at the time.

My main thought was to get back to the embassy, because it seemed to me that Baron Genrik would be interested in finding an enemy of the king. I couldn't have been more wrong. "We are not in Granom, Countess," Genrik told me coolly. "It would be very inappropriate for us to interfere in a matter of

Emmine security.”

“Shouldn’t we at least notify His Emmine Majesty’s security people then?” I asked. “I should think they would appreciate the tip.”

“From Granom, Countess?” Genrik countered. “You may be getting along with your human friend over at the University, but she is hardly typical of the King and Parlliamment of Emmine.” I briefly wondered how he knew about Maia, then realized he really hadn’t trusted me out in the city. How many of his spies had been following me? I suppose one would have been more than sufficient. It’s not like I was making a secret of where I went. “In fact,” he continued, “if we were to inform them of the existence of this man, they would probably ignore it anyway. Granom and Emmine are not on friendly terms. I thought you would have known that by now. Anything we do is suspect.”

“That’s because we’re doing a lot of suspicious things,” I snapped back at him. “If you’re spying on me, I’m sure you’re spying on Emmine as well. Picked up any good secrets lately?” That last was delivered in a particularly scornful tone of voice.

“Why not? They’re spying on us as well,” he countered. “Our phones are tapped. We’re surrounded by tall buildings from which any number of remote listening devices could be used.”

“What are we doing here that’s so sensitive?” I demanded. “Negotiating trade deals with Emmine? What’s so secret about that? They see every offer we make them.”

“Do they, Countess?” Genrik replied and suddenly I wondered just what sorts of negotiations he was into. More than his portfolio called for, I’m sure. Did my parents engage in this sort of thing in Merinne? Somehow I didn’t think so. Perhaps a few private agreements with the representatives of the other nations, that’s normal enough, but would it be important enough for Emmine to violate the sovereignty of Granomish territory? Well, we weren’t on friendly terms and several times in the past ten years we’d come rather close to war.

The most recent incident involved a proposed military base in the colonies of Methis’ Chain. Ksaveras was only regent at the time, with his father on his death bed, and Veras made the mistake of sending the materials to build a second space launch facility, but Emmine interpreted it as an aggressive act. Can’t blame them too much. Even our own people were not overwhelmingly in favor of a second space facility and those rockets could just as easily be inter-archipelago ballistic missiles. Had we been on friendlier terms with Emmine, nothing might have come of it, but they protested the move and started making threatening gestures of their own, like moving their navy into position as though they were about to invade our colonies. This of course was an insult to Ksaveras, who was too young and inexperienced to know when to listen to his more hawkish advisors and when to tell them to put a sock in it. He refused to back down and of course Emmine couldn’t. Finally the Orenta stepped in and smoothed it all over, but I still remember the daily air-raid drills I had to endure in school. I thought we had all learned better since then, but I guess Genrik was still fighting that battle, or maybe I was the one in the wrong. I didn’t think so at the time, but now I wonder if I should have kept my mouth shut.

I didn’t though. “Oh, that’s just evil,” I told the baron. “One Maiyim is outlawed by every major government on Maiyim. That includes Emmine. Maybe they won’t trust the source, but I’m sure they’ll investigate the matter anyway. If you like I can find a way to leak the accusation to them so it won’t officially have come from us.” I was fairly sure Maia would be glad to make a call on my behalf.

“You will do no such thing,” Genrik forbid me.

I really should have kept my mouth shut, but, “I certainly will,” I shouted back. “Just watch me!”

I didn’t quite make it to the front door. Four embassy guardsmen surrounded me as I sought to leave the building and firmly escorted me back to my suite. Genrik was there to make sure I was locked in safe and sound. “You can’t do this!” I told him angrily.

“I am the voice of His Majesty in all matters that concern this embassy,” he informed me coldly. “I certainly can. Now you will wait in your rooms until morning when I will see you to the airport and aboard the first jet back to Querna. You may consider your diplomatic career at an end, not that it really started,” he added as he walked away and I was directed back into my room.

I didn’t resist. The guards would have just picked me up and carried me in anyway. I had more dignity than that, after all. I heard the door close behind me, followed a few minutes later by the sounds of someone installing a bolt from the outside. Now that was the final indignity! I think that, angry as I was, I would have gone quietly back to Granom at that point had they not decided to physically lock me up in my own room. Wouldn’t guards at the door have been enough?

I fumed and even screamed a few times in my frustration as I tried to think of a means of escape. At least I did not start throwing things. After a while I got very quiet in the hopes that my guards might get curious as to what I was up to, but while they may or may not have been curious, my door was never unlocked. I tried the phone, but it had been disconnected so I looked out my window. I still had a balcony, but it overlooked a city sidewalk. Even if I tried to jump down from there the drop would have been hazardous to my health. Landing on a paved sidewalk could have killed me and would have at least left me with some broken bones. And while if I survived I might have gotten as far as the hospital, it would not have been under my own power.

Finally I gave up. I shouldn’t have; help was literally around the corner. No sooner had I flung myself down on my bed than I became aware that someone was in the room with me. “Can I get you anything, my lady?” I heard Lorenia ask.

“How about a cake with a file in it?” I suggested as I sat back up again.

“A cake with... why?” she asked.

“Isn’t that what you’re supposed to send prisoners?” I countered. “It’s what they do in the movies.”

“I doubt there’s much you can file your way out of in here, my lady,” Lorenia replied sensibly, “and the cake would probably taste better without it.”

“Probably,” I agreed, smiling for the first time in hours. “I’m sorry you got trapped in here with me, though. I guess I was too self-absorbed to notice you were here before.”

“Oh, we’re not trapped in here, my lady” she told me earnestly. “I came in by the servants’ entrance.”

“What?” I asked. “Where?”

She showed me a section of the wall in my sitting room that would swing open into a passage if she pressed a hidden release switch in the panel next to it. It was an old style of mechanism that relied on magic. I wasn’t certain if I could have activated it. Being a magic-null does have its drawbacks, but this time it did not really matter. “Where does this passage go, Lorenia?” I asked



“Everywhere, my lady,” she responded. “We thought you might want to stretch your legs.”

“Who is we?”

“Come on, you’ll see,” Lorenia told me.

I shrugged and followed her, thinking to myself the old line, *I don’t seem to have any other pressing engagements*. Walking between the walls is not as simple as it sounds, at least not in the embassy. The whole point of a secret passage is to keep it secret, and the embassy servants kept these very secret indeed if Genrik thought I was secured in my room. However, such a hidden walkway has to be narrow. If you make it too wide even an oblivious soul will notice what thick walls all the rooms have and no room needs that much insulation, not even the scientific base on Robander’s Island. Lorenia must have been well-practiced at negotiating the maze of secret corridors if she thought she would be able to bring me a pot of tea or something to eat through them. I’m fairly thin for a Granom, but Lorenia is normal that way with all the curves where they ought to be, of course, but she’s still somewhat wider than I am. I wondered how she managed to glide through the tight passage with such ease.

We eventually came out in the embassy kitchen. It was late at night, but the cook was still there and stirring up something in a large stew pot. “You’ve haven’t eaten, my lady,” she observed. “You’re wasting away.” I laughed. The words reminded me a bit of my grandmother. I was still smiling as she put a large bowl of the seafood stew she was working on in front of me. Lorenia brought me a spoon and a cup of tea.

I hadn’t been hungry until that moment, but I realized they were right. I had missed a meal and I was ravenous. “So what?” I asked when I was halfway through the bowl. It was a very large bowl and I wasn’t sure I could finish it especially with the bread that seemed to have materialized from the oven while I was eating. “Did you bust me out just to give me a good meal? And it is good, by the way. Why don’t you serve stuff like this at the official dinners?”

“His lordship,” the cook replied with a hint of disapproval, “Does not like this sort of thing. ‘Peasant food,’ he calls it.”

I looked at what was left of my bowl and saw shrimp, scallops, fish, mussels and lobster in it along with the vegetables. “If peasants eat this well every day, I don’t want to be royal,” I told them. “Too bad I’ll be leaving in the morning.”

“You should be leaving as soon as you finish that, my lady,” Lorenia told me.

“Hmm?” I mumbled around a chunk of potato. “I thought I wasn’t being escorted to the airport until dawn.”

“I thought you did not want to leave, my lady,” Lorenia countered.

“Well, I don’t but...” I trailed off and saw what she was getting at. “Oh yeah. You can sneak me out of the embassy?”

“Certainly, my lady,” Lorenia replied. “Servants come and go all the time. You’ll have to wear something a bit plainer, though.”

“I can manage that,” I laughed, “but why are you two helping me?”

“Not just the two of us, my lady,” Cook informed me. “All the servants are on your side.” I was about to ask, “Why?” again, but she continued on. “We like you better than his lordship, for one thing. Also you are royal, he isn’t.”

“You’re much nicer to us than he is too,” Lorenia put in.

“When I let you serve me and lay out my clothes?” I asked, trying to figure out what I might have done to befriend these people. It wasn’t that I did not want them as friends, I did, but considering my native ability to make a bad impression, what had I done right this time?

“Bringing you your meals and laying out your clothing is my job, my lady,” Lorenia told me simply. “It’s no big deal. Everyone has a job and that’s part of mine. But you remember to say ‘please’ and ‘thank you.’ I know it’s not a big thing, but the point is you treat us like people.”

“You are people,” I replied unthinkingly, “aren’t you?”

She smiled. “He doesn’t think so. He’s harsh and demanding.”

“I’ve noticed,” I interrupted, but she just kept going.

“Nothing is ever good enough for him and his staff members are not much better. One of them tried to hit me last week.” I made a mental note to find out who that had been. Abuse should never be tolerated and even if I were sent back to Querna in disgrace, I’d still have more than enough influence to weed that particular bully out of the diplomatic service.

“Well, not all of them are like that,” Cook added, “but most of them. Some of them are worse though. But you never forget that we’re people too. We know you were sent here to replace his lordship and that’s just fine with us, but if you go home now that’s all over, so we’re with you, every one of us.”

Tears came to my eyes. I don’t normally command loyalty, at least I had not up until then and I wasn’t used to the intense feeling of warmth it gave me. All I could say was, “Thank you,” before the tears started flowing. A few minutes and a towel to wipe my eyes with later, however, it was time for me to leave.

Cook, obviously one of the leaders of the servant underground at the embassy, decided I did not really need to change into simpler clothing, but she did put a long, plain coat over my shoulders. “Just liking me still doesn’t seem like a strong enough reason for helping like this,” I commented as I slipped my arms into the sleeves.

“I was a young girl working in the Wurra kitchen fifty years ago,” Cook told me. “One Maiyim tried to kill King Ksaveras IX and Queen Petronelle, two very nice people, like you.” She smiled at me. It was a little embarrassing, but it also made me feel good about myself for a change. “I never forgave them for that and if they’re still around, the least I can do is to help you deal with them.”

“Then I guess it’s up to me to deal with them,” I nodded, suddenly realizing I was in completely over my head. Didn’t these people realize that? It took four accomplished mages and as many soldiers, sailors and marines as we could scrape up to counter the revolution in Querna. Here it was just me.

I finally wondered how any of the servants even knew why I had been locked in my room. How did they know I was concerned about One Maiyim? Then I realized almost all my recent conversations with Baron Genrik had been in the corridors of the embassy. He had rarely met with me in private so I’m sure

someone overheard almost everything we had said.

What would Uncle Candle do? Or Oceanvine and Sextant? They'd go out and confront this Doctor Tall, of course. If I do that I'd better not forget to pack a slingshot. It's not like I can use wards and fireballs like Vine can. Besides, for all I knew, that ring could be something he found in his grandfather's sock drawer and thought looked nice.

"Where are you going to go now?" Lorenia asked me.

"I think it will be best you don't know," I decided, "but don't worry. I have at least one good friend in Randona,"

Five

"Ksanya?" Maia asked through bleary eyes. I felt horrible for waking her up before the sun had even begun to lighten the sky, but it was a cold night and I didn't know where else I could go. Later, I learned about all-night movie theaters

"Hi, I'm on the run. Got a place a fugitive can crash?" I asked.

"Crash?" Maia asked, awash to the term.

"I thought that's what the kids were calling it," I explained. "Maybe it's just Orentan slang. I need a place to stay. Otherwise I'll have to return to Querna."

"Does this have something to do with Doctor Tall?" Maia asked while stepping aside to let me in. I liked Maia's apartment. She had taken a collection of three rooms and turned it into a cozy den that just shouted "Welcome!" to anyone lucky enough to visit.

"Well, he didn't come after me with an axe," I replied, "but it all started with him." I went on to tell her how I'd gotten myself in trouble and everything else that had happened since we'd seen each other a few hours earlier.

"I could have saved you the trouble," she sighed when I was done. "Diplomats are naturally cautious in matters involving local law enforcement unless their own immunity is being exercised, that is. Well, you're welcome to stay here as long as you like. We probably ought to call Wizard Candle and ask his advice. I'd let you into his faculty house, but his colleagues would probably notice and get suspicious."

"I don't want to call Uncle Candle," I told her, "at least not yet. We don't really know why Doctor Tall wears that ring. It could be entirely innocent and I want to know more before I start seeing anarchists under my bed."

"You're sleeping on the couch," Maia pointed out.

"In the closet, then," I retorted. "In the woodshed if you really prefer."

"Who still has a woodshed?" Maia asked, laughter roaring just behind her eyes. I knew of quite a few isolated islands where wood was still used for heat in the winter and I imagine there are just as many in Emmine. "If we're not going to make calls to Querna, we'll need to check up on Doctor Tall ourselves,"

Maia pointed out.

“Later,” I yawned. “I’ve been up all night and that couch of yours is calling out a siren song I can’t resist.”

“I hope you fit comfortably on it,” Maia fretted.

“Hey,” I protested. “I’m a lot shorter than you and I’m not all that wide. I’ll fit.”

Maia was gone by the time I finally woke up. I don’t normally sleep in but today was an understandable exception. It was almost Noon by the time I opened my eyes. I cleaned up and was about to scoot off to Maia’s office but she had pinned a note on the door telling me to stay put until she got back. Good advice. I was fairly sure Baron Genrik would have people out looking for me and since he knew about my trips to Uncle Candle’s office it was all too possible there was someone keeping it under surveillance. Then I realized that it was no secret who I’d been meeting with at that office. Was anyone watching this apartment? Possible. I didn’t even dare look out the windows. No wonder Maia had left the blinds down when she left this morning, or maybe she just did it because I was still sleeping. I wanted to look outside and was afraid that I might tip off anyone watching the place.

Diplomatic immunity is an odd thing and anyone attached to an embassy is exempt from prosecution under the local laws. That isn’t supposed to mean you can get away with murder, just that a host nation could not try a diplomatic representative on trumped up charges. In practice, I see far too many of the junior diplomatic staff scoffing at the parking laws, smuggling contraband in diplomatic pouches and the like.

Dad got tired of the petty crimes in the embassy in Merinne at one point and sent three quarters of his staff packing just after replacing the entire embassy guard contingent. They might have been immune from Bellinen law, but Dad made sure they were tried in Granom. Unfortunately Baron Genrik had never happened to do likewise here and some of his juniors were arrogant beyond belief. I’d been making plans to purge the staff, but knew that was a year away yet. Meanwhile I knew full well that if anyone was watching this apartment it would only be a matter of time before he decided to just break in. The action would get him expelled from Emmine, but I was fairly certain that finding me would earn him a hearty recommendation to another posting by Genrik.

Depending on the severity of the crime I might do the same thing, but in my case I’d recommend a posting to Saindo where if a diplomat stepped over the line it was all too likely a local would just shoot him. Of course I don’t think we keep a regular embassy in Saindo. There’s no central government to send a diplomat to.

I hadn’t brought my book bag with me when I left the embassy. I had not brought anything but the clothes on my back. I didn’t really care to read those books anymore and hadn’t in weeks, but without them I was going to be terminally bored. Maia had a small black and white television, which I turned on for the news. At least I wasn’t being featured. I didn’t look forward to the afternoon soaps though.

I was spared from that when Maia showed up just as the news was over. “I expected you’d still be sleeping,” she told me.

“I’m surprised I slept so long,” I laughed. “What’s it like on the outside?”

“A bit chilly,” Maia told me, “and I think it’s going to rain this afternoon.”

“Not quite what I meant,” I admitted. “Is there anyone watching the apartment?”

“Might be,” she replied. “I’ve definitely grown a tail. Granomen make lousy spies in Emmine, you know. I had no trouble spotting the one following me. He was the only one wearing a gray pin-striped suit on campus as if being a Granom didn’t make him stand out enough in this crowd.”

“Hey,” I shrugged. “We’re shorter than you. We can hide in a crowd.”

“You’re slim and trim compared to most of your countrymen,” she chuckled mercilessly. “This isn’t like a cartoon, you know. A twenty inch-wide person can’t hide behind a three inch-wide tree.”

“The average Granom is only a few inches wider than the average human,” I pointed out.

“True enough,” Maia agreed, “but I still had no trouble spotting the man who followed me.”

“Did you try to lose him?” I asked.

“I’m not crazy,” Maia shook her head. “The smartest thing to do was to behave as though nothing was out of the ordinary. They’d be able to find out where I live easily enough. Better to let them think I haven’t seen you.”

“I imagine one will actually interrogate you,” I warned her.

“One already has,” Maia confirmed. “Oh and someone named Lorenia called looking for you. Can she be trusted?”

“Implicitly, I’m sure,” I nodded, “but I wouldn’t be surprised if the line was being tapped.”

“Not my line,” Maia laughed. “Wizard Candle did something to the phones in the office. I’m not sure what it was, but he’s certain there’s no way in the world anyone can monitor his line. He calls Methis all the time, remember, and there have been times when an unauthorized call to anywhere in Granom would have been suspect.”

“He’s a hero of all three major archipelagos,” I told her. “I’m sure he could get clearance to call anywhere he wished to.”

“You’re right,” Maia nodded, “but he doesn’t care to ask for a right he already sees as his.”

“I’m with him,” I agreed. “We shouldn’t have to. I could tell the embassy guards where to get off, but that probably wouldn’t help. I’m fairly certain they would just drag me back and throw me on the next flight to Querna. With a bit of luck Veras would side with me, but I’m a big girl and I’d rather not have to go crying to the king even if he is almost like a second brother.”

“Well, I figured you would be going crazy with boredom, so I brought you a couple of magazines from the office. Sorry, I don’t have many books around the place but if you have any preferences I can bring some back tonight. There’s a used book store on the way home.”

“A good mystery, perhaps,” I shrugged.

“Something to get in the mood?” Maia smiled. “I also asked a friend in the Dean’s office for a copy of Doctor Tall’s *curriculum vita*. She’s copying it and promised to send it to me by interoffice courier.

You may be stuck in here, but we can still start checking up on him.”

“Good idea,” I agreed, “but I don’t know how long they’ll keep watching you.”

“Let them watch,” Maia laughed challengingly. “I’ll give them until tomorrow noontime to back off, then I’ll call in a complaint. The University Police take their jobs even more seriously than the city cops.”

“But diplomatic immunity...” I began.

“They won’t care,” Maia explained. “Anyone threatening campus security will be arrested. When it turns out they’ve arrested a nominal diplomat, that diplomat will be escorted directly to that same flight you’re trying to avoid.”

“Ooh, I like it,” I smiled. “The ambassador could protest to King Hacon Ancel, but having to admit members of his embassy had been accused of stalking a citizen of Emmine would embarrass him more than the actions of your campus cops would embarrass Emmine.”

“Exactly,” Maia nodded. “Your Baron Genrik could claim it was a wrongful arrest, but he would still have to explain why his people were in a position to be arrested anyway and no matter what explanation he chose, he sure wouldn’t want to lead with the truth.”

“I’m glad you’re on my side,” I told her. I meant every word of it too. Maia had a creatively devious mind, no doubt honed by her years in the Sutherian government offices. If she had been working against me, I’d have woken up in the WurraPalace before I even knew I’d left Randona.

When she returned to her office a few minutes later, I was feeling much better. I considered reading the magazines she had brought me, but I spotted a manuscript copy of a paper Oceanvine had written on her bookshelf and started reading that. I was amazed at my cousin’s grasp of magic. As far as I could tell she had written it after only having become a practicing mage for a few weeks and yet I was still challenged to understand everything she wrote. Maia had a few books on general magic and they helped with some of the jargon, but Vine’s grasp of magic theory even from the start was simply impressive.

I was still reading her paper for the second time when Maia came home for the evening.

Six

Maia reappeared with a copy of Doctor Tall’s resume late that afternoon. She still had a Granom following her, but she was not bothered. It bothered me though, but I continued to stay away from windows and we were both careful not to turn on two lights at the same time. From the outside it did not look as though Maia had a guest. I hope not, anyway.

“I was going to call out for pizza,” Maia admitted, “but while I will often do just that and put the extra away for another day, they don’t know it, so ordering enough food for two might make our peeping tom suspicious. Don’t worry though. If he’s still there in the morning I guarantee he won’t be by noon time.”

“We’d still better let a day or two go by before I emerge from this cocoon,” I replied.

“Oh yes, having his spy arrested will probably make your Baron Genrik send another one or two to watch me,” Maia admitted, “This will take a few days, I think, but after the first arrest I can complain

about any subsequent stalkers the second time I see them.”

Maia was a whiz in the kitchen and I learned a few things about cooking while I was with her. It was amazingly easy considering I’d never had to cook for myself before, and fun too. Of course, I was only learning to make simple dishes – ones that could be done quickly and on the spur of the moment - but you have to start somewhere. I did feel bad about not being able to help with the shopping that first week though.

After dinner we started pouring over Tall’s *scurriculum vitae*. I was impressed by the length until I realized it included every paper he had ever written, every conference he’d participated in and a lot of other details academics value, but which I wouldn’t have normally have been interested in wading through. “This isn’t up-to-date,” Maia warned me. “It’s a copy of the one he submitted ten years ago when he was applying for his chair.”

“That may be enough,” I shrugged and continued the read. We handed pages off to each other, taking notes and comparing them from time to time.

“Well, I wasn’t expecting this resume to tell us exactly when he joined an illegal and secret society,” Maia sighed two hours later.

“But it does,” I corrected her. “Right here on page three. About eighteen years ago, he stopped writing about the effects of government supplements for large corporations and started writing a long series of papers detailing ecological programs and their political ramifications both on Emmine and a proposed unified world government. That covers two of the main tenets of One Maiyim’s original public goals. They no longer mean what they used to, of course, but I understand those were the same arguments that brought the People’s Party to power in Granom and the Isle of Fire. They seem to be fairly effective in generating new members too. You know that could be why Tall has stayed at University. Where better to recruit idealistic new members?”

“Could be,” Maia agreed. “We have crazier interest groups on campus than that. But the students are also fairly well informed especially compared to the general public. How could One Maiyim get them to join up happily after what happened in Silamon, Rjalkatyp and Querna?”

“There are always excuses,” I told her. “Ways of turning something around to your advantage.”

“It’s called lying,” Maia retorted flatly.

“See?” I nodded. “You do understand! Vine tells me the favorite excuse is that the people who caused the trouble were not sanctioned by the main organization; that they were rogue members acting on their own. Besides it was the People’s Party, not One Maiyim, in the recent cases this summer that the newspapers reported. Officially there was no connection between the illicit One Maiyim and the one-time sanctioned People’s Party. Is there any chance of getting a list of his more recent accomplishments?”

“I hope to have a longer list tomorrow,” Maia replied. This was the easy one to send me, but the University has kept track of all the grant money students and faculty have managed to bring in during their tenures. It just isn’t in a nice neat set of type-written pages.”

It took all week to gather the available facts, but then I wasn’t going anywhere. Maia made good on her threat the next day and her tail was replaced in time for the evening commute. She complained about the second one as well, and he too was whisked off to wherever bad people go when caught by campus security. The third time was the charm, however, and to my surprise it turned out to be the same man as

had been watching her the first time around.

I'd been worrying about her becoming the little girl who cried "Wolf," but when the first man, who was supposed to have been deported, reappeared, the Campus Security Force went through the official and highly public channels to make sure it did not happen again. According to the news, Baron Genrik received a reprimanding protest from the king and, I suspect, a threat to be expelled from Emmine himself if he didn't keep his people on a leash. Genrik, for his part, could hardly admit that a member of the House of Granova was running around Randona at will. The repercussions of my not having paid an official visit to King Hacon Ancel's court yet would have been complex and long-lived. That's the sort of thing I should have done my first day or two in Randona, but Genrik had held off until he felt he could trust me as his deputy. It was a diplomatic error and just goes to show that even a career diplomat can make a major blunder.

So, unable to explain why he had men spying on Wizard Candle's secretary, Genrik had to back down and behave himself as every foreign Granom in Randona, and sadly quite a few of the native ones as well, found themselves closely watched for weeks to come.

I was uncharacteristically cautious and waited several more days before venturing out of Maia's apartment, but she managed to entice me with a country ride in a shiny, red sports car with only two seats. "This is yours?" I asked, wondering why I hadn't seen it before.

"No," she laughed. "It belongs to your Uncle Candle. He asked me to take it out once a week or so to keep it running properly. Let's go on a picnic!"

"Sounds fun," I opined, "but shouldn't we be back on Doctor Tall's case now that we can start watching him?"

"On a weekend?" Maia countered. "We'd stick out as much as your ambassador's boys did. We'll take up the chase tomorrow."

"What if he only communicates with his One Maiyim colleagues on the weekends?" I asked even as I eagerly got into the car. It felt odd getting in on the right side without a steering wheel in front of me, but Emmine traffic flows on the opposite side of the road from the way it does in Bellinen and Granom, so the cars are mirror imaged from one I might have driven at home. I'm not sure how that developed, but it did. I guess it doesn't matter so long as everyone stays on their own side of the road.

"By next weekend we'll know his habits well enough maybe to risk it. We need to find places from which to watch him unobserved," Maia pointed out. "Right now, you just need to get a few lungs full of fresh smog."

Well at least she did not say "fresh air." Neither Randona nor Querna can be cited for their excellent air quality, There is too much industry near both cities for that. It's part of why One Maiyim can still get recruits, I fear. However, the air was far cleaner and sweeter two hours south of the city when she stopped in the foothills of a mountain range. It was a picnic area in one of Emmine's national parks. We were surrounded by the widest and tallest trees I have ever seen. One had even been carved out so that a narrow, one-lane road had been built through it although it must have been done decades ago because it was too narrow for modern cars and was closed to traffic now anyway. Although we did get out and walk through it. I was amazed at the number of growth rings inside and soon realized these were not fast-growing trees. They were thousands of years old! Absolutely amazing. I wondered why I had not heard of them before. Even if they weren't a natural wonder of Granom, it's the sort of thing young Granomish children should learn about.



The day was pleasant; I'll give it that. We sat and chatted in the shade of the monumental trees, we hiked for a while along one of the marked trails and met two men from Kornedd who had come north to do pretty much the same things we were doing. Throughout it all, however, I was aching to get back to Randona and start investigating Doctor Phillip Tall. I will admit, however, that the real highlight of the day was when I got to drive on the way back. Uncle Candle had great taste in cars!

Most of the undercover work fell to me, but that was fair, I thought. Maia had office hours to keep even if Uncle Candle was thousands of miles away and now that it was relatively safe for me to be out and about once more, I needed to do something constructive.

Doctor Tall, it turned out, had a fairly set routine on the week days, which involved classes, office hours of his own and time he spent in the library. That suited me just fine as it gave me an excuse to continue my own studies. I could hardly camp out in the Political Sciences Building and while I was tempted to just walk into his office and introduce myself, I couldn't think up a plausible reason for doing so. Too bad. If he became used to seeing me there, I could watch him all the more closely.

It might have been helpful if I could have tapped his phone line, but I didn't have the resources to do so, and it would have made me feel dirty even if I had. Even a crazed maniac bent on taking over the world deserves some privacy, I thought. And as crazed maniacs went, Doctor Tall seemed fairly normal. Of course isn't that what you usually hear after someone like that is caught. "He was always so quiet; kept to himself..."

Actually, Phillip Tall was not especially quiet nor did he seem to be keeping to himself. And after several days of staying on campus, he finally broke his routine and started walking into Randona's business district with me in hot pursuit. I didn't manage to find where he was going, however, because in my eagerness to follow him, I ran headlong into a pair of embassy guards.

Seven

"Walking openly in public like this is foolish of you, Countess," one of the guards told me tightly.

"Yes, my lady," the other chimed in. "You could get caught by the embassy guardsmen."

They weren't trying to take me by the arm and force me back to the embassy, but I also couldn't tell from their voices whether they were being serious, ironic or both. "As I seem to have been just now," I sighed. "So now what?"

"It's tea time," the first guard told me. It was two fifteen in the afternoon. That wasn't tea time on anyone's clock, but he indicated we should go into a nearby café and I began to relax once more. If they had been planning to drag me back kicking and screaming (and yes, I would have both kicked and screamed) I seriously doubted they would have stopped off for a snack along the way. These guys are professionals. They don't make mistakes like that.

"Why so it is," I agreed, making a show of looking at my wrist watch.

In spite of the pretense of tea time, we all ordered coffee and I managed a first sip before commenting, "You got me dead to rights here. Why are we on a coffee break?"

“We’ve been spending a lot of time looking for you, my lady,” the second guard replied.

“I imagine Baron Genrik – or is he Lord Parrasov this week? – ordered that,” I commented.

“He did, but that is not the reason we wanted to find you, Countess,” the first one told me. “Cook was worried about you. All the servants have been spending their free time trying to find you, in fact.”

“And where do you come in?” I asked. “Aren’t you supposed to be taking orders from the ambassador?”

“In theory,” the first guard told me, “if he so orders, yes. But perhaps you don’t realize where the first loyalty of every soldier in the Royal Army of Granom lies. We are sworn to protect His Majesty as well as the other members of the royal family. You’re royal. Baron Genrik is not. If he were to directly order us to arrest you, we might have to do that, he is the voice of the king here, but in practice most of us remember our oaths require us to be loyal to you.”

“Not all of us can be trusted though,” the second one chimed in, “so don’t go running up to just any off-duty Granomish soldier and expect his help. Only about half of us are definitely with you. The rest we either don’t know about for sure or are definitely in the Baron’s camp.”

“Understandable,” I replied as that soaked in. “As you said, Genrik is the king’s representative, it’s reasonable that a soldier would consider it in keeping with his oath to be utterly loyal to him. I must expect loyalties to be conflicted. Had I not been a member of the royal family, I doubt we would be having this conversation right now.”

“True enough, Countess,” the first one nodded. “had you not been a royal, His Excellency would not have felt threatened by you.”

“By me?” I responded. “But I was on my best behavior when I first got here. I was doing everything I could to get along with him.”

“And that’s where you went wrong, my lady,” the second told me. “You do have a little bit of a reputation problem, you know.”

“You know,” I echoed, “I do believe I’ve heard something about it once or twice. But I was behaving!”

“And I doubt he could credit his eyes,” the second guard chuckled. “He kept expecting you to go nude sunbathing on a public beach or pub crawling in the red-light district.”

“I’ve only gone topless once and that was in Bellinen where it would have been more scandalous if I hadn’t,” I shot back. “And I haven’t gone pub-crawling in years and then only in the bars near the University. The tabloids made more of that than was there.”

“I believe you, my lady,” he responded. “The trouble is, His Excellency did not.”

“Well, I do have a lot to live down,” I admitted, “but only if you include the fictitious stories that have been in the tabloids for the last three years. I’ve been a good girl at least that long.”

“Ah, Countess,” the first guard laughed, “but you’re too good a target for them. You’re beautiful, charming, intelligent and have or at least had a wild streak for them to exploit. Except for that last you are very much the ideal Granomish woman.”

“I am?” If I’d been human I would have blushed. As it was, I’m sure my skin went translucent at the compliment. “I’m too thin and my hair isn’t a normal color.”

“That just makes you exotic,” he laughed. “And if there’s anyone a tabloid reader wants to see cut down it’s someone who seems ideal.”

“Well, that might explain why my portrait can still be seen at every supermarket checkout in Querna,” I sighed. “I would try binge eating, but I don’t really like over-eating. But that still brings us back to my original question; now what?”

“Well, it’s like I said, Countess,” the first guard told me. “Cook is worried and so is your maid, Lorenia.” Lorenia was my maid? Well, I guess she was, but I didn’t think I was her sole responsibility. “We should find a way for them to contact you safely. Also, unless you’re planning to go home we need a way to rehabilitate you with His Excellency.”

“Have Lorenia contact Maia from any public phone,” I decided. “She’s been calling every other day anyway. I’ll just let Maia know she should accept the calls. But make sure she’s out of the embassy when she does call. A lot of out-going calls are monitored, you know.”

“We know,” they chorused.

“As to rehabilitating me, I’m not sure that’s possible, but if I’d been planning to just go back to Querna, I would have done so already. I’m here right now because I don’t want to just go home, but in the meantime I have another problem.” I told them about Doctor Tall and his probable connections to One Maiyim and the now outlawed People’s Party. They promised to keep an eye on Doctor Tall for me and to report via Lorenia anything they learned.

“Be careful,” I warned them. “Granomen stand out in a human crowd. That’s how Maia spotted the men who were following her.”

“Those were the baron’s juniors,” the first guard assured me. “They’re about as subtle as a hammer. Don’t worry, we know how to recon.”

I felt much better as I headed back toward Maia’s office. I still didn’t know which guards or precisely how many of them I could count on from the embassy, but at least I knew some would help me so long as I did not ask them to rise up in open rebellion. Well, I wasn’t planning that in any case. Genrik was mostly doing things the way they had always worked for him and he had been an excellent ambassador for Granom throughout his career. Hearing about my reputation all over again reminded me he might well think he was protecting the interests of Royal Granom from me. If the rumors had been true, he would have been right.

The two guards, whose names I learned were Ranolof and Stanislav were planning to recruit other like-minded men from within their ranks to help on surveillance. I hoped they really knew what they were doing, but the incident also told me I was far too recognizable.

Maia and I considered that and eventually decided I needed to change my appearance. The problem is Granomish women only wear makeup to cover blemishes. My skin is perfect, well the parts that show anyway. There was no Granomish makeup that would change my appearance and if I tried human makeup I would really stick out. Granomen don’t tan, but I’d look like I did. Also I love my lighter-than-normal hair and I really liked wearing it long, but Maia was able to find a non-permanent dye

and I started wearing it tied back instead of loose, which was the way I preferred it. Maia also helped dye my eyebrows, which I have to admit I would never have even thought of if she hadn't pointed out just how jarring the color difference was. The eyebrows really did make all the difference too. The change was subtle, but profound and I didn't recognize myself in the mirror by the time we were done and she decided it should be sufficient to hide me from most casual observers.

Another factor that changed the way I looked was I had no choice but to wear Emmine-style clothing since Granomish fashions were not available in Randona and the rest of my clothes were still in the embassy. Of course that meant I couldn't wear anything off the rack at the fashionable shops and I thought we would have to get everything specially tailored until I remembered there was a small Granomish population in the city. I seriously doubted they made their own clothes. The neighborhood was close to the embassy, but I decided I'd have to risk it. It wouldn't be nice to ask Lorenia to spirit my clothes out to me. If she got caught... Well, I didn't want to think about what might happen to her.

So we went shopping in the Granomish neighborhood. I didn't need anything fancy, but I did get a few blouses and skirts that I could mix and match. The shopper in me wanted much more, I admit, but I was spending Uncle Candle's money, having none of my own available.

Having taken those steps, however, it was time to get back to business. I didn't dare meet directly with Lorenia, which distressed her terribly, but, "I don't want you to endanger yourself," I told her on several occasions. "Even if you see me on the street, don't approach unless I signal to you."

"Very well, my lady," she responded obediently, but I could hear it in her voice. She'd rather be here with me. I didn't deserve that sort of loyalty especially from a nice person like Lorenia. She had only known me a short time, but I wouldn't betray her by putting her in unnecessary danger either.

Lorenia was essential to what I was doing, however, and I tried to assure her of that each time we spoke. She was the vital link between me and those people in the embassy who felt a stronger loyalty to the royal family than Baron Genrik. So when Ranolof caught Doctor Tall meeting with Michael Sollen, a human businessman who owned several large warehouses on the outskirts of Randona and who also was seen wearing a One Maiyim ring, it was Lorenia who got the news to me. Similarly when I stumbled across Doctor Gerena Larabowa, an Orentan from Lillo who held a seat in the philosophy department, and had the same poor taste in personal adornment, it was Lorenia I relied on to let the guards know.

Unfortunately none of these three seemed to be up to anything particularly nefarious. They taught classes or conducted normal business, went shopping, sometimes they met others for lunch or dinner, but even the one time Stanislav and Lorenia were able to sit in the booth next to Tall and Larabowa and listen to their conversation all they talked about were students and teaching, which to me seemed odd. I mean, I know teachers talk about those things but most of them have a life outside of classes and I wouldn't have thought it would be a common dinner conversation topic.

I was not about to let a lack of evidence slow me down this early, however, and a few days after subjecting herself to other people's boring dinner chat, it was Lorenia who found the fourth such ring wearer.

Agate Cooper was a former Member of Parliament or MP as they were called in Emmine. She had a modest estate in the fashionable west end of Randona where she entertained a large number of visitors; people of note and others we wouldn't know even with an ID card. Mrs. Cooper turned out to be the mother lode of One Maiyim activity, although even that took some doing to uncover.

Maia once again pulled off a marvel of bureaucratic expertise and came up with a fairly complete list of

Agate Cooper's Parliamentary activities and I found her listing in Plantatte's Parliament, the authoritative work on all Parliament members' biographies. Between us, we discovered Mrs. Cooper had once been a member of One Maiyim quite openly and while she had later renounced her connections with the movement after it was outlawed in Emmine, saving her career, the fact she still wore the ring said she had never really left the organization. I suspected, in fact, that we had finally found one of One Maiyim's hidden leaders.

Even since her public recantation, Agate Cooper's politics had not changed and she had a long history of promoting all the issues on One Maiyim's political agenda and had remained on close terms with a large number of other supposedly ex-One Maiyim members. And we saw quite a few of them coming and going. One name above them all, however, caught Maia's immediate attention. We were studying the latest list of names when Maia squeaked in surprise.

"What's wrong?" I asked. I have to admit that while I know most notable Granomen on sight and most Orenta as well, I have never had the opportunity to spend time in Emmine until my posting here. None of the names meant anything to me save that they were possibly aligned with the same people who tried to kill my family in Querna.

"Countess Myrrha of Olen," Maia explained, "is Oceanvine's grandmother."

Eight

"Small world, isn't it?" I commented. "So Vine's Grandma is a member of One Maiyim?"

"Grandma is an entirely too familiar term for their relationship," Maia informed me. "When Vine announced she had changed her major to general magic, her grandmother wanted her disowned from the family."

"She did mention she was nearly disowned," I admitted, "I didn't know who was behind it. But if Countess Myrrha is her grandmother, does that make Myrrha the daughter of Silverwind the Great?"

"And the first Oceanvine, yes," Maia nodded. "Funny how these things happen, isn't it? Even more ironic, Oceanvine the Elder was an avid member of One Maiyim when she was your age and Silverwind was one of its founders. That was before it developed its anti-magic platform and way before the attempted revolution in Merinne and the assassination attempt on Ksaveras IX and Petronelle."

"What revolution in Merinne?" I asked. "I never heard about that one."

"You wouldn't have," Maia told me. "Oceanvine and Candle managed to thwart it before it actually got started. Revolutions that don't happen tend not to get into the history books, but there are still a few people in Merinne who were alive at the time."

"Orenta live longer than humans and Granomen," I pointed out. "On the other hand, I don't think I need that particular history lesson just now. We need to find a way to listen in on conversations on the Cooper estate. I could be wrong and Mrs. Cooper may just be the hostess with the mostest, but I don't think all the activity at her house is normal. I'm tempted to try breaking in and hiding in a closet."

"That sounds reckless even for you," Maia told me seriously.

“I didn’t mean it,” I admitted, although the notion had been playing through my mind all day.

“I should hope not,” Maia continued. “Breaking and entering is a crime everywhere, even in Saindo.”

“But there’s no law in Saindo,” I countered.

“More to the point,” she shot back at me, “each man and woman is a law unto himself. No one is in favor of theft when he’s the victim, you know.”

“You have a point, but I’d really like to plant a bug in there somewhere,” I told her. Actually, I had not thought of planting a microphone there until that moment, but while I would still need to break into the Cooper Estate, I wouldn’t have to stay there very long. Maia protested I was being foolish, but by then I was starting to get desperate. I either had to take some chances or just book a flight home. Besides it wasn’t fair of me to keep sleeping on Maia’s couch as I had for several weeks now.

When Lorenia called the next day, I told her what I was going to need. I probably should not admit it publicly, but it’s one of the worst kept secrets in Randona that the Granomish embassy had a supply of various spy devices. We have never been able to plant a bug in the Randona Palace, but we have had them in most of the other embassies. It’s a practice I would like to halt, but for the moment, I was happy to take advantage.

Lorenia offered to rush several over to me immediately. I knew I was taking a big chance, but we arranged to meet in the same park where I had charmed the children some weeks ago. It was a cold and dismal afternoon with a threat of snow in the air. Actually the snow wouldn’t bother me as much as the rain that was likely to materialize if the snow did not. On my way to the rendezvous though, it occurred to me that I might want to make the encounter look more natural, should anyone happen to witness it, and passing a jeweler’s shop, I went in to look for a pretty bauble. I owed Lorenia big-time anyway. No matter what I chose could only be a token of thanks, but I did feel the need to give her something and an exchange of “gifts” would look more natural.

I did not have a lot of time to peruse the contents of the shop, but fortunately an amber pendant on a silver chain caught my eye. I think the shop keeper expected me to haggle. I never have managed to figure out which sorts of Emmine businesses welcome haggling and which set their prices in stone. Emmine citizens grow up knowing which is which. I couldn’t be bothered. The asked for price for the amber sounded reasonable to me and I paid it. If I deprived the shop-keeper of an hour of pleasant haggling, well I’ll just have to live with that, now won’t I?

I don’t know what I must have become in Lorenia’s eyes during my absence, but those eyes glowed as I met their gaze. There was so much hero-worship there, that I hesitated to give her the pendant after all, but then I reminded myself I might not have another chance. Looking around the park, I saw no one anywhere in sight, not even pedestrians taking a shortcut. With no one around I invited her to sit for a bit.

“You’re looking well,” I began. It was a lame greeting under the circumstance, but it was all I could think to say.

“Things are quiet in the embassy at the moment, my lady,” she replied.

“No full scale search mission for the renegade countess?” I asked.

“I think Lord Parassov believes you left Randona on your own by now,” she replied. “There’s a standing order to keep an eye out for you, but nothing more than that.”

“What? Does he think I’m swimming back to Querna?” I laughed.

“He knows you didn’t take a plane, my lady” Lorenia explained, “but you might have boarded a bus to another city and flown out from there. Or maybe you’re on a cruise ship. With winter coming, cruises to the Probellinens and Bellinen itself are very popular here.”

“I might be sunning myself on the shores of North Horalia for that matter,” I commented, “but instead I seem to be settling in for the second winter of the year. It’s late spring in Querna right now. I imagine the cherry trees are in bloom. Have you ever been in the Wurra Palace?”

“No, my lady. Is it nice inside?” she asked.

“It’s a bit grandiose,” I admitted. Maybe I’m just a bit jaded to that sort of thing. “What’s really nice is the large garden from which the Garden Wing takes its name. The gardeners work very hard all year round to make it an idyllic spot, but I think it’s at its glory in the spring. Cherry blossoms, crab apple blossoms, lilacs. It’s just a delightfully fragrant place and it’s in a sheltered spot so the natural perfumes linger even on a windy day.”

“It sounds lovely, my lady,” Lorenia commented.

“I’ll make sure you get to see it some day, if you like,” I promised.

“I would love that, my lady,” she told me in almost a whisper. “Oh, I cannot stay out too long. I’d better give you this and get back to work.” She reached into her purse and pulled out a large, folded paper envelope and a plastic box about half the size of a clay brick and gave them to me. “You’ll need to attach a speaker to it if you want more than one person to be able to listen at a time, my lady. I understand it is a standard connection, but the earphone in the bag will suffice for one listener.”

“Thank you,” I replied. “This won’t have gotten you in trouble, will it?”

“No, my lady,” she shook her head. “I’m supposed to be in the kitchen right now. Cook approves of what I’m doing.”

“Oh, I have something for you as well,” I told her and gave her the pendant in its small box.

She opened it and the glow on her face was all the thanks I needed. We hugged briefly before going our separate ways.

Once I was back in Uncle Candle’s office I opened the package to find a small battery-powered microphone and transmitter unit. According to a note, the battery in it would only last a week. Also I should put it somewhere, where it would remain dry.

“We have one week,” Maia commented. “Even if we manage to plant this once, I doubt we’ll be able to get in and change the batteries.”

“We?” I asked. “I thought you were against doing this?”

“I can’t let you go alone, Ksanya,” she told me. “You’re a magic-null. You can’t even see a simple aura. You’ll blunder into the most rudimentary defense fields like a drunken moose.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” I admitted wryly.

“Friends don’t let friends blunder like drunken moose, Ksanya,” she continued in mock seriousness.

“Oh, Maia,” I cried a bit, throwing my arms around her. “I do love you. It’s a good thing it’s possible to have two best friends, because I’d hate to have to choose between you and Vine.”

We did not want to waste any time in planting that bug, but we did have to wait until after midnight before going out to Mrs. Cooper’s estate. We used Uncle Candle’s car and drove past the house three times before parking a block away. It was snowing heavily as we crunched our way up the street.

“I don’t suppose we’re going to find an open window in this weather, are we?” I asked, more to keep my courage up than because I thought Maia might have a positive answer for me.

“I don’t think we’re going to get inside at all,” Maia replied. “I saw wards up across every window. They weren’t the standard sort of security wards either. There’s a lot more power incorporated into them than normal security systems use. Whatever you do, don’t touch any of the windows or their frames. Probably the doors too, but I haven’t taken a close enough look at them yet. Maybe we can find an overlooked basement window or bulkhead.”

“What about the second floor?” I asked. “Those windows aren’t generally protected, are they?”

“These are,” she replied. “So are the dormer windows on the third floor.”

We walked quietly around the house, staying in the shadows as much as possible. I suddenly realized I should have used makeup this evening to darken my face. If a stray beam of light hit it, my skin would shine like the rising moon. Well, it was too late to worry about that now. The snow was swirling down so heavily that my chalk white face might actually be an asset. I wasn’t sure. Skulking illegally around people’s homes isn’t really a hobby I care to get any further practice at.

As we progressed, I would point at a door or window and Maia would shake her head until we had entirely circled the house. “Now what?” she whispered the question. “Our foot prints are showing all over the yard.”

“No kidding,” I replied. “It’s getting windy and the forecast is for snow all night. I think our footprints will fill in. What about planting the microphone near the front door?”

“It’s warded too,” Maia warned me.

“I wasn’t going to put it on the door,” I replied. “See that little bench on the front porch? It may be our best bet. I can stick the microphone under the seat. It will probably go unnoticed.”

“We’re not going to hear much out here,” Maia pointed out.

“Just greetings and farewells,” I agreed, “but it’s our only chance.”

“Do it,” Maia told me tersely.

There were several sets of footprints on the walkway up to the door, so my own would not be obvious, not even under the overhanging roof. I knelt in front of the bench and quickly removed the protective cover from the adhesive strip on top of the box. Then I reached under the bench and placed the box.



Stepping back to admire my handiwork, I was unable to see the box from any part of the walkway. Of course it was snowing very hard by that time and the nearest lights were halfway down the block where they were doing a pitiful job of illuminating the street, but I was satisfied that it was the best I was going to get. Besides, if I tried to move the box now, the adhesive would be lost. Win or lose, it was my only chance. Realizing that, I turned and rejoined Maia and we hurried as carefully as we could in the storm to get back to Uncle Candle's car.

"If this doesn't work we might be able to return and put fresh batteries in," Maia commented once the car's engine had warmed up. We both luxuriated in the warm air coming out of the heating vents.

"I don't know about that," I admitted. "I may change my mind in a week, but I doubt it. Right now I don't ever want to do anything like that again. I kept expecting to hear gunshots at any second and you know what? They would have been justified in shooting us. No one should have the right to invade another's privacy."

"We don't have to listen, you know," Maia pointed out, carefully putting the car into gear.

"After all that?" I demanded. "Lorenia risked a lot to get this equipment to me. No doubt several others were involved too and then there's the risks we took and we're not done yet. This is a dangerous storm and this little car doesn't have snow tires, does it?"

"No, it doesn't," Maia confirmed, "and for the record, I agree with you on all counts. I guess I just have a tendency to play prosecutor to other's defense when we're trying to hash something out."

"We're going to have to find a listening post," I pointed out. "That transmitter won't reach over a quarter of a mile, maybe not even that far."

"We can park a block away," Maia told me, "but not tonight."

"No, I doubt there will be anything to hear until tomorrow sometime," I commented. "According to the records we have, Mrs. Cooper generally does not receive until after lunch. That's fine by me. I need some sleep."

"And a drink?" Maia prompted.

"No, not tonight," I decided. I was sorely tempted, but, "I don't drink when I'm nervous or upset or if I feel like I need one. Drinking is fine when I'm already relaxed, but having a drink because you need one can all too easily lead to looking for reasons to need another. Have I preached enough yet?"

"You tell me," Maia laughed. We spent the rest of the trip back to her apartment discussing just about anything else.

Nine

I am definitely not cut out to be a spy! For anyone who thinks there is some sort of glamour attached to that sort of work, forget it. It is boring, tiresome and filthy work that threatens to leave a taint on your soul every step of the way. It can also be very cold if the weather is against you, which it was for me.

I spent the next week in Uncle Candle's car parked a block away from the Cooper Estate and, as Maia and I suspected there was very little worth listening to on the doorstep. The door was usually opened by a servant, so there were almost no personal conversations going on. The one thing I did glean from that week at my listening post was that most guests had to leave their names at the door and wait for approval to be allowed inside. That didn't sound like dear old Agate was receiving friends. No one had behaved that formally in well over a century. I wouldn't have been surprised if the visitors had been asked to leave their calling cards.

What I did collect during that week mostly were the names of visitors. The guards from the embassy had done as much, though, but it did give me a longer list and a feeling for the frequency of some people's visits. For example, Vine's Grandmother was there twice over the course of the week, usually around tea time, and she was never left on the doorstep. There was one man by the name of Darros Hawthorn who always had to wait but also who always arrived at ten minutes past three. There weren't a lot of exit conversations, so I don't know how long any of these people stayed.

Then finally near the end of that week of ultimate boredom, when I was still trying to screw up my courage enough to think about replacing the batteries in the transmitter, I got a break. I wasn't even paying a lot of attention to the noise coming out of my earphone. I was reading a paperback book, in fact. Just trying to stay awake, but there was something different about the sounds and, after a moment, I realized that two women were talking as the front door opened.

"You will do this, Petrana," I heard an elderly woman say. I was fairly certain this was Mrs. Cooper. I had heard her a few times before. She did not often walk her visitors to the door, but this time, perhaps, I got lucky. "It is your final chance and you know it."

"I do, Mistress," Petrana replied. Mistress? What was this? No one had used that title in an even longer time than calling cards would have represented.

"The Circle of Masters is very displeased with your past record and this is your only opportunity to redeem yourself. You were a Xenlabit, were you not?" A Xenlabit? Every school child knew that name; it was one of the five demons.

"No, mistress," Petrana corrected her, "I was trained as a Gredac." Another of the demons. Curious.

"Well, if you ever want to achieve that rank again, you will go to the ball and handle it without any further hesitation. You know what the alternative is," Agate told her coldly. After that I only heard the door close and the sound of receding footsteps.

I looked down at my notes. I had been scribbling like crazy while they spoke and I could barely make out what I had written in my excitement. There were no further sounds coming from the microphone now, so I rewrote the notes while I could still remember the few details I had clearly. My mind was already trying to fill in details that were not there and I knew the best way from jumping to an erroneous conclusion was to make sure my evidence wasn't tainted.

Of course once I had rewritten those notes, it didn't stop me from working on annotations and speculations. For one thing, I had only heard the name Petrana once before and she was a known member of One Maiyim. That would be Senator Petrana Hawakamala from the Isle of Fire who disappeared shortly before things went very badly indeed for the People's Party there. We knew she had boarded a plane for Querna, but while there was a record of her arrival, she had stepped away from the Customs counter and out of sight until possibly just now.

Maia was at her skeptical best when I discussed it with her over a late evening cup of coffee. I came back to her apartment full of excitement and even carried in the receiver and its earphone as though it was likely to give us additional information. I had normally left it in Uncle Candle's car. I wasn't sure if she was just giving me all the counter arguments or if she meant them. At least I knew she'd join me if I chose to be a drunken moose again. "We have an extradition treaty with the Isle of Fire," she pointed out reasonably. "Why would Senator Hawakamala, if that's who she was, come here? There's a death sentence hanging over her head and I'm sure His Majesty's courts would send her right back to Rjalkatyp on a special jet."

"Granom has such a treaty as well," I countered, "and our ties are even closer to Rjalkaptyp than Emmine's. The Isle of Fire is friendly with everyone these days, of course; Ellisto, Bellienen, why even Wennil allows them to have a consulate in Castelon. I think she is far more likely to be recognized in Querna than Randona."

"But Petrana can't be a particularly unique name," Maia told me. "It comes from the same root as one of your names – Petronelle."

"And possibly for the same reasons," I admitted. "My great aunt was a very famous queen and beloved by Granomen regardless of their nationality. A lot of little girls were named Petronelle and Petra in my mother's generation, but very few were named Petrana. In fact so far as I know that variant of the name has only ever been used on the Isle of Fire."

"Okay, but how common is it on the Isle of Fire?" Maia asked.

I shook my head. "I don't know, but how many women with that name are currently running around Randona?"

"One that I can think of," Maia shrugged, "but as my old statistics teacher might have said, 'This is hardly a representative sample.'"

"I'm more concerned as to what a Xenlabit or a Gredac is," I told her.

"Two of the five children of Aritos," Maia replied. "Demons."

"Right," I nodded. There was a hissing sound coming out of the earphone on the table between us, but I ignored it. "But this Petrana, whoever she turns out to be, said that she had been a Gredac, like it was some sort of rank or honor. Could we have stumbled on a cult of demon worshippers? Does that even exist any longer?"

"I don't know," Maia admitted, "but we should give Wizard Candle a call and ask him. He might know what it means."

I checked my watch. "It's a good time to call him, I think. Although we'll probably be dragging him away from the dinner table."

"I doubt he'll mind once we tell him why," Maia replied.

The hissing sound from the earphone between us changed slightly just then. It sounded a bit like words. "Wait a minim, I told her. I'm getting a signal, I think."

"Probably malfunctioning. We're miles from the transmitter," Maia pointed out. "It can't possibly reach

this far.”

“I think it’s something else,” I replied. “Come over here and listen with me.”

So we sat with our heads together and the earphone between us as we heard, “Mersday... Six. One. Seven. Five. Four. Eight. Seven. Nine. Zero. One. One. Seven. Two. One. Eight. Six,” and so on. It continued on for another fifteen minutes and ended up with a trumpet fanfare before the earphone returned to the hissing it had done just prior to the mysterious broadcast. Then, the hissing stopped too and the earphone was silent once more.

“I know what that was,” I told Maia. I had never actually heard one of these numbers broadcasts, but Vine had told me about them.

“So do I,” Maia nodded. That did not surprise me one bit. “Now we really do have to call Wizard Candle. I have standing orders about this. Good thing I was taking notes.”

I looked over and saw that she had picked up a notepad and written down everything she had heard through the earphone. And there I thought she was just trying to find a more comfortable position while we had been sitting in such close proximity. “Will Uncle Candle know what that code means?” I asked.

“Probably not,” Maia replied, “but he wants to hear about every broadcast I or anyone else intercepts and this was a long one. Let’s go.”

It was past midnight now. “Where?” I asked.

“The office,” she laughed. “That line can’t be tapped, remember?”

The building was a bit creepy after midnight with only a few lights on in the corridors, but we were not the only ones up on campus by a long shot. We ran into a number of teachers and students on the way to Uncle Candle’s office, most of whom mumbled tired hellos in our general direction before moving on to whatever projects kept them up at this hour. The one impression that impacted my senses throughout the building at this time of night, though, was coffee. There was a lot of coffee being brewed and consumed here tonight. I wondered why I’d never noticed it during my daytime trips here. Perhaps the ventilation was also better during the day?

Maia wasted no time at all once we were inside the office. She closed the door to the hallway behind us and then led me into Uncle Candle’s personal office beyond the conference room. Except to poke my head in out of curiosity, I had never actually been in here before. There was no reason I had to be and Uncle Candle had not exactly left it in a state of neatness. This was, according to Maia, typical of my uncle.

Uncle Candle had half a dozen projects going on at any given time and he kept books stacked up according to project in front of various chalk boards on which he liked to work out ideas. His home was even worse in some ways. He had more books than he had wall space to put them on, even going up the stairs and into his attic and down into the basement. Although at least there he did keep the chairs and couches cleared away for company. From what Vine had told me, though, until she and Sextant had accepted apprenticeships from him, even those pieces of furniture had usually served as temporary book holders much of the time. It occurred to me that he would have found Methis’ trick of being able to build a home that is larger on the inside than the outside not only useful, but vital. Unfortunately this was magic that no mortal had ever mastered.

“Would you like me to call?” I offered. I knew the official ways of the Wurra Palace intimately, having grown up with them, but she turned me down.

“That’s all right. Besides you’re still on the run from your embassy. It’s not too likely, but if you introduce yourself to whomever picks up the phone there, word could get back here.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” I admitted, “although by now it’s possible no one there is particularly worried.”

“Lorenia still calls in every day to check up on you,” Maia informed me. “I get the impression that every so often Ambassador Parassov makes a point of reminding the staff to keep an eye out.”

“Too bad,” I sighed.

Maia dialed a number and then asked for the overseas operator. I had not thought of that either. I’d never had to actually place an international phone call and was unacquainted with the procedure. I thought I could just dial the number and would get right through. Maybe someday we’d have the technology and international trust to do that, but for now all extra-archipelago switching had to be done manually. It only took a few minutes, however, to connect to the main switchboard at the Wurra Palace and Maia requested to be put through to “Wizard Candle, please. This is his secretary, Maia Denfirth calling. Oh. Hi, Henna. How’s the weather there? Hmm, sounds nice. Would you like some snow? I could probably have some sent. We have lots of extra at the moment.” She laughed, evidently with the operator. Henna was, I remembered one of Sir Brentav Tolorosk’s assistants. Sir Brentav was Ksaveras’ seneschal and Henna was something like the second under-seneschale, I wasn’t too sure and as far as my experience goes the Wurra Palace is the only place left on Maiyim in which seneschal was still even an official job. Elsewhere Sir Brentav would probably have been called the Chief of Staff.

We waited a few very long minutes while Henna tracked down Uncle Candle and had someone lead him to a telephone. While waiting, Maia activated the phone’s external speaker so we could both talk to him. “Candle here,” he said at last. “What’s the trouble, Maia?”

“Hi, Uncle!” I piped up, mostly to let him know I was present as well.

“Ksanya?” he asked. “You’re there too? Well I’d say you’re up past your bedtime, but as I recall you’re a night-owl anyway.”

“I’m trying to get over that,” I laughed. “Uncle, we have a lot of important stuff to tell you. As the Elistans say, we live in interesting times.”

“You may want to take notes, sir,” Maia added.

“That isn’t a problem,” Candle replied. “I had your call transferred to one of those small offices on the second floor when I heard who was calling. That’s why it took so long to answer. Go ahead.”

Together Maia and I brought him up to date on everything that had been happening since my arrival. “I just can’t take my eyes off you, can I?” Candle laughed by the time we got done. I was a little annoyed. I didn’t think this was a laughing matter at all, but that’s Uncle Candle for you and maybe, just maybe, he’s right. Laughing at your troubles, if you can is better than crying about them or worse, cowering in fear because of them. “Well, I’ll take this message off to the RBI in the morning and see if their cryptologists can make anything of it. Probably not, since they haven’t been able to crack the code yet, but you never know. This could be the one that does it. As to this mysterious Petrana. Well, you never actually saw her,

did you? She could be Senator Hawakamala, or she could be someone else entirely. It doesn't sound like she's up to much good does it? I'm especially concerned by her admission of being 'trained as a Gredac.' I'm not sure what that means, but the Bond of Aritos that was combined with the Hook in Rjalkatyp was the Gredac variant and we already know One Maiyim has some high-powered mages within its ranks. They might be using the names of the demons to specify which of the Bonds of Aritos their mages have studied. At least that's how it sounds to me. I'll have to ask some of our, uh, mutual friends about that." It was an oblique reference to the Gods. I can understand why he was being careful about mentioning them by name. Who talks directly to the Gods these days, outside of the temples anyway? Besides, They try to stay out of our lives, the least we can do is allow Them Their privacy. "What's this ball you mentioned though?"

"I haven't even considered that yet," I admitted, "and I really should have. I was too excited, I guess, about stumbling on Senator Hawakamala."

"If that's really who this Petrana is," Candle cautioned me. "I admit it sounds likely, but you don't have much to go on."

"It might be a reference to the Annual Winter Masque at the palace," Maia chimed in, bringing us back to Uncle Candle's question. "That's coming up in a week and it will, no doubt, be the social event of the season once again."

"I'd forgotten that was coming up," Candle admitted. "I suppose I've been invited again?"

"Yes, sir," Maia responded. "Vine and Six have as well. I've been meaning to call you about that, but we've had a few other things on our minds lately." She sounded contrite.

"Sounds like it," Candle chuckled. "I'm fairly committed to an investigation with Southgate here at the moment, please tender my regrets to His Majesty. Oceanvine's and Sextant's too, they're coming up on final exams soon and flying across the world for a party, even a royal gala, would be counter-productive."

"Yes, sir," Maia replied, "but if something is going to happen then..."

"Inform the Chief of Palace Security," Candle told us. "He's a smart lad and should be able to handle it."

"Yes, sir," Maia repeated. We talked for another few minutes before allowing Uncle Candle to return to dinner.

Ten

What do you do when the Devil knocks on your door? Well, according to Maia, you invite Him in and offer Him a cup of coffee. If you're very lucky, He may have brought some sticky buns with Him.

Actually, I had met Aritos before. I stayed in his home for a week or so. He's married to the Goddess Methis, but don't spread it about. It's the sort of thing that makes priests very upset when you tell them, not that I've been silly enough to do so. I might have a few years ago, but I'd like to think I've gained enough wisdom not to go arguing theology with a priest. Discussing? Yes. Asking difficult questions? Sure, they love that, but telling them outright that the goddess most credited to inspiring inventors is

shacked up with the god considered to be the ultimate evil is not likely to gain you any favor in their eyes. More likely you would be condemned to a thousand years of penitence. So just remember, you did not hear it from me!

The sticky buns were very good, by the way, although sharing breakfast with us was hardly the reason He came to visit. That was just a mark of His exquisite courtesy. "Candle told me what you learned last night," He told us once we had time to enjoy the meal. "I cannot tell you everything I know..."

"Why not?" I asked curiously. I had always wondered about that. "Is it some sort of law that even the Gods cannot break?"

Aritos laughed, "Sort of. It's closer to a gentlemen's agreement, than an actual law or rule. We all agreed to let the people of Maiyim take care of their own business and not interfere. My brothers and sisters are not even on Maiyim at this time and have not been here in decades."

"Where are They?" I asked.

Aritos looked up and I automatically followed His gaze to the ceiling. It was a nice ceiling. Maia's apartment was in an old building and the ceilings were covered with plates of embossed tin that had been painted white. It was much more interesting than a plain plaster ceiling, but that wasn't really where Aritos was looking. "They're out exploring the universe," He told me.

"Lucky Them," I smiled, wishing suddenly that I could join them. Then I realized that was exactly how my royal cousin Ksaveras XI felt. No wonder he was such an avid supporter of the space program. I smiled again and thought, *The Gods are out there, but someday we'll join Them*. I think it was the most piously religious thought I had ever had, although another part of me warned against hubris. Not much chance of that lately, but I have talked to the Gods – some of Them. It's the sort of thing that can go to your head.

"We'll all join Them someday," Aritos replied as though reading my thoughts. "What I can tell you are a few facts I've learned about One Maiyim."

"Isn't that interference?" I asked.

"Not really," He shrugged. "I learned it through rather conventional means for one thing and I doubt it will make much difference in the situation in which you are currently involved."

"Then why tell us at all?" I couldn't help but ask.

"It might keep you from being distracted from the real problem at hand," Aritos shrugged. "You know, usually I spend more time explaining why I can't answer questions than I why I can."

"Sorry," I apologized. Later, I was a bit surprised that I never felt much awe when in Aritos' or even Methis' presence, but when I've been with Them, They just seemed like normal and ordinary folks. I think They actually encourage that sort of thing. Hopefully, They don't disapprove of my behavior.

"No, that's all right," He chuckled. "I think you just managed to surprise Me a bit. That doesn't happen very often." He poured himself a second cup of coffee. "May I warm yours up as well?" he asked.

"Thank you," I replied, holding my cup out.

"I'm fine," Maia shook her head.

"All right," He began after refilling my cup. "You heard the woman Petrana saying that she was trained as a Gredac, right?"

"Yes," I agreed readily. "Is she really Senator Hawakamala?" Aritos did not quite frown, but the odd look on his face told me I had strayed into territory he would not help me with. "Oh, sorry," I apologized again.

"No need," He shrugged. "I'd have been more disappointed had you not asked the question and, well, actually you'll find out the answer to that question soon enough so I'll answer anyway. Yes, she is. Okay?"

"Thank you," I replied with soft sincerity.

"Think nothing of it. You still need to decide what to do about it," Aritos informed me. "In the meantime, let's get back to her position as a Gredac. Now you already know who Gredac is?"

"One of your children," I replied.

"Yes," He nodded, "Along with Kerawlat, Xenlabit, Pohn and Arithan." His voice broke a bit over that last name and I knew why; Arithan had been killed and by Aritos's own doing six decades ago. I think Arithan had been His favorite, but I knew better than to pry. It would be more like sticking a knife in a still fresh wound and I like Aritos too much to hurt him that way. "You two have both heard of the so-called Bond of Aritos?"

"It's misnamed on several levels," I replied. "First of all it has nothing to do with You nor is it a single magical symbol."

"That's correct," Aritos nodded. "It is actually a family of five different signs each one associated with one of my children. My sign is properly called the Seal of Aritos and looks like this." He used his finger to trace a complex pattern in the air. The pattern glowed with a beautiful red-golden light. "I know you have both seen this before on the ends of Candle's staff, right?" We both nodded.

"It looks similar to the Bond," I opined. "Not the same though."

"The signs for my children are indeed similar visually to my own for very good reason," Aritos admitted, "but in other ways they are very different. They can be used by mages to harness incredible power although only at very great cost. Until my children were permanently imprisoned, the Bond would eventually lead them to the mages who used them. You don't want to know what happened next."

"Actually, Uncle Candle told me," I replied with a shiver, but He was right. You don't really want to know.

"Well, now that my children are unable to respond to the use of their Bonds the mages who cast them eventually will find themselves translocated to my children with the same eventual result," Aritos informed us. I knew that too, but I nodded rather than interrupt Him again. "Of course there are always some people who don't think that will happen to them, After all it does not happen right away; a mage must gain a certain amount of mastery before my children even find him worthwhile, but sooner or later, anyone who persists in using one of the Bonds will eventually fall victim to the end result.



“Now in the last few decades there have been two schools of magic. One has been the one represented by Candle, Oceanvine and Sextant. It nearly went extinct and that would have been a disaster for Maiyim had it come to pass. Fortunately it did not and even now the Universities are offering degrees in general magic again. The other school of magic, however has been populated by the rogue mages of One Maiyim. They learn most of the same basics, but all mages of One Maiyim are required to study and learn to use one of the Bonds of Aritos. On mastering, if that is the correct word, their chosen Bond they are accorded a title of mastery so that someone like Petrana Hawakamala who has learned to use the Bond of Gredac is called a Gredac herself. Had she studied the Bond of Xenlabit, she would have been a Xenlabit. They learned fairly early on that the Bond of Arithan no longer works. The Bond uses a bit of the power of the demon it is connected to, you see. Since Arithan died, his Bond carries no power. Anyone with the sense the Gods gave geese would have simply abandoned attempts to use that Bond, but I suppose if they had that much sense they wouldn’t have tried to use any of them in the first place. Instead what those fools have done is to accord the title of Arithan to any of their mages who manages to master more than one of the Bonds.”

“I thought that was impossible,” Maia commented. She had been much better behaved than I had. Maybe she should have been the deputy ambassador for Granom? “Wizard Candle always said the complexity of a single such sign was too much for a mortal mage to be able to master more than one.”

“He’s mistaken,” Aritos chuckled. “He is only human after all. And he does know both my and Methis’ Seals and has used them both. That’s more difficult than using the signs of my children. I imagine that if you were to ask him about it now, he may have changed his mind. Well, that’s all I really had to tell you two,” Aritos told us as he got to his feet. “Good luck.” He just faded from view.

“Damn, I had still more questions,” I sighed.

“Probably ones He wouldn’t have answered anyway,” Maia told me.

“Probably not,” I agreed reluctantly.

Eleven

“I have to get to that masked ball,” I told Maia in her office an hour later.

“Do you have a fairy godmother handy?” Maia shot back, a twinkle in her eyes.

“Funny,” I replied flatly. Actually I thought it *was* funny, but the flat response was expected of me. “But I have to be there.”

“I’m not sure I’m following your logic,” she told me somewhat more seriously. “Why do you have to be there?”

“Aritos confirmed that Petrana is Senator Hawakamala, right?” I asked.

“Sounded like it to me, yes,” she nodded, “So?”

“So whatever she’s been ordered to do, it’s going to be done there,” I replied.

“And as per Wizard Candle’s orders, I’ve already warned Sir Cinhal,” Maia told me. “Palace Security

will be on guard.”

“Hawakamala is a Gredac mage,” I countered.

“Was a Gredac mage,” Maia corrected me. “She was demoted.”

“And did she suddenly forget everything she knew?” I asked. “I doubt it.”

“So do I,” Maia admitted.

“And how many mages does Sir Cinhal have on his staff?” I asked pointedly.

“How many do you have?” Maia countered.

“I have you,” I replied lamely realizing I was about to lose the argument.

“Ksanya, I’m not much of a mage,” Maia told me. “I can levitate a pair of hex nuts independently of each other and I can maybe raise a protective ward, although it probably would not be a very strong one and I’ve never tried to do it while under the stress of intense activity going on around me. I am, at best, a very junior apprentice.”

“So was Vine when she was in Sutheria,” I pointed out.

“She was better than I am even then. To tell the truth I took this up mostly because it lets me catch something I’ve dropped before it hits the floor. I can be a bit clumsy at times.”

“Not that I’ve ever noticed,” I told her. Maia, clumsy? She was one of the most naturally graceful people I’d ever met. If she’s clumsy I must have trouble walking and breathing at the same time. “Even so, I still need to be there. How can I just let this play out when I know something is going to happen?” It was my argument of last resort and we both knew it.

“You can’t and I agree we both have to be there,” she told me at last.

“What?” I asked. “But you said... Oh, taking the prosecutorial role again?”

“It’s just the way I am,” she grinned. “Besides, I needed to make sure you had thought it out.”

“I thought out the reasons,” I told her, “but not how I’m going to get in. This isn’t some college sorority party. I can’t just crash it, especially now that we’ve put Security on its guard. I suppose I can ask Lorenia. Invitations must have been sent to the Embassy. Maybe she or someone else on staff could get their hands on one or two.”

“Better not try it,” Maia counseled me. “We don’t want to put our allies at risk especially since it won’t be necessary.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Weren’t you listening last night?” Maia asked. “Invitations for Wizard Candle, the Lady Oceanvine and Sir Sextant arrived last week. I seriously doubt Vine would mind if you used hers. I’ll use either Candle’s or Six’s. Odds are Candle would have invited me to accompany him in any case. He did last year.”

“Vine is well known in the royal court, isn’t she?” I asked. “I mean you told me she has dinner with the king regularly.”

“She’s very well known there,” Maia confirmed. “Why do you ask?”

“Even in a mask I doubt I could pass for her. For that matter even a blind man couldn’t mistake you for Uncle Candle,” I told her.

“The invitations don’t have names on them,” Maia explained. “Just the envelopes.”

“Huh?” I think I gasped. “But an invitation to the palace ought to be personalized!”

“I understand they used to be,” Maia explained, “but with over three thousand invitations someone decided that it would be a lot faster and cheaper to only personalize the envelopes.”

“Sounds like a horrible breach of etiquette to me,” I opined.

“It was supposedly a big scandal the first year until word came that Ksaveras X was on his death bed. That was the first time,” Maia commented. The first time was five years ago and a near thing. Veras’ father had nearly died and never fully recovered, leaving Veras regent far sooner than he ever should have had to be. “After that, nobody thought it was worth making that much of a fuss over whether or not their names were on the invitations.”

“Considering the relations between our nations,” I noted, “that was surprisingly empathetic of the notables of Emmine.”

“It was. Sometimes it takes death or near-death experiences to bring old friends back together. It did not quite bring our nations back together in friendship, of course,” Maia told me, “but...”

“But it might have, had we known,” I finished for her. “We never heard about it.”

“It was such a small thing,” Maia replied. “And your king did not die that year and even if he had I doubt anyone would have mentioned it.”

“It’s nice to know though,” I decided. “Maybe our nations will be friends again soon. I hope so anyway. So we have invitations. Oh, but what will I wear?” I said that last dramatically, with my hands on either side of my face.

Maia giggled, “Time to go shopping again. Good thing we have a week to get ready.”

“That won’t be long enough,” I told her. I think I was almost serious. “Wait a minim! You’re going too again? Is this another drunken moose thing?”

“Well, I’m not letting you go alone,” she nodded, “and besides, I’ve actually met Their Majesties. At the very least I’ll be able to vouch that you are who you claim to be and not just some crazy Granomish chick.”

“I might be both, you know,” I pointed out.

Twelve

If I could have gotten into my closet in the embassy, we wouldn't have needed to go shopping at all. I had this notion, direct from the movies, that Maia might insist we rent some sort of cow or horse costume. Worse, it might be that drunken moose and I was determined to not be the tail. Fortunately, she was no more interested in portraying a quadruped than I was and we ended up getting fitted for formal gowns, I think the lady who took my measurements despaired of having enough cloth to cover me. Really, Granomen are not that much larger than humans when measured around our waists, but we do look like we are. We're also a lot stronger, having thicker bones and larger muscles.

Fortunately fashions in Randona this year are being inspired by what's being worn in Orente. It was not a sarong, but it did look like the designer had one in mind. The dressmaker must have been a wizard in her youth, or should have been. I actually looked good in my gown and you know what I said about Granomen in sarongs.

We nearly waited too long to purchase masks. With over three thousand men and women expected to be in attendance, we should have realized that even simple dominos would be in short supply. Fortunately we stumbled across a curio shop that had several old masks with gold leaf and peacock feathers that I thought were quite becoming but that the shop owner warned us had been in keeping with the theme of the winter ball from thirty years ago. "They'll be perfect," I was certain. "We're already dressing alike. Identical masks will complete the image."

"We're not exactly alike," Maia pointed out.

"Our gowns differ only because the pattern on the fabric never quite looks the same twice," I countered. "Why? Are you worried about someone else wearing your dress? It's a bit late for that now. Besides, lots of men are attracted to twins."

"We hardly look like twins," Maia laughed.

"You can see the family resemblance, can't you?" I asked the shopkeeper, dripping feigned innocence.

Maia rescued him from trying to find the right answer. "Well, Mom shouldn't have given in to all those cravings when she had you, Sis."

Some people might have taken offense, but Maia is the last person anyone would ever expect a zinger like that from, so when she finally lets loose all you can do is laugh even when the joke is at your expense.

We drove Uncle Candle's sports car to the masque. I wanted to put the top down even though it was snowing lightly. Convertibles are fun and the woolen cloak I'd bought to go with the gown was warm and toasty. I'd never worn a cloak before; they're painfully out of style in Querna even though they are the highest of fashion in Randona. Cloaks are fun so long as it isn't too windy. What I like most about them is you can wrap yourself up in one or fling it open dramatically, but Maia pointed out that no matter which of us drove the car, we would have to bare our arms to work the steering wheel, so the tan canvas top stayed up and the heater was turned on full blast as well.

We timed our arrival to be fashionable, so the band was just finishing up the first set of dances as we drove up to the front gate. Maia handed the car keys to a valet and accepted a receipt, then led the way into the palace.

It was my first entrance into any part of the large compound that made up Randona palace. The grand ballroom was part of the old keep that dated back to those dim and ancient days when this was actually considered a fortified castle. The rest of the old keep was more often used as office space for the royal retainers and the royal family lived in the new palace which was a mere three hundred fifty years old.

I had a bad moment at the door when I had to give my name. I couldn't claim to be Oceanvine and I wasn't about to lie. "Ksanya Granova," I told the herald. It was true enough without stressing titles in any way. I don't think he was fooled, and shouldn't have expected him to be. Emmine heralds should know the names of the Granomish royal family as well as their Granomish counterparts would know the royals of Emmine. I relaxed when I realized I was not about to be announced on my entrance into the hall.

"That would have defeated the purpose of the masque," Maia pointed out when I confessed my relief, "wouldn't it? I would have expected you to know that. Why? Are Granomish nobles announced into a masked ball?"

"Well, no," I admitted, "but so many customs are different in Emmine and I guess I wasn't thinking straight."

"You're understandably nervous," Maia told me, "but we'll both be better off if you can at least try to relax just a bit. The unmasking won't be until midnight and I suspect by that point if anything is going to happen it will be over by then."

"You're right," I nodded. "I just need to avoid the other Granomen in the hall."

"I only see a few," Maia reported, "and they seem to be clustered on the other side of the hall. Safety in numbers?"

"Something like that," I chuckled. "It's kind of like a high school dance with the girls on one side of the hall and the boys on the other."

"And only the actual couples on the dance floor are the chaperones," Maia filled in. "Yes, some things are universal, only in this case the segregation is along political lines. If you knew who everyone was, you'd see the members of the Labor Party over in that corner. The Liberals are just behind us and the Conservatives are up ahead. The only ones I see who are really mixing are the Orenta. If you ask them, they'll tell you that's because 'elves like a good party.'"

"Maia!" I was shocked. "I never expected you to..."

"Use that word? I almost never do, but in this case I was quoting the Bellinen ambassador. He likes to laugh about that sort of thing," she chuckled. "Maybe I'll get a chance to introduce you later."

"That's right, you'll know the people in here a lot better than I would even in their masks," I noted.

"Don't count on it," Maia warned me. "I don't get regular invitations to dine with Their Royal Majesties like the Lady Oceanvine. *I was* here the night she and Sextant were knighted, of course and a few other times when Wizard Candle invited me to accompany him."

"Well, Mom always said this was one of the few ways for royals and nobles to let their hair down and give their titles a rest for one evening at least," I recalled. "Of course the real fun is in trying to guess who's who in the hall and I still think you'll do better than I could tonight."

“Not hardly,” Maia chuckled. “but if you want to keep your identity a secret, you’ll want to talk as little as possible. That, I’ve been told is one of the tricks of figuring out who people are.”

“You’re right,” I agreed. “It’s how I usually do it, although many people have distinctive ways of walking or making gestures too. When you know the people in a crowd well enough, it’s amazing how easy it is to recognize them even when masked. But you’re right, maybe I should learn to keep my mouth shut, especially when other Granomen are within earshot. Meanwhile I think we need to keep an eye out for One Maiyim rings.”

“Miss Denfirth!” a man greeted Maia from seemingly out of nowhere. “This is a delight. I wasn’t expecting to see you here this evening with your usual escort out of town. I must say the Wizard certainly makes it difficult for any honest man to compete.”

“Your Highness,” Maia curtsied. “I hadn’t expected to be found out so early in the evening.”

“Nor I,” the prince laughed, “but it appears your beauty has caused me to give myself away.”

Maia laughed, “Your Highness might make me believe that if he didn’t sound like a bad historical play.”

“Ah!” he threw his right hand over his heart. “Wounded to the quick. And who, may I ask, is your friend?”

Maia threw a glance at me and I shrugged in return. If he really wanted to know who I was, he’d go talk to Baron Genrik and I had no doubt whatsoever that the baron would recognize me even with my darkened hair, especially since I had not worn it pulled back this evening.

“Crown Prince Helm,” Maia began, “I present Countess Ksanya of the House of Granova.” She obviously was following the lead I gave her based on the name I gave to the herald earlier. Helm was only a few years older than Maia and me and I knew that he was considered the most eligible bachelor in Emmine. He was certainly charming enough even if on a first impression he seemed a bit sappy. I could only assume he was looking for just the right lady to be his princess.

“My honor, Madam,” Prince Helm greeted me. It had been a very long time since anyone had kissed my hand. It’s not that such behavior was considered old fashioned in Querna, although it was, but that my reputation tended to keep such courtly manners at bay. I learned later that hand kissing was old fashioned here as well, but Prince Helm had learned early on that some ladies are charmed by the gesture. My brother often did likewise. I’ll have to introduce them someday. “So, what are the two most charming ladies in the hall this evening doing by themselves?”

On a whim I decided to take a major chance. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, right? And I told the crown prince the truth. With Maia’s help, I explained not only why I was hiding from my own embassy but why we feared for the lives of his parents. Why he believed us, I’m not sure. I suppose he may have just been humoring two ladies, but it did not seem that way to me. So together we meandered through the hall looking for heavy gold rings on which the symbol of One Maiyim had been enameled.

One way to stay unobtrusive while we searched was to dance. It allowed us to move through the crowd and check out the rings on people’s hands without seeming to stare at anyone for too long. Helm alternated dancing with Maia and me and while he was always the perfect gentleman I was not in the least insulted when it seemed he was slightly more interested in Maia. The natural matchmaker within me pried into that possibility during one dance.

“Yes, I do find Miss Denfirth very attractive,” Helm laughed at my clumsy opening question. “As heir to the throne, of course, I am under pressure to find a partner with at least some noble blood which is a shame since I think she would make a better queen than most of the noblewomen in Emmine.”

I knew about that first hand. It’s one of the reasons I used to be such a brat, I think. I don’t know every noble son in Granom, but so far the ones I’ve met were boring, over-pampered and far too full of themselves. Still, I’m under pressure to marry one of them, although my great grandfather married a commoner and I told Helm so. “Not just a commoner but a former prostitute,” I added.

“Yes, but unlike Prince Zakhar, your great-grandfather, I am next in line for the Crown. The pressure on me is somewhat greater,” Helm pointed out.

“Also Zakhar did not really want to be king, I sense you are at least willing to inherit the throne,” I told him.

“It’s a duty I’ve been trained for since birth,” Helm admitted. “Still Miss Denfirth is a far more interesting conversationalist and far less predatory than most of the women who are here this evening.”

“Not everyone can be an Oceanvine,” I commented.

“Oh? Do you know the Lady Oceanvine?” he asked interestedly.

“We’re best friends,” I replied automatically, “but you know she’s taken, don’t you?”

Helm laughed, “It’s obvious to everyone but her, but yes I’m aware of that. Sir Sextant is a very lucky man.”

“Huh!” I stifled a laugh, “I don’t think he realizes it yet either.”

“That might be part of why they’re perfect for each other,” Helm suggested. “Ah, to your right.”

At first I didn’t realized what he meant, but then I remembered we were on the dance floor looking for One Maiyim rings and he had spotted one. It was our first of the evening and was being worn by a man in a mask that looked like an eagle’s head. I made a note of him and suggested that Helm should steer us back toward where Maia was waiting.

“There may be a lot more,” Maia commented when we told her, “but in a crowd this large one or two dozen people might easily get lost.”

“Also all the women are wearing white gloves,” I commented. “That’s an Emmine custom, isn’t it?”

“When in the presence of the King, yes,” Helm agreed. “That is not done in Granom?”

“No, but then we pride ourselves on the work we do with our hands, remember,” I replied, “so covering those hands in the presence of royalty would be as much against custom as not covering them here is.”

“A generation ago both men and women wore gloves while in court,” Helm told us. “Only the women do now.”

“Except for mages,” Maia added. “Mages are always presented to the Crown barehanded.”

“Now why is that?” I wondered. “A mage uses his mind, not his hands to cast spells.”

“It’s just a custom,” Maia shrugged, “but it really bothered Vine the first time she entered court as a mage. It was totally against her upbringing and she kept trying to pull her sleeves over her hands, unconsciously I think.”

“I can imagine,” I replied, chuckling, “but we need to keep an eye out for anyone behaving oddly. Maybe we should split up again?”

“I hate to say it, Madam,” Helm began. By now I realized he was not being formal but was instead satirizing the formality of others. It did make him sound a bit stuffy though. “But the only ones I see behaving oddly this evening are us.” Just then the band played a fanfare as King Hacon Ancel and Queen Melloise entered the hall.

I got an idea suddenly and reached over to get Maia’s attention. “Can you see auras like Vine?” I asked her.

“Not while you’re touching me,” she replied with half of a laugh.

“Oops!”

“I’ll keep an eye out,” she promised with her eyes closed, “but you know everyone has an aura. Well, everyone but you, that is. When I look at you this way it’s more like there’s this big hole of nothingness.”

Helm looked at me questioningly. “I’m a magic-null,” I explained. “I actually do have an aura just like anyone else, it’s just that my aura disrupts all magic.”

“Sounds like a handy talent,” Helm commented.

“Very rarely,” I replied. “Every so often I relax too much and find I have trouble turning lights on and off. I’ve practically stopped drinking wine and other alcohol because I lose control with just a couple glasses of wine. That’s why I only had that one small cup of punch earlier and have been sticking to coffee ever since. I guess you could say my real talent is in being able to pull the null-magic effect back, rather than push it out. Not every magic-null can.”

“It’s almost time for the unmasking,” Helm told us. “We’ll have to start lining up in a few minutes.”

“So early?” I asked. “I thought the unmasking was supposed to be at midnight.”

“It is nearly midnight,” Helm replied, “but if I had any part in making time fly for you, I accept the compliment.”

See? Sappy to the end. Still, I couldn’t help but respond, “I’m sure that was entirely your doing. Thank you.”

“Madam,” he replied with a bow.

“Your Highness,” I laughed while performing a curtsy.

“I see some odd auras out there,” Maia reported. “They’re sort of shimmering where most others are just consistent glows. I don’t know what that means, if anything, though.”



“We should get near the head of the processional,” Helm told us. “That way we can be near the head of the hall and prepared should anyone try something. I’m starting to sound like you two, aren’t I?”

“Only if you try talking falsetto,” I laughed. “How do we present ourselves?”

“It’s fairly simple,” Helm explained. “The processional is done to an ancient dance called *apavane*. Don’t worry, I can talk you through it easily enough. Actually it’s just stylized walking to a slow tempo and a lot of people just walk really. You could get away with it if you want.”

“No, if we’re going to do it, we may as well get it right,” I shrugged.

“Easily done,” he nodded, leading us both out onto the dance floor.

“You’re going to dance with both of us?” Maia asked, somewhat startled.

“Miss Denfirth,” Helm replied with mock astonishment. “I do have a reputation to maintain!”

“Now why do I have the feeling that reputation is about as well deserved as mine is as a party girl?” I commented.

“I wouldn’t know,” Helm shot back. “Are you?”

“Not recently,” I replied.

“That’s probably why, then,” he admitted.

“One thing I don’t get, though,” I told them as we took our places near the head of the line. “Their Majesties waited until nearly midnight to enter the hall?”

“Not at all,” Helm replied, sounding amused. “They’ve been here since the beginning, but they unmasked after the third dance set so they could be here officially. Why? How do you do it in Granom?”

“The King and Queen would arrive after the first set, but while they would wear fancy dress, they would not don masks or at least not to hide behind. Queen Orezhda, usually has one of those masks on a stick, but except to make a gesture of some sort, she rarely uses it. The unmasking is at midnight though, although we usually perform a waltz as the unmasking dance. That varies some years though.”

“Then you do not unmask before Their Majesties?” Helm asked.

“No, to each other. That can be a surprise sometimes, but usually not an unpleasant one. Someone you really don’t like is as easy to recognize as someone you do. It’s strangers who can surprise you.”

“And do you usually mix with friends or strangers?” Helm asked.

“Depends on my mood,” I laughed. “It is a good way to meet new people without the usual prejudices.”

Then the music began again and we started to process forward. *This is it*, I told myself nervously. I was right, but even now I’m not sure how I knew.

Helm was right, a pavane is very much like walking. It is walking with style while going two steps forward and one step back, kind of. Actually it is divided up into a series of steps called sets and the dancers go two sets forward, one backwards and then one forward again. During the Age of Faith when it was danced on a more regular basis, there were all sorts of variations and ornamentations. Well, there would have had to have been. It is not an exciting dance by anyone's standards, but it does make for a stately procession and it was supremely easy to learn although I could have done without the backwards set. Too many others lost track of where they were in the count and there were numerous collisions as we made our way toward the head of the hall. I also heard quite a few people reciting the steps to themselves; "Left, right, left-right-left..." and so on.

Helm did not push his way to the front of the line, but I suppose he was well known by almost everyone in the hall so while he tried to allow others to go ahead of him, everyone deferred to him even though he was masked. Well, he is the crown prince after all, even if precedence was not supposed decide who went first in this particular ceremony. To his credit, Helm did try to get at least a few couples to go on ahead of us, but was met by a chorus of polite refusals and that is how I found myself dancing ahead of the rest of the attendees. Some girls have all the luck.

We reached the space just before the thrones, unmasked and then curtsied or bowed before the king and queen. King Hacon Ancel's eyebrows rose microscopically as he recognized Maia as the woman on his son's right arm. He did not seem pleased or displeased by her presence, although I evidently puzzled him greatly, as we walked to the side I could see him whispering back and forth with Queen Melloise and I'm fairly certain they were speculating as to my identity.

One person who had no trouble recognizing me, however, was Baron Genrik who unmasked just a few minutes after I did. He approached me with his wife and told me icily, "We will discuss this later, won't we, Madam?"

"I'm sure we will," I replied calmly. With my attention on Maia and the other people unmasking, I found the ambassador was the least of my worries. I knew that might very well change within the hour, of course, but I couldn't get myself to worry about it.

"Five couples back," Maia whispered. "Something strange is happening to their auras."

"What?" I asked softly looking at the couple in question. They were a mixed couple; a human man and an Orentan woman. Perversely, the first thought that went through my mind was, "They look good together."

"Their auras are expanding," Maia continued. Then the significance of what was happening sunk in. "They're casting a spell. Stop them!"

Helm and I both rushed forward to stand between them and the king and queen and I stretched my null-magic field out as wide as I could just as they cast a powerful fire spell. A wall of fire surge out toward us and came within three feet of me before suddenly winking out, or at least a large hole where my null-magic field was winked out. The rest of the fire wall kept going and I heard screams of pain behind me. I didn't have time to see who'd been hit, however. The two attackers were trying something again.

Helm started charging toward the two and I was hard pressed to stay with him and keep him safe from

the next hostile spell. I'm not sure what it was, but it must have been something pretty darned nasty under other circumstances, but as I told Maia weeks ago, there's only one mage on Maiyim capable of casting a spell while under the influence of my null-magic and she was not here.

"Impossible!" the Orentan woman declared. The heck she knew! I think she tried something else. She should have tried dropping a chandelier on me, it would have been a lot more effective than whatever she tried. Meanwhile Helm was ahead of me and was tackling the man. The woman, however, stepped back and pulled a gun out of her purse.

*So much for Palace Security*, I thought even as I reached forward and grabbed her gun arm. Granomen are stronger on average than humans and much stronger than Orenta. From the noises she made I think I lifted her arm up so fast I nearly dislocated it. Too bad I didn't. A single gunshot filled the hall, setting off screams of panic among the thousands of people there.

Yeah, panic. That's just what we needed to make the whole evening complete. Good thing the only damage was to the ceiling although I understand there are several art historians arguing vociferously among themselves as to how to restore the fresco painted there or whether it should be left as it is. Nice work if you can get it, I suppose.

In our tussle, the Orente's mask fell off and I recognized her as the wayward Senator Petrana Hawakamala. I guess she was just as nervous about this evening as I was, though, because that arm I was holding was slippery with her perspiration and she was able to wrench it out of my grip and bring the gun down bruisingly hard on my left shoulder.

I'm told that had I been an Orente or a human I probably would have suffered a broken bone and I guess that's what the erstwhile senator was hoping for. As it was, though, she had enough force behind the blow to knock me partially down. The last time I felt that much pain was when I fell off a horse and broke my leg. Come to think about it, I gave up riding after that.

As I looked up from my knees, Hawakamala was aiming the gun at His Majesty, although she was shaking enough that half the people in the hall were potential targets. I came up as fast as I could and hit the side of her jaw as hard as I could with the back of my right fist and sent her flying several feet. I didn't get to see her landing, however. The move, while necessary to save Their Majesties put more strain on my bruised shoulder than I could take and I blacked out for a few seconds.

While I was out, the man Helm had tackled managed to kick the prince in the face and bolted for the doors only to be gunned down by the security people on duty as he cleared the door. Five others were arrested on Maia's word and relieved of their One Maiyim rings.

Meanwhile, I was lying on the floor trying to return to something resembling alertness. I was somewhat surprised to find Baron Genrik at my side though, but Maia was busily pointing out members of One Maiyim. His expression was stern, but I didn't think his anger was directed at me for a change. On my other side, however, were King Hacon Ancel and Queen Melloise. Melloise helped me sit up and I attempted a bow from that position, but the king stopped me. "My lady," he told me, "it appears we owe you our lives and yet my queen and I do not even know your name."

"Your Majesty," Genrik spoke up, his manner entirely different from what it had been only minutes earlier. "It is my profound honor to present my deputy, The Countess Ksanya Renata Dorofea Petronelle of the House of Granova."

"Madam, you have our undying gratitude," Hacon Ancel assured me. I don't think I've ever heard

someone mean that literally before, but I took a deep breath and did my best to make a pretty speech in return.

Fourteen

“What happened to Hawakalama?” I asked as Maia and Helm returned to my side.

“Was that her name?” the king asked. I guess the way he phrased that said it all, but Maia told me anyway.

“She was dead by the time she hit the floor,” Maia told me. I clearly recalled seeing Hawakalama’s head spin around as I hit her. The blow must have snapped her neck; sometimes I don’t know my own strength. I was not particularly happy knowing I had killed her, but I had even less choice about it than I did with Justice in Querna. At least this time I wasn’t cracking wise about it.

“And the others?” I asked. They told me about Hawakalama’s dance partner then and about the others who’d been arrested. They never stood trial, however. They were all found dead in their cells the next morning. We don’t know if it was suicide or the act of their comrades in One Maiyim. We do know they died by magic, however. Uncle Candle was able to determine that much when he returned a week later. Vine and Six were a week behind him, however. They had to wait until after final exams and then they even had to grade some of their own.

Maia and Helm were dears and insisted on staying with me while the royal physician examined me. When I told him about the pain I’d felt, he had me rushed off to the nearest hospital for x-rays. Maia and Helm were with me all the way and waited until I was released. Then they saw me back to the embassy and Maia stayed the night in the suite next to mine. Too bad it wasn’t an adjoining suite.

It turned out that gun really had broken my collar bone, but not all the way through. It was a hair-line, green-stick sort of break and I was instructed to keep my left arm in a sling for the next few weeks. Queen Melloise had a special sling made for me with my personal coat of arms embroidered on it although that didn’t arrive for another two days.

After all that time, I was very happy to be able to sleep in a real bed for the first time in weeks. Bruised as I was, I didn’t sleep very soundly and I woke up when Lorenia came into my room to lay out my clothes for the day.

“Good morning, Lorenia,” I told her as I opened my eyes.

“Good morning, my lady,” she smiled at me. “Welcome home!”

I realized that Maia’s apartment felt more like home to me after the weeks I’d spent on her couch, but I wouldn’t admit that to Lorenia. “Thanks,” I told her. “I hope you’re picking out things that are easy to get on.”

“Yes, my lady,” she replied brightly, “A loose blouse and a wrap-around skirt.”

“Isn’t that a bit informal even for Randona?” I asked. It would have been in Querna at least for a deputy ambassador.

“Not at all, my lady,” Lorenia assured me. “I’ve seen business women wearing outfits like this.”

I looked over at her choices. They weren’t as severe as I might have expected. Well, there weren’t any rules that said I had to wear a gray-striped suit and a top hat. I would trust Lorenia’s tastes, for now.

“Knock, knock!” Maia called as she opened my door. “Have a nice sleep?” she asked.

“What little I got,” I grumbled lightly, “but I’ll get better, I promise.”

She looked over at the clothing Lorenia had laid out. “Oh you’ll look good in these,” she enthused.

There was another knock on the door and another embassy servant wheeled in a cart with breakfast for two on it. He set it out on a small table by the glass door to the balcony where Maia and I could sit and look out into the embassy courtyard. I thanked him for the service, but made a note not to eat in my room very often. The kitchen was good enough for me. The coffee is hotter and fresher there too, though from the looks of it, Cook had put herself out for me this morning. I sent her my compliments by way of Lorenia.

Maia and I were only about half done when my phone rang. I started getting up to answer it, but she stopped me and answered the phone in my stead. If she wasn’t such a close friend I would have been tempted to hire her away from Uncle Candle. I really liked her business style and you might have thought she’d been my personal companion for years. Maia just has the knack. “Oh, of course,” Maia replied after exchanging a few words. “Please hold.” The phone had a long extension cord and she brought it to the table. “For you, naturally,” she told me, with her hand over the microphone. She mouthed something, but I’ve never had the ability to read lips.

“Hello?” I spoke into the phone.

“Good morning, Cousin,” Veras greeted me from the other end. “I hear you’ve been causing trouble again.” Was he angry? Pleased? Something else? I couldn’t tell. Veras was very good at keeping people guessing. I thought I’d done well, but who knows how he might have heard about the night before.

“Afraid so,” I replied carefully.

“I have one of your favorite tabloids in front of me,” he continued.

“Oh Gods!” I moaned. I realized it was a couple of hours past midnight in Querna. Had Veras been woken up to be told what had happened?

“The headline says, ‘Ksanya King-Saver!’ and has an interesting photograph of you rather spread out.”

I laughed. “I can imagine. I was trying to make my null-magic field spread as wide as possible. I guess all manner of parts of me were sticking out?” That’s the sort of photo that kind of paper likes to print.

“Well, you didn’t quite fall out of your dress,” he chuckled.

“Good,” I replied. “I’d like to think I would have remembered that. I only had one cup of punch after all. I’m trying to be a good girl these days, you know.”

“I think you’re being very good, Cuz,” Veras assured me, “So does Baron Genrik.”

“Does he?” I asked. “It’s news to me. I know he presented me to Hacon Ancel and Melloise last night, but he didn’t really have a lot of choice at the time.”

“According to the conversation I had with him two hours ago,” Veras replied, “he couldn’t be more impressed by your performance. Oh I know you went against his express orders. He admits that, but he also admits he was wrong to give those in the first place. He was especially impressed by the way you kept pushing your way past every obstacle to do what you knew was right.”

Is that what I did? Well, yes, I suppose so. But put that way, it sounded like I actually knew what I was doing every step of the way.

“Look out your window,” Veras told me.

I had to stand up to do that, but down in the court yard there seemed to be a lot of activity around a limousine. “What’s going on down there?” I asked.

“Baron Genrik is retiring with full honors, of course. Assuming he’s keeping to schedule, his belongings should be being loaded into the limo even now.” That was why he was calling so late by Querna’s clocks.

“But why is he leaving now?” I asked.

“Results count for everything, Ksanya and your results couldn’t have been better. Not only have you improved our relationship with Emmine, but also with The Isle of Fire, although I must admit, we’ve always been on good terms with them. Madame Blizzard tells me she’ll be sending you an official thank you from Rjalkatyp this morning as well. So, Madam Ambassador, what do you plan to do next?”

Wow! Madam Ambassador! It was more than I could have hoped for so soon, especially the way all this had started. “Well, I suppose, I ought to bid Genrik a safe journey and thank him and all that. After that I’m going to have to purge this place of some of his juniors and probably all of the seniors. Genrik turned out all right, but that lot is just a bit poisonous for my tastes.”

“Are you sure you’re not prejudiced simply because they were loyal to the baron?” Ksaveras asked pointedly.

“They are supposed to be loyal to you,” I countered. “The servants and the Embassy Guards are. The career diplomats are supposed to be as well. I’ll go over each of their records very carefully and I’ll also be careful not to ruin anyone’s life, but if I’m not comfortable with an aide, he gets transferred to a new posting. Don’t worry, I won’t be vindictive, but I have to do this my way. Any chance of getting a few of the people posted in Merinne sent here?”

“Talk to your father,” Veras suggested. “I’m sure he has a few juniors there who are ready for promotion. Now that all that’s settled, there is one matter I think you’ve taken too long on. I mean really, Ksanya, you’ve been there for months and still haven’t delivered my proposal for a multinational crew on the next mission to Midbar.”

“Sorry, Cousin,” I laughed, “but I’ve been just a bit busy until now.” Ksaveras would have only been truly happy had I started negotiations last night while I was still lying on the floor. “But I’ll get on it at my earliest opportunity.”

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