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Ars Nova Magica

Book Two

The Staff of Aritos

by

Jonathan Edward Feinstein

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Author's Foreword

Autumn, for me, is also the time to visit the world of Maiyim. Most of the Maiyim novels have been written in the fall and it's just one reason I look forward to September each year. Admittedly, not all the Maiyim Stories were written in the autumn. *World of Water* was written in the spring and I don't recall when *Men of the Earth* was written, although I think it may have been during the winter. The "Three Stories" were a summer project. I have other side stories planned that will be written as my schedule allows, but for the heart of the series, fall has definitely become the time for Maiyim, at least as long as the series lasts.

In *The Maiyim Bourne*, I wrote how I am always thrilled to start a new series. Well, continuing one is pretty thrilling too, especially this one. In the first book I introduced Elie and Six and followed their early development as mages. It was a short but intense apprenticeship. In this story you will get to see them as journeymen. In *The Maiyim Bourne* I explored some of the changes to Maiyim in the Emmine Archipelago, In the Staff of Aritos; it is time to start traveling across Maiyim to revisit the Isle of Fire, Granom and Bellinen. I hope you'll enjoy it as much as I did.

Regular readers know that rather than ask for money for myself I usually suggest various charities you may consider donating a dollar or two to. In the last Maiyim book I suggested donating to any of the charities providing tsunami relief in the Indian Ocean basin. They still need help and will for some time to come, but it seems to me that there have been other disaster areas just as deserving of your help. Not the least of them is the Gulf Coast of the southern United States, devastated by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, but there have also been catastrophic earthquakes, landslides and avalanches. So all I can say this time around is pick a cause and support it.

Peace,

Jonathan E. Feinstein  
Westport, MA  
March 6, 2005  
The Staff of Aritos

## Prologue

"Unacceptable!" Oceanvine impatiently told the hapless pursuivant for the fifth time.

"My lady," the herald replied, "I'm not making the rules up as I go along. When one is presented to Their Royal Majesties it is customary to do so using one's true name."

"Oceanvine is my name!" Oceanvine shot back immediately. "After everything that happened in Sutheria, no one, not even His Majesty, can tell me otherwise."

"Oceanvine is a mage name, my lady," the herald informed her wearily. "It will not be yours officially until after you graduate."

"In a few short months," Oceanvine replied. She continued trying to stare the man down wondering where she was even finding the nerve to do so. Three months earlier she would never have

even considered doing so. She took another look at the pursuivant, a man twice her age who certainly did not deserve to have to deal with a willful young lady just barely out of her teens. "Look. Can't we compromise?"

"We have a few minutes, my lady," he conceded. "The Sovereign of Arms is in court today. If you will agree to abide by his decision, I will argue your case to him." It was a more than fair offer and Oceanvine knew it. In Granom the heralds were deeply immersed in the political life of the court, but here in Emmine they prided themselves on their neutrality. This man would present her case to his superior with the same passion and force that Oceanvine had to him and would likely be more effective as he would, no doubt, be able to cite similar precedents while arguing on her behalf.

"Thank you, Sir Ranoulf," Oceanvine nodded with a warm smile.

Her teacher, Wizard Candle poked his head through the doorway just as Sir Ranoulf left the small room in which he had been trying to prepare Oceanvine for her entrance into court. "Are you done bullying the herald?" he asked sourly.

"I was not bullying him, Uncle," Oceanvine replied with as much dignity as she could muster.

Candle shot a glance over his shoulder and shrugged, "Well, I don't see any scorch marks, so maybe you were just using your feminine wiles."

Oceanvine blushed, but Candle's secretary, Maia Denfirth, rushed to Oceanvine's defense with a shocked, "Wizard! That was out of line."

"Was it? Oh, yes, I suppose it was," Candle considered. "So how did you convince the man? Reasoned argument?"

"Mule-like stubbornness," Oceanvine admitted, earning a stifled laugh from her fellow student, Journeyman Sextant, who was standing just behind Candle and Maia, "and I did not completely convince Sir Ranoulf, but we did arrange a truce of sorts."

"An armistice is probably more accurate," Candle chuckled.

"No," Oceanvine disagreed, "a truce. I agreed to let the Sovereign of Arms adjudicate."

"I really don't see what was so important about how you were to be announced in court," Candle told her. "Even your great-grandmother wouldn't have been so insistent had she been put on the honors list before her graduation." Oceanvine's great-grandmother had also been known by the mage name "Oceanvine." Unlike the younger Oceanvine, however, she had not been born to the nobility.

"My great-grandmother would have been shocked at the very thought of being summoned to court at my age," Oceanvine countered.

"I imagine she would have," Candle allowed. "It was a few rather crucial years later before she found herself hobnobbing with the royalty. At your age she was still a student on perpetual probation. Well, if you were able to keep your temper, that puts you one up on her."

"Why do we even still have heralds in this day and age?" Sextant asked. "The Age of Faith was centuries ago. What's the point? Messages travel just as fast and reliably via the Royal Post."

“The role heralds play these days has little to do with carrying messages, Six,” Oceanvine informed him. “They are responsible for setting all matters of court protocol including the registration of personal arms. As an extension of that, the Patent Bureau is also under the auspices of the Randon Sovereign of Arms and that takes up most of the work done by modern heralds in Emmine at least. I understand their function is mostly court-related in Granom.”

Outside the room, decisions had been made and Sir Ranoulf returned to tell them it was time. “What did the Sovereign of Arms say?” Oceanvine asked, betraying the nervousness she had been suppressing all afternoon. Sir Ranoulf told her and she replied, “Thank you,” and leaned over to kiss him lightly on the cheek.

The throne room of Their Royal Majesties, Hacon Ancel and Melloise, was a long hall with a ceiling that cut up through two other palace floors, forming a pair of balconies. The walls were white plaster and the woodwork was aged cherry wood. Over one hundred portraits of the previous kings, queens along with various heroes of Emmine lined the walls and much of the ornate curlicues in the wood were covered by gold and silver leaf, giving the entire hall, in Oceanvine’s opinion, a cold and metallic feel.

The king and queen were just finishing up with the business of elevating a prominent businessman to a knighthood. There was a polite round of applause from the attendees who had ranged themselves along the sides of the long hall, leaving a narrow corridor open down the center.

Finally the moment arrived and a herald began, “Wizard Candle, Marquess of Sentendir and Companion of the Silver Stay, the Lady Elinor Oceanvine Jenynges...”

There was a loud gasp and a barely stifled grumble of outrage on the right side of the hall. Glancing in that direction, Oceanvine spotted her grandmother, Countess Myrrha, glaring at her with even greater anger than Oceanvine had experienced that one time her father had caught her practicing telekinesis when she was a girl. It had been Myrrha who had specified young Elinor’s punishment and Oceanvine had never forgotten it. Neither had her brother or cousins. They had all been watched for any signs of incipient rebellion after what Elie had thought was an innocent game with her favorite ball. Last spring such a glare would have made Oceanvine wilt where she stood, but sometime over the summer she had grown up a bit.

“and Journeyman Sextant,” the herald continued, ignoring Countess Myrrha’s outburst, “are hereby called into the royal court!”

It had been arranged that Candle would enter ahead of his two students, followed by Oceanvine and Sextant, but at the last moment, Six held his arm out for her and they strolled down the hall with Oceanvine on that arm.

“By definition,” King Hacon Ancel told them, “anyone we elevate can be considered a hero of the kingdom, but it is utterly unprecedented that we can reward anyone who has saved as many lives as you three did in our Royal Colony of Sutheria last month.

“Wizard Candle, you have refused offers of knighthood both from our parents and from us in the past, so we will not offer you that again, but I hope you will accept a barony from our hands.” Hacon Ancel caught a sparkle of delight in Oceanvine’s eyes at that so he rushed ahead before Candle had a chance to frame a suitable reply, “Therefore we grant you the island of Tamollen in Sutheria for you and your descendants to have and to hold from this day forth.”

Candle’s brow furrowed as he tried to recall just which island Tamollen was. Then he suddenly chuckled

as it came to him, but the king had already moved on to Oceanvine and Sextant. “Lady Oceanvine, Journeyman Sextant, the Order of the Star of Emmine, while technically a knighthood, is also the highest service award in our kingdom. We are informed that you two are the youngest grantees of that most honorable order and yet it seems like small thanks to us for the services you have performed in this first year of your careers as mages.”

Having said all that, Hacon Ancel began the almost ritualistic ceremony prescribed by the customs of Royal Emmine when elevating people to the Order of the Star of Emmine and then the even longer ceremony involved in granting Candle his barony. Technically all the king needed to do was say, “You’re Lord Tamollen now,” and Candle would have preferred that to the twenty minute ceremony, but the traditions of the royal court had been so deeply ingrained in the monarchs that Hacon Ancel would never have considered such a shortcut.

The mages were Their Majesties’ last order of business for the day and the hall rapidly transitioned into a reception hall for all the honorees of the day. Oceanvine found herself bouncing from person to person, being congratulated at every turn. She recognized some of the attending nobles, having met them when they were guests in her father’s manor, but very few of the people in the hall were noblemen and most of the people were complete strangers. After a dozen heartfelt congratulations, however, she found herself face-to-stormy face with her grandmother. “How dare you use that name?” Myrrha demanded disgustedly.

“It seems quite appropriate to me,” Oceanvine replied calmly. She was amazed to realize that she suddenly felt as calm as she behaved. Countess Myrrha had always dominated the manor as though she were still married to the earl, rather than merely being his mother and young Elinor had lived in fear of the older woman’s wrath. Now, in that moment, she discovered that Myrrha’s likes and dislikes were none of her concern.

The fact that Oceanvine was not cowed enraged Myrrha further, “Magic is an abomination!”

“I do not find it so, grandmother,” Oceanvine told her with polite firmness.

“You’ll waste your life with it, girl,” Myrrha continued. That last was part of a litany Oceanvine and her brother had been forced to endure for years. Anything Myrrha disapproved of was a waste of their lives. At this moment, Oceanvine’s only regret was that she had not realized how wrong her grandmother had been earlier. “And it is a betrayal of the family.”

Oceanvine had heard that one before and was prepared. “Oh, is it?” she countered. “Then perhaps you shouldn’t have allowed me to be your mother’s namesake.” Myrrha took half a step back from Oceanvine, looking confused. “Oh? Didn’t you know? Your mother’s given name was Elinor too. She earned the money for her lessons by cleaning fireplaces. For that matter, your father was the son of a fisherman on Ketch, so I really don’t see where you get off acting more royal than the queen.”

“Insolent brat!” Myrrha snarled. “You will not use that name!”

“It is who I am, Grandmother,” Oceanvine replied with cool serenity. “Get used to it.”

“I hope you will excuse the interruption, Madam,” Hacon Ancel suddenly cut in, “but we would like to have a word with your granddaughter. You don’t mind, do you?”

Myrrha’s entire manner changed immediately, betraying her many years as a hanger-on in the royal court. “Of course not, Your Majesty,” she told him with a smile and took three graceful steps backward

before she turned and walked away.

Oceanvine, so cool and collected a moment earlier, was now a bundle of nerves until the king commented, "A thoroughly unpleasant woman. You handled yourself well. I'm impressed." Oceanvine was uncertain how to respond to that so instead she remained silent. "Your great-grandmother, however, was ever one of our wisest and most trusted advisors, Lady Oceanvine, and so long as we may call on your services similarly we are most pleased by your choice of mage name."

"I am ever your loyal subject, Your Majesty," Oceanvine replied at last, falling back on courtesies she had been fed since the cradle.

"And our most outspokenly honest one, we hope," Hacon Ancel added with a warm smile. "Your great-grandmother never failed to let me know when she thought me in error." Oceanvine caught the significance of the king dropping the royal "we" in telling her that. He was speaking to her not as her king, but as just another person. It was a rare honor, she knew, and not one she might have expected. "We find that few of our subjects are willing to be so forthright. Will you do us that service, young Oceanvine?" he asked sincerely.

"Your Majesty," Oceanvine replied with a curtsy. He smiled and nodded toward Maia who was patiently waiting her turn to talk to Oceanvine.

Hacon Ancel looked around and spotted Candle just across the hall, helping himself to the buffet table. Unlike anyone else in the hall, the king had no trouble making his way to where the wizard was filling his plate. A small aisle lined with curtsies and bows opened up before him and he soon stood next to the elderly mage.

"So, Lord Tamollen," the king began sternly, stressing Candle's new title "we are given to understand you have not been entirely honest with us."

"In what way, Your Majesty?" Candle asked curiously.

"Reports say you sailed the *Maiyim Bourne* to Sutheria and used her extensively while handling their recent problems," the king replied. "As a boat by that name is still supposedly hanging in our museum, I can only speculate how you came to have it at your command last summer."

"Ah yes," Candle hemmed. "I don't suppose Your Majesty would believe I had a copy made of the boat before I presented her to you?"

"Oh I do believe that most firmly," Hacon Ancel replied with a laugh. "But which of us got the copy?"

Candle considered his words before answering, "When you asked for the *Maiyim Bourne* all those years ago I was unable to simply refuse, but there are certain aspects to her that would never have been safe to simply give away, especially since neither of us would have much control over who handled the boat or her contents."

"What sort of aspects?" the king inquired.

"For starters, there are closets on board the real *Maiyim Bourne* that will produce any sort of clothing the opener desires. Similarly there is a food box that looks like a refrigerator but from which any sort of food or drink can be taken, hot or cold."

“That does not sound too dangerous,” Hacon Ancel opined.

“Those two? No,” Candle agreed, “nor do most of the other ways in which the boat strives to accommodate her crew and passengers, although even those gifts could be abused. What really made me wary were the pouches that sit in each of the cabins. They provide a never-ending supply of coins. Gold, silver, bronze, it doesn’t matter, those in the wrong hands could be disastrous.”

“Hmm, yes,” the king nodded, “in time, such pouches could destroy the economy, although you could have just removed them from the cabins couldn’t you?”

“Well, yes and no.” Candle shrugged. “I can pick them up and carry them off the boat, certainly. Once removed from the *Maiyim Bourne* they stop working. They’ll contain a double handful of coins and that’s it, but when you return to the boat, you’ll discover they have already been replaced by fresh money bags. You have to realize that Nildar and Wenni gave us the boat to aid us in our search for the demons. To do so, They built in sources for anything we might need that They could think of and included the money bags to help pay for port costs and anything They might not have thought of.”

“Why didn’t They just take it back when you were finished?” Hacon Ancel asked.

“Why didn’t They, indeed!” Candle laughed, then got very serious, “Nildar told us to ‘Think of it as a test.’ I don’t want to know what will happen if I fail that test, or His trust.”

“Well,” the king replied at last, “you may be correct and I must confess I am glad you still had her this summer, but to whom will you entrust that divine gift and test as a legacy when the time comes?”

Candle did not reply verbally, but his eyes strayed across the hall to where Sextant and Oceanvine were talking to Maia. Hacon Ancel followed the wizard’s gaze and nodded. Then he excused himself in order to rejoin his queen.

Candle, realizing he had emptied his plate while talking, deposited it on a tray filled with other dirty plates, helped himself to a glass of wine and moved to join his students.

“You really should have been honored too,” Oceanvine was telling Maia. “You were part of our team in Sutheria.”

“Backup support only,” Maia replied modestly, “You three did all the real work.”

“Oceanvine,” Candle began, “I heard you talking to Myrrha a while ago. Couldn’t help it, really. They may have heard you in Medda.”

“Oh!” Oceanvine blushed, “I’m sorry, I was trying to keep my voice down.”

“You did, but while you may not have noticed, the hall went preternaturally quiet at just that point for some reason,” Candle chuckled. “How did you know Vine’s given name was Elinor? I never told you that.”

“No, Uncle,” Oceanvine replied. “She did... And that’s Oceanvine!”

“Yes, ma’am,” Candle replied, chuckling.

The University at Randona

Oceanvine listened nervously to the University hymn. She had always found its words silly and more than just a little sappy, but now on graduation day it took on an entirely different meaning to her. She did not have the time to dwell on the hymn, however. She was too worried about delivering the introductory speech as salutatorian. Her faltering initial start as a freshmen prevented her from being valedictorian and even though she had been on the Dean's List since her sophomore year she was surprised to learn her grade point average was the second highest in the class. She would give the speech after the choir had finished.

It was not supposed to be much of a speech; not much more than an introduction for the other speakers. The speech had, in fact been all but provided for her by the University. She recalled the neatly typed outline of everything she was expected to cover and she had briefly considered coming out with a chalkboard on which to publicly tick off each point as she came to it.

Candle and Sextant had helped her write the speech, and then Maia had stepped in and tossed their words directly into the waste bin. "Don't be afraid of using all the clichés," Maia encouraged her. "They always involve going out and making the world a better place, right? Well, the whole campus knows you've already done that and you have a knighthood to prove it. We'll hit them with all the sappy clichés, but from you it will sound like advice from the experienced."

"Experienced?" Oceanvine laughed. "Me?"

"Yes, you!" Maia insisted.

"But I'm just an apprentice!"

"About to become a journeywoman," Maia corrected her. "This is no time for modesty, you really did save the world, or at least a substantial part of it. Face it, Oceanvine, you've already done more than most of your class will ever do. From your mouth the clichés aren't really clichés. They are a statement of fact."

In the end Oceanvine decided to take Maia's advice. "Today is our graduation day," she began simply. "Today we begin the rest of our lives." She mentally ticked off two time-worn clichés as she continued to speak. She and Maia had not written a speech so much as compiled a list of the twenty most common phrases used in graduation ceremonies. The theme, however, was about changing the world for the better and Maia was right, the trite platitudes Oceanvine enounced were seen by her audience as "See what I've done? You can do it too."

The speech went well beyond the scope the dean had sketched out for her, but Oceanvine found she really didn't care. This was her speech and she would make it the way she wanted. She need not have worried on that count, however. While she went further than directed, she didn't say anything particularly controversial and on the whole the speech was received with enthusiastic applause.

In fact the dean and his faculty had far more of a problem with the valedictorian's speech which turned out to be filled with anti-Granomish political sentiment, during which the dean walked behind the valedictorian and whispered something which made him cut the speech short. Oceanvine suspected it included the words, "You don't have that diploma yet, you know."

Finally, with the speeches over, the graduating class lined up in alphabetical order to receive their



diplomas. The dean stood at the podium and called each student up by name, handed them their diploma with his left hand and shook hands with his right. "Garrimon Farrier... Congratulations, Mister Farrier. Karellen Galasin... Congratulations Miss Galasin," and so forth. Finally he announced "Elinor Jenynges."

Oceanvine started forward and reached for the diploma only to see the dean turn toward the audience. "Miss Jenynges has done something no student of this university has in decades. After three years on the liberal arts track, she changed her major to general practice magic for her senior year. This was not an easy change to make and she had to take two extra classes over the normal load in each of her last two semesters, but here she stands today with the second highest grade point in the class and the first journeyman's degree in over forty-five years. It was once a custom that graduating mages chose new names to commemorate the start of their careers and Miss Jenynges has opted to renew this ancient custom." He turned to Oceanvine and finally handed her the diploma and, while shaking her hand told her, "Congratulations, Journeywoman Oceanvine."

Each graduate's name was greeted by polite applause, but on hearing Oceanvine's mage name, the applause was much louder and less perfunctory. "Thank you, Dean," Oceanvine replied and continued on to allow Thonas Josefson receive his diploma.

In all Oceanvine was feeling the happiest she could ever remember feeling until her family found her. "Congratulations, Elinor," her father told her stiffly. His tone implied anything but his approval. "Interesting speech."

"Uh, thank you," Oceanvine replied, trying to hug him. It was a mistake. Earl Fredrik had never been the most demonstrative of people. Oceanvine had been shocked when she first met her relatives on Kern. It seemed as though they hugged and kissed constantly but after the initial shock, Oceanvine had decided she liked the emotional openness of the people of Medda. Consequently she had a hard time adjusting back to the reserve with which her family comported themselves even while at home. The winter holidays had been a trial most of the time although, as always, her mother lent her a sympathetic ear and a comforting hug when they were alone.

Her brother, Clemen, was not as stiff and formal as their father, but only while not at home. In the manner and when within sight of their parents, he generally behaved like a miniature of the earl.

Within his daughter's embrace Earl Fredrik stiffened even more than before. He cleared his throat and Oceanvine belatedly let go of him. He looked at her sternly and nodded imperceptibly, then turned to walk away. Clemen held out his hand and gave her equally terse congratulations, although at her enquiry stare, he winked exaggeratedly and flashed her a quick smile when he was certain their father wasn't aware of it. In all, however, any joy she had taken from the day drained away until her mother, Countess Erinne, got her turn.

Erinne had not had the stern and formal upbringing her children had been forced to endure and understood her daughter and what she was going through. She opened her arms and took her daughter into a warm embrace. "I'm so very proud of you, Oceanvine!" she murmured in Oceanvine's ear. It wasn't loud enough for anyone but Oceanvine to hear, but it was enough. The fact that her mother accepted her, mage name and all, was enough for anyone.

Happy tears flowed from Oceanvine's eyes and she replied, "Thanks, Mom!"

Erinne smiled in return, even though Oceanvine could not see it. Taking a quick look around to see her husband busy talking to a pair of other noblemen, both of whom seemed to be praising Oceanvine's earlier performance, Erinne asked, "So would you like to tell me about that horseshoe you had the

gardener hang over the manor's front door?"

"Heh, yeah," Oceanvine laughed, breaking the embrace at last. "I learned last summer that I have family on Kern. One of them, a woman about my age named Jollin, made it for the manor as a parting gift." Oceanvine smile at the memory. "And she was still covered in coal dust when she gave it to me too. She'd been up all night hammering it out. Still, I wish I could have been there while she did. She promised to teach me how to use a forge, but we weren't there long enough."

"Why would you want to?" Erinne asked.

"Why not?" Oceanvine shrugged. "It might have been fun. It certainly would have been interesting. The real trick was in getting Mahten to hang it with the points downward in the Kernish style. I guess he grew up on one of the western islands where they hang their lucky horseshoes with the points up."

"Why didn't you tell us that during the winter holidays?" Erinne asked.

"About the points, Mom?"

"No, dear, about our relatives on Kern?" Erinne pressed.

"I didn't think Dad was ready to hear that some of his close relatives were blacksmiths," Oceanvine admitted.

"No, I suppose not," her mother agreed with a sigh. "So what's next for you? You told us over breakfast you wouldn't be coming home for the summer break again."

"No time again," Oceanvine explained. "Last year Uncle Candle took me on a surprise trip to Renton and then all around the archipelago. I'm not sure which the bigger surprise was; that Doctor Oceanvine was my great-grandmother, that Wizard Candle was sort of an uncle or that Six was a distant cousin."

"It's a small world, dear," Erinne told her, "or at least it seems that way at times."

"I guess," Oceanvine nodded, "although at one point I was so confused I actually asked Methis if we were related. Well, I didn't know She was Methis at the time. Candle introduced her as an old colleague named Fireiron."

"You actually met the goddess, Methis?" Erinne asked, awed.

"Yes," Oceanvine relied simply. "She's very nice. She invited me to study in Her library this summer. That's where we're going tomorrow, to a place Uncle Candle calls 'Methis' Forge' although actually it's Her home."

"But how did you meet Her?" Erinne asked.

"It was after Great-grandmother's funeral," Oceanvine explained. "Uncle Candle had promised she would be buried in Renton next to Silverwind. You know who Silverwind was, don't you?"

"Dear, nearly everyone has heard of Silverwind," Erinne told her.

"Really?" Oceanvine asked. "I hadn't and I'm his great-granddaughter."

“Your grandmother had something to do with that,” Erinne replied darkly.

“Oh, yeah,” Oceanvine nodded. “I’d forgotten. Anyway after he disinterred her body, he dragged Six and me off to Renton for the real funeral.”

“Why you exactly?” Erinne asked pointedly.

“I told you last winter how I had spent my sophomore and junior years as her companion? Well, she made me promise that after she died I would try to get on board the *Maiyim Bourne*. She said there was something there for me. Well, I didn’t know the one in the Royal Museum was a fake so I asked Six to help me get on board that one.

“Fortunately Uncle Candle stopped us. I’d hate to think what sort of trouble we might have gotten in had we succeeded. Anyway, it seems he had made a promise too – that he would take anyone he caught trying to get on the boat to her real funeral. I didn’t realize until we were well out of town that I was going on an overnight trip... Wow, that’s an understatement, isn’t it? Without so much as a toothbrush.

“We drove all the way to Renton with hardly any stops and went directly to where her real grave had already been prepared. There were four people waiting for us.” Oceanvine did not know how much she should tell and decided to censor her story just a bit. “They were all former teachers from Oceanvine’s Renton School, one was Fireiron, or Methis rather. I guess She took a liking to me because we talked away most of the night until I was too tired to keep my eyes open. It was weeks before I learned who She really was, but She did invite me to come to Her home and I think She made me promise to take the class She used to teach in Renton.”

“You *think* She did?” Erinne asked.

“Well, it was in a dream, but it was a very real dream. It is true that Uncle Candle is taking us there, though.”

Erinne was uncertain what to think about that. She fully believed in the Gods, but to actually meet and talk to one of them face-to-face? Did that really happen? She was still musing over the possibility when Candle strolled up to her. “Erinne,” he greeted her warmly. “Wonderful to see you again! It’s been a few years, but you’re looking as beautiful as ever.”

“And you, Wizard, are as full of it as ever,” Erinne laughed, “but thank you for the thought.”

Candle nodded. “I see you managed to bring your husband, the earl, with you today. I honestly didn’t think he would attend. I know young Oceanvine didn’t expect to see him today.”

“It was a near thing,” Erinne sighed, “but when half the nobles in Eminne sent letters and telegrams of congratulations for Oceanvine graduating second in her class he couldn’t very well not be here. It would have looked odd.”

“And appearances are all important,” Candle nodded.

Erinne blanched a bit, but nodded just the same. “Besides. There was that special Parliamentary session this week, so we were in town anyway.”

“I think His Majesty may have pulled a few strings to arrange that,” Candle speculated. “He’s invited your daughter to dinner at least once a month this past year. I think he misses her great-grandmother very

much and hopes to get a bit of her sharp criticism through her namesake. Young Oceanvine, however, is a much nicer and more subtle person than my sister ever was.”

“Kind of you to say so, Candle,” Erinne replied, “but in her own way she can get into as much trouble as Doctor Oceanvine ever did. Did you know that horrid woman tried to get Fredrik to disown our daughter?”

In spite of the juxtaposition of the two statements, Candle knew immediately that Erinne was not talking about his sister. “Myrrha did that?” he asked. “I can’t say I’m surprised. She was in court when Oceanvine and Sextant were granted the Star of Emmine. She nearly went through the roof when the herald summoned your daughter as ‘Elinor Oceanvine.’”

“Fredrik almost went along with her,” Erinne admitted, “until I pointed out that if the king approved of what she did, how could he publicly disapprove?”

“Your husband is a good man, Erinne,” Candle assured her. “He just has a few blind spots related to his mother’s prejudices. Did he ever learn who his grandparents were?”

“Only when Oceanvine came home at winter break.

“She blurted it out, did she?” Candle asked, amused.

“Not until after several days of browbeating by that woman,” Erinne replied with particular acid when referring to Myrrha. “Did you know she kept all the rest of Oceanvine’s relatives from attending today? Even her cousins Michal and Katrin who are students here at University. That woman!” she repeated vehemently with a peculiar emphasis that made it sound as though there was another word she would have rather used.

“You can’t even say her name?”

“Not lately,” Erinne replied.

“I pity Myrrha,” Candle told her. Erinne looked at him, surprise and confusion mixed on her face. “I really do. She sacrificed everything, even the love of her family for devotion to a cause that was flawed before she was ever born. What a waste.”

Erinne nodded, and then changed the subject, “Are you really taking Elie... uh... Oceanvine to visit the Gods this summer?”

“Sextant too,” Candle nodded. “They both met them last year at my sister’s funeral. Elie,” and he said that with a particularly soft emphasis to let Erinne know it was all right for a loved one to occasionally call a mage by his or her birth name, “has a standing offer from Methis and, of course Aritos is Her husband.”

“He is?” Erinne asked. “I never heard that.”

“Shh!” Candle told her with a chuckle. “The priests don’t know yet. Actually they were both here earlier. Nildar and Wenni were as well, but they left soon after the ceremony. The Gods are like that and try not to interfere with everyday life.”

“So my daughter will be taught by the Gods?” Erinne asked, awed once again.

“Some of them, anyway.”

Just then Maia joined them, “Wizard, pardon the interruption, but the package you’ve been waiting for just arrived by courier. I knew you’d want it immediately.”

“Thank you, Maia,” Candle replied, accepting the small but heavy object. “Oh, Erinne, this is Maia Denfirth, my... uh...”

“Secretary is the word you’re looking for, Wizard,” Maia informed him, somewhat amused.

“I was thinking something more along the lines of ‘administrative assistant,’” Candle admitted.

“A grandiose title for the same thing,” Maia laughed.

“Ah, but you deserve a grandiose title, my dear,” Candle told her, “and it suits you. Maia, this is Oceanvine’s Mom.”

“Madam,” Maia replied respectfully. “Oceanvine has told me a lot about you. It’s an honor to meet you at last.”

“Maia, you don’t call Oceanvine ‘my lady’ every sentence, do you?” Erinne asked at last.

“She’s not a countess,” Maia replied.

“No, she’s the daughter of a countess,” Erinne chuckled. “but, I imagine she’s been in court more often than I have the last few years.” Maia was still not at ease, but Erinne felt, partially from the way Candle was treating his aide, that this might be someone worth getting to know. “Tell you what,” she offered, “Why don’t we have lunch together tomorrow?”

“Really?” Maia asked. “I mean, yes, of course. Thank you! I should have time after seeing everyone off.”

“And, Maia,” Erinne continued, suddenly remembering why Maia’s name sounded familiar. “Oceanvine has told me a lot about you too.”

“Ah!” Candle exclaimed on opening the package. “Perfect timing too. Let’s go find Vine and Six.”

“They were near the stage, talking to Doctor Nichols, I believe,” Maia reported.

“Good!” Candle replied happily. “Please join us, Erinne. There was a part of the graduation ceremony that the Dean failed to perform.”

They made their way across the field to where Sextant and Oceanvine were still talking to the professor of astrophysics. “Wizard Candle says I still have a lot of catching up in the physical sciences,” Oceanvine was admitting as Candle approached. “I imagine it will be a bit before I can fill all the prerequisites for one of your classes.”

“Not at all, uh... Journeywoman,” Nichols replied. “We do have introductory physics classes you know.”

“Of course,” Oceanvine smiled, “then maybe next semester...”

“Sorry for butting in, Peder,” Candle told Doctor Nichols, “but stick around, why don’t you. This sort of thing needs witnesses. Oceanvine, your graduation ceremony is not yet complete. Neither is yours, Sextant, for that matter.”

“How so, sir?” Sextant asked.

“Along with that scrap of vellum, you were each supposed to get one of these,” Candle told him, handing then each an oblong piece of crystal. Inside the crystals were the arms of the University at Randona. “It took me a while to find two other mages of sufficient ability to help make these, but it was worth the effort, I think.”

“Mage stones!” Oceanvine exclaimed delightedly as she took hers and watched the arms within begin to glow bright red. She knew from Candle’s earlier lectures that it would only glow when she touched it. “Like the one you set in Great-grandmother’s headstone.”

“Not exactly like that, but close enough,” Candle admitted.

“I don’t get it,” Sextant admitted. “How did you get these attuned to us without our being there at the time?”

“I clipped a bit of your hair when you weren’t looking,” Candle admitted. “An invasion of privacy, I’ll admit, but I hope you’ll forgive me. The surprised looks on your faces was worth all the bother.”

Oceanvine hugged him warmly, “Thank you, Uncle!”

Methis’ Forge

One

“Come on!” Candle told Oceanvine the next morning. “You can contemplate that hunk of rock later.” Since receiving her mage stone, Oceanvine had spent much of her spare time just looking at it. To give her credit however, in Candle’s opinion, she did so while continuing to let a hex nut orbit her head. It was a habit she had picked up in her initial training and had become her signature while studying all year; so much so that several teachers had been forced to ask her to put it away during class.

“We’ve been waiting for you, Uncle,” Oceanvine replied tartly from the couch she and Six were sitting on.

“Well, I’m ready now and the cab is here,” Candle retorted. “Let’s go.”

“As long as you’re ready,” Oceanvine tossed back at him, but Candle was already out the door of his apartment.

Oceanvine and Sextant picked up their duffle bags and followed Candle out the door. Sextant closed the door behind him, but when he tested it, found it would not lock shut.

“Oh yeah,” Candle nodded when Sextant pointed it out to him. I’ll take care of that. He concentrated for a moment. “There that should do the trick.”

“Interesting ward,” Oceanvine commented. “I see the repulsion component, but what’s the rest?”

“Well spotted,” Candle commended her. “Your diagnostic abilities have really grown over the last year. Yes, repulsion to keep anyone who approaches away from the doors and windows and adhesion to keep those doors and windows shut just in case someone has the strength to get past the repulsion.”

“Strange looking ward, though,” Sextant opined. “The energy seems to be going every way at once.”

“Yes,” Candle agreed. “Oceanvine, the first one, that is, invented this type of ward. It’s nearly impossible to breach. We’ll be covering these alternating current wards this summer, but for now, get in the cab, hmm?” Candle leaned toward the driver’s window and instructed him, “Jorric International, please.”

“The airport?” Oceanvine asked. “We’re flying?”

“We’re not likely to drive to Quernlia,” Candle told her as the cabbie drove off.

“I thought we were sailing on the *Maiyim Bourne* again,” Oceanvine replied.

“Not this year,” Candle shook his head. “Why? Are you running short of Orentan blouses?”

“No, I took several before we left the boat in Keesport and they seem to wear longer than normal ones,” Oceanvine replied. “I just thought we’d be sailing her again. At least I was hoping we would.”

“I’d have preferred that too, actually,” Candle agreed, “but even at the speeds the *Maiyim Bourne* is capable of we would have spent half the summer just getting there and back, so this time we fly. Besides it’s almost winter in Granom and getting a face of salt spray mixed with ice is an experience I’d rather forego.”

“Uh oh!” Sextant muttered. “I don’t think either of us packed heavily enough for this trip.”

“Right,” Oceanvine agreed. “I threw a change of light clothes and a cotton sweater in my bag along with my toothbrush, but I was expecting to use the boat’s closets for the proper clothing.”

“Too late for that now,” Candle told them. “Oh, don’t worry. I checked the weather forecast in Mith. Those cotton sweaters should be about right when we land there and you can go shopping in Granom. Their woolens are better than ours anyway. We may not need them, however. Mith and Methis’ Forge are in the subtropical region of Quirnlia, you know.”

JorricInternationalAirportwas the largest airport on Maiyim, serving over fifty thousand passengers every day. While technically part of Randona, it may as well have been an entirely separate city. The airport had its own police force, fire department, health department and a dozen other services normally only offered in the larger cities. Over five thousand people lived in the airport permanently and their children attended a special public school there during their elementary school years.

It hosted five hotels, fifty-nine restaurants and taverns, four car rental agencies, three airplane rental agencies, three flight schools, two insurance agencies and six banks, not to mention the shopping center featuring dozens of shops and markets. What impressed Oceanvine the most, however, were the two

very long concourses leading to the various gates from which passengers would embark or disembark from their planes.

“I don’t think I’ve ever walked so much in my life,” Oceanvine complained.

“You’re getting soft,” Sextant teased her.

“Just exaggerating,” Oceanvine admitted as they passed a flower shop, “but not by much. Honestly, if we have to walk much farther, we might as well walk the rest of the way. Are we still in Emmine?”

“The concourse is less than half a mile long,” Candle informed her.

“That’s a relief,” she snapped at him. “And how many miles did we walk through the terminal before we got here? I feel sorry for anyone who drives here on their own. I doubt anyone could park within a mile of the place.”

“It is a big airport,” Candle admitted. “Well, if it makes you feel any better, the port at Mith is considerably smaller since most passengers fly on to Querna. And if you have to blame anyone for this long walk, it might be me.”

“What did you have to do with the scheduling of the airport, Uncle?” Oceanvine asked.

“Nothing I’m aware of,” he replied easily, “but every time I fly, the plane takes off from a gate as far from the terminal as possible. As far as I’m concerned all these other dozens of gates and planes are nothing but window dressing and the people waiting to board were obviously hired to make the whole place look busy. The only planes I see taking off are from the ends of the concourses.”

“That’s silly,” Oceanvine laughed.

“Have you ever flown before?” Candle countered.

“Well, not on a commercial plane,” she admitted. “My Dad has a private plane although nothing as large as the liners I see here and this my first trip out of Emmine.”

“Private flights don’t count,” Candle replied. “We’ll see how your experience goes after you’ve flown on a commercial flight a dozen times or so. The good news, though, is that we won’t have to wait long to board our flight.”

“Why not?” Oceanvine asked.

“Haven’t you been listening to the public announcements, Vine?” Sextant put in. “Our flight is boarding now. Should we run, sir?” he asked Candle.

“Not necessary,” Candle, the world traveler, replied. “We’re almost there.”

Sure enough, their flight was leaving from the very furthest gate from the terminal, but they arrived after everyone had left the lounge. Stepping through the gate, however they saw a short line of people still walking across the tarmac to a portable stairway that led to the airplane’s hatch. Getting in line, they climbed the stairs and showed their tickets to the waiting flight attendant.

The attendant looked at the names on their tickets and frowned slightly. “Wizard? Journeyman and



woman?" she asked, trying her best to sound polite in spite of her disbelief. "Is that for real?"

"Is this?" Candle asked, materializing a red rose in his hand and offering it to her. It looked like the sort of trick any stage illusionist might perform, but Oceanvine and Sextant knew Candle had just performed one of the most advanced forms of true magic; he had created that rose on the spur of the moment. From their discussions over the past year they knew he had mostly converted air and energy to accomplish it, but Candle had explained that while there was accepted theory as to how the trick was done, it had yet to be confirmed through experimental evidence. However it was something they would have to wait until they were master mages to investigate. For now, however, it was a highly impressive feat and Candle was the only mortal currently alive who could do it.

The woman accepted the rose and sniffed its scent for a moment. She smiled and turned to Sextant and Oceanvine. "Can you?" she began.

"Not even by pulling one out of our sleeves," Sextant admitted with a wink. "The best I can do is this." He held his hand out and another rose seemed to appear in his hand as well, but when the woman reached for it, her hand passed right through it. "Sorry," Sextant apologized, "maybe when I'm a thousand years old too, I'll be able to give you a real one." The attendant smiled politely and allowed them to board.

"Show off," Oceanvine muttered.

"And I'm only eighty-one," Candle told him coldly, but whimsically added, "you young whippersnapper!"

Two

It was a sign of the times that no flights ran directly from anywhere in Emmine to anywhere within the Granomish sphere of influence, so twelve subjective hours later, their plane landed at Merabawa International Airport just outside of the city of Killo in the Bellinen Archipelago.

Once aloft, there was very little of interest to see below, although their flight path took them within view of the new volcano in the Great Bay. Sextant spotted the plume of steam and ash first, but before he could point it out to Oceanvine, the pilot mentioned it over the intercom and Oceanvine leaned over and past Sextant to get a look.

"It's still completely submerged, isn't it?" she asked.

"It is," Sextant confirmed, "although I understand it won't be for much longer. At last measurement the peak was less than fifty feet below sea level and rising quickly."

"Neat! A new island," Oceanvine enthused. They discussed it for a while before each went back to the books they had brought with them.

The airport at Killo had originally been built on reclaimed land in the middle of the bay next to what had once been a large Orentan naval base. During the long time of peace with both Granom and Emmine, the government of Bellinen had cut back heavily on military spending and closed the base at Killo. The commercial airport quickly spread to encompass the area of the former base. The airport authority chose to keep most of the docks from the old base, which turned out to be an excellent decision because at

least half of the traffic in and out of the airport turned out to be by water, allowing Merabawa International to serve not only the Island of Kilarn, but much of northern Bellinen.

“We have a thirty-six hour layover,” Candle told Sextant and Oceanvine after they had been cleared through Customs..

“Good,” Oceanvine yawned as they walked through the airport. It was not as busy as Jorric had been, but Oceanvine didn’t think Jorric would be much busier this time of night. “We ought to get some hotel rooms, I think. It’s after two in the morning here, though I don’t know why I’m so tired, it’s only about Nine PM at home.”

“Sitting on your butt for twelve hours takes a lot more out of you than you might think,” Candle assured her. “Just another reason I’d have preferred to sail. There’s a hotel here in the airport. Just as well, since we aren’t likely to catch a bus at this time of night and even the taxis are few and far between.”

“This is weird,” Sextant noted as they walked through the terminal.

“What is?” Oceanvine prompted him.

“Well aside from the color of the paint on the walls and the posters and other decorations,” replied Sextant, “there really isn’t a lot of difference between this airport and Jorric International. It’s as if they were designed by the same architect.”

“Might have been,” grunted Candle. “I’ve noticed that most of the larger ports seem to look alike.”

“You would have thought the Orenta would have built along their own architectural traditions,” Sextant argued.

“I would have,” Candle agreed, “and so would you, but in truth, there’s been a lot of cultural blending since I was your age and modern structures like skyscrapers and airports seem to look very much alike all over the world. Don’t let that get you down, though. I figure we’re overdue for a period in which traditional aesthetics will make a comeback. They’re certainly trying to be different in Methis’ Chain.”

“The newer buildings in Sutheria were unique as well,” Oceanvine opined.

“True,” Candle agreed, “but their governmental buildings were copies of their counterparts in Randona.”

The hotel turned out to be part of a luxury chain that while not quite world-wide did have at least some branches in each of the three major archipelagos. Candle booked a small suite from the desk clerk, a sleepy-looking Orentan, who to Oceanvine’s eyes was more dressed for a beach party than conducting business, although she did notice that his shirt was as similar to her own as any two Orentan garments could get. “Nice blouse,” the clerk complimented her before going back to his latenight nap.

“We’ll be here for two nights,” Candle pointed out, “so I figured we might as well be comfortable. I’d have gotten some of their less pricey rooms if we were only going to be here a few hours.” Oceanvine and Sextant were both too tired to worry overmuch about where they were sleeping so long as they got to sleep, so it was only on rising the next morning that Oceanvine was able to admire the fabulous view they had of the bay from the common room of their suite.

Both Candle and Sextant were still fast asleep so Oceanvine, on calling down to Room Service, only ordered a pot of coffee and service for three rather than a more complete breakfast. Then she started

doing what she thought of as her morning exercises. First of all, she levitated a hex nut, playing around with it for a few minutes by making it perform a series of complex aerobatics. Then she let it start orbiting her head again. "I really ought to get this one gold-plated or something," she mused as she noted this was not only one of the original nuts Candle had bought for Sextant's and her training, but was indeed the same one she had been using this way throughout her senior year at University. She briefly considered replacing it altogether with a piece of jewelry or some other sort of object d'art, but decided it wouldn't be the same.

Then she started casting a series of illusion spells. She and Sextant had originally been assigned to make illusory balloons, but now, nearly a year later, she was limited only by her imagination. She was tempted to turn on the suite's television set partially to watch the news and partially for an added distraction, but then she wondered if she could create a moving illusion. So far all her illusions had been static. They could be moved from place to place easily enough, but their appearances never changed. Could she make an illusory television?

She was tempted to project one of the great plays she had studied back in school before changing her major, but realized that while she could quote many of the famous speeches and even some complete scenes on occasion, she didn't really have any of them memorized enough to satisfy her. Instead she reached for a magazine from the coffee table in front of her and started reading. As she read the first article, she projected an image of one of the leading news anchors from Emmine television in front of her and had him speak the words she read.

It was a difficult illusion to maintain because she kept looking up to watch him read the article, but since she was only reading it for the first time, he would naturally stop whenever she took her eyes off the page. So instead she had him speak one of the soliloquies she could recall. "Not bad," she said to herself as she let the illusion fade away. She was particularly satisfied by how well she had mastered auditory illusions, especially when coupled with visible ones. She made a mental note to ask Uncle Candle how to perform tactile illusions next. "Now what sort of practical use can I put that to?"

Just then there was a polite knock at the door and, on rising, discovered her coffee had arrived. She fumbled through her purse to discover she only had Emmine currency to tip the young woman who had delivered the tray, but evidently she was used to accepting foreign currency. What startled the Orente, was the hex nut still flying around Oceanvine's head.

"Oh, sorry," Oceanvine told her apologetically. "Morning exercises, you know."

"I usually do mine in the gymnasium," the Orente replied distractedly before remembering her manners. "Thank you, Miss," she said at last before leaving.

"Definitely I need to get this gold-plated," Oceanvine noted as she brought the nut to rest in front of her face for a moment. Then she shrugged and let it start orbiting once more. She poured herself a cup of coffee, dosed it heavily with cream and sugar then sat back down on the couch, only this time she used her magic to turn the television on. *I wonder why more people don't learn magic, if only to not have to get up to turn the TV on?* she mused contentedly.

The set displayed a morning exercise show of the more conventional sort so she turned through the channels to find a news program. The news at the moment was local, but as she had never had the occasion to listen to news from Bellinen, she found it interesting. Once more settled in, she went back to her exercises. She created a visible ward around one of the chairs and then tried to do another illusion. And failed. The ward disappeared and her hex nut fell to the floor. "Still not up to three spells at once," she sighed, levitating the nut back into orbit.

She was tempted to try for three spells again, but decided that dynamic illusions were more interesting and instead let an illusion of herself wander around the room. That turned out to be boring, but realizing it was a technique she needed practice at she allowed her illusory self to walk on the walls and ceiling. That was a little more fun, especially when Sextant woke up and entered the common room a minute later.

“Morning, Six!” the illusory Oceanvine greeted him cheerfully.

Sextant was still half asleep and without pausing to think he replied, “Mornin’, Vine.”

“That’s Oceanvine!” she corrected him automatically. The illusion winked out, adding to her annoyance.

“Huh?” Sextant grunted, looking first at Oceanvine on the couch and then where the illusion had been walking on the ceiling.

“You made me break concentration,” she complained.

“Sorry,” he apologized instantly. “Is that coffee?”

“Yeah,” she nodded. “I’ve been up for a while and, no, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have lost concentration so easily.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask. Why are you so sensitive about your name?” Sextant asked. “I don’t mind friends and family calling me Six. You do all the time for that matter.”

“I don’t know,” she responded, then changed her mind, “yes I do,” she decided sadly. “At first I thought it was just because my great-grandmother was so picky about it and that if I was to honor her properly I should be equally exacting, but I soon figured out that was just an excuse. What really did it was my encounter with Terabawa Grovinsk in Silamon. You were knocked out so you missed that part. He kept referring to me as ‘Little Elinor’ and in a very condescending manner. It really bothered me, you know? I told him to stop calling me that, but he kept taunting me until I couldn’t take it anymore. It was in that moment I knew my name should be Oceanvine. I told him so and killed him at the same time,” she trailed off.

Sextant didn’t know what to say. It was the first time in almost a year she had discussed the incident with him. He knew she had talked about it with Candle on the trip home and after that she had seemed better and seemed to be back to her usually cheerful self most of the time. Every once in a while Sextant would catch sight of her sitting by herself, just staring off into the distance, but if he asked her what was wrong, she’d smile and explain she was just thinking.

“You didn’t have a choice, you know,” Sextant told her at last. “He would have killed all of us. He came pretty close to doing it too.”

“Uncle Candle told me the same thing,” Oceanvine replied. “It helps most of the time. He told me my great-grandmother killed a few people over the years in pretty much the same way. With fire. He said the first time he saw her do it, there was a rogue mage who was trying to enslave him. She latched on to the enslavement spell and sent a ball of fire back up the spell string. Uncle Candle says there was nothing left but a pile of fine ashes.”

“That must have been one heck of a spell,” Sextant whistled.

“She did it in anger, Six!” Oceanvine told him. “Just like I killed Grovinsk in anger. Six, what if I killed someone else? What if I did it accidentally just because I lost my temper?”

“I think that’s part of why Wizard Candle still pushes us to improve our self-discipline, but that doesn’t sound like you in any case,” Sextant told her confidently. “First of all you don’t lose your temper easily and when you do, you usually react vocally, not magically.”

“Well, that’s true,” Oceanvine agreed. “Hey! Are you saying I shout a lot?”

“No, just when you lose your temper,” Sextant replied with a grin, “Like now. You know, though, Oceanvine is a pretty formidable name. It’s got power, but it’s not a friendly name. If you’re not careful it will hold your friends at arm’s length and you’re really too nice a person to do that. It’s up to you, but you know there’s nothing wrong with nicknames.”

“I know,” she agreed, “I always preferred Elie to Elinor, but somehow I feel like I still need to grow into the name Oceanvine. It’s a size or two too large for me at the moment. Maybe when it fits better I’ll be more relaxed about it.”

“And when will that be?” Sextant prompted her.

“When I don’t try to bite your head off when you call me ‘Vine,’” she told him, smiling slightly.

“You got it, Vine,” Sextant replied.

“Oceanvine.”

“Just testing. Oh look! Let me turn up the sound,” Sextant requested. On the television was a picture of a large rocket. Sextant hurried over to the television to turn the volume knob, but Oceanvine did it by telekinesis. “Show off!” he accused. “Or are you just getting lazy?”

“Keeping in practice,” Oceanvine retorted.

“What’s going on out here?” Candle asked a few minutes later, emerging from his room at last.

“It’s the Gran 4 spacecraft, sir,” Sextant reported, “At Honnea Spaceport, they’re getting ready to launch.”

“Already?” Candle asked. “I thought that wasn’t due to lift for another few months.”

“They pushed the schedule up,” Sextant replied. “I think it was to guarantee they make it to Midbar first.”

“They didn’t need to take the chance,” Candle noted. “The Emmine space program has been having problems of its own and won’t be ready to launch for Midbar for at least a year. I know the next two flights will only orbit Midbar, not actually land there.”

They watched the program for the next five minutes as the countdown continued, then, just ten seconds before lift-off the count was halted. It was another quarter of an hour before it was announced that the flight had been scrubbed for the day and that the crew would attempt lift-off the next day.

“Aw, heck,” Sextant muttered. “Oh well, we can watch it over breakfast tomorrow.”

“If they actually make it,” Candle told him. “As I understand it the launch window will remain open for the next few days so depending on what the problem turns out to be, they might skip a day. But speaking of breakfast, why don’t we get some?”

Three

“So what are we going to do today?” Oceanvine asked an hour later after they had breakfast in the hotel restaurant. “Go shopping for winter clothes?”

“In Bellinen?” Candle retorted. “If it weren’t for ocean travel, the Orenta would never have known what winter was. No, let’s do something different for a change. Do you like roller coasters?”

“Sure,” Sextant nodded.

Oceanvine considered the notion. “I’ve never actually been on one. It doesn’t sound like much fun to me.”

“You have to try it at least,” Sextant insisted.

“Besides, there’s plenty more to do,” Candle added. “You can ride the merry-go-round, eat junk food or just relax.”

“Oh, all right,” Oceanvine decided. “As you say, Six, I ought to at least try it before deciding it’s not for me.”

TonalaPark was a large amusement park on the outskirts of Killo and featured three different roller coasters, an old fashioned carousel, and dozens of other amusement rides, food concessions, a large miniature golf course, three stages for live entertainment, a ballroom and a bowling alley. Candle splurged for three all-day passes for the rides and Sextant led the way directly to the largest coaster in the park.

“So?” he asked Oceanvine as the ride came to an end. She didn’t respond. Instead she just sat there with her eyes wide open. “Uh, Oceanvine. You okay?”

“Wow!” she breathed at last.

“Whew!” Sextant let out his own breath. “I thought we’d lost you for a moment there.”

“That was fun!” Oceanvine told him.

“I was starting to wonder,” Sextant shook his head. “You know it’s okay to scream on the exciting bits. That’s part of the thrill, I think.”

“Why would I want to scream?” Oceanvine wondered aloud, then added, “Can we go again?”

“We can keep going all day if you want,” Candle informed her, “but you may want to compare this ride to the other two coasters. Some of the other rides can be exciting as well.”

“Let’s try the one with the big loop in the track,” Oceanvine suggested eagerly.

They rode all three coasters several times before finally stopping to eat. Amusement park food in Bellinen was even more foreign to Oceanvine than some of the exotic dishes she had sampled aboard the *Maiyim Bourne*. Much of it looked fancy, dyed in bright and exciting colors, but tasted simple such as the spun sugar treat called cotton candy. Most of the food was batter-dipped and fried.

“They made this like the fish in Emmine-style fish and chips,” Oceanvine noted, “but who came up with the notion of fried pineapple?”

Finally as the day wore down and Candle opted out of the thrill rides to listen to one of the concerts, Sextant was able to convince Oceanvine to join him on a short trip on a tour boat on the River Kil. That, she decided, was a perfect ending to the day and they spent the next hour just quietly riding around Killo harbor. It reminded her so much of the idyllic evening they had shared a year earlier in Truwich, that she started holding Sextant’s hand again.

They returned to the park to find Candle talking with a middle aged Orentan woman with long dark hair and almost black eyes. “Hi, kids,” he greeted them. “This is an old friend of mine. Merika, I present my students, Journeyman Sextant and Journeywoman Oceanvine.”

Merika chuckled, “You’re either remarkably well preserved,” she said to Oceanvine, taking both hands in hers, “or...”

“Doctor Oceanvine was my great-grandmother,” Oceanvine explained. “Is my choice of name going to cause a lot of confusion, Uncle?”

“Only on first meetings,” Candle shrugged. Then after Merika greeted Sextant, Candle continued, “Merika is the daughter of Vine’s one-time college roommate, Airblossom.”

“Oceanvine,” Oceanvine automatically corrected him.

“How are your parents?” Candle asked Merika, ignoring Oceanvine.

“Both as well as might be expected at their ages,” Merika replied. “Dad broke his leg a few months ago and is healing slowly, but he certainly doesn’t let it slow him down much.”

“He’s not still working is he?” Candle asked.

“Only part-time,” Merika replied, “in the Merinne Parks System.”

“Waterfall,” Candle explained for the benefit of Sextant and Oceanvine, “is one of the best experts on forestry in the world. How’s Blossom?”

“Mum’s fine,” Merika replied. “Still teaching a couple of classes each term at University. I think she may be the last member of the faculty with a true mage name.”

“That’s a shame,” Candle shook his head. “I think our scholars gave up too much when they started moving away from that old tradition. But the University at Merinne curriculum still includes practical magic, doesn’t it?”

“Oh yes,” Merika agreed, “but there’s no longer a specific magic curriculum, it’s all incorporated into the other sciences and disciplines.”

“Better than at Randona,” Candle told her. “Only seniors and post-graduates are taught any magic at all, and darned little of it when they are taught. Although, Oceanvine here, just graduated with the first degree in general magic in decades.”

“Congratulations,” Merika told her. “Are you going to be a wizard like the first Oceanvine?”

“If I can,” Oceanvine replied.

Two small Orentan boys came running up. “Mom! Mom! Did you see us? We were at the top of the Wheel! We could see forever from up there!”

“Very nice!” Merika told her children warmly. “Where’s your father?”

“Getting us drinks!” the slightly elder boy reported.

“Maybe you should be helping him?” Merika suggested.

Her sons considered it for a moment then replied, “Okay!” in unison and ran off again.

“Cute kids,” Candle chuckled.

“Tiring sometimes too,” Merika smiled. “Sometimes I wonder if I shouldn’t have had them when I was younger. They start school again next week, so we thought they deserved a trip to the park. Right now I’m thinking a cruise might have been more restful. Oh, here they come back. Uncle Candle, I don’t think you’ve actually met my husband,” she noted accepting a drink from the Orentan man. “This is Hasawa. Honey, This is my Uncle Candle and also Oceanvine and Sextant.”

Hasawa was short for an Orente, only five feet, nine inches tall, but he had a broad smile and an expressive face. “Pleased to meet all of you,” he told them. “Meri told me she had a human uncle, it’s too bad you were not able to attend the wedding, sir.”

“As I recall,” Candle replied regretfully, “I was traveling at the time and the invitation didn’t catch up to me until after the event. Too bad too, since I was only a thousand miles away at the time, I could have easily found a way to be there. Well, that shouldn’t happen anymore. I’ve since hired a secretary to forward messages and the like to me no matter where I am.”

“I’ve heard Querna Telephone and Telegraph is working on a portable phone that can be used in an automobile,” Hasawa noted.

“That would help too, but sadly if Granom is doing it, it might be a while before an Emmine company can acquire the technology,” Candle replied.

“It might be a while before the Granomen accomplish it as well,” Merika added. “Their technicians are clever and talented, but just because they are trying to do something, it doesn’t mean they’ll succeed. They certainly didn’t manage to launch this morning.”

“I’m not sure why anyone wants to go to Midbar,” Hasawa commented. “It’s a dead world.”

“It might have had life in the past,” Candle replied. “There are some who believe it may have had an atmosphere and surface water.”



"I suppose," Hasawa admitted, "but we know there is life in the deep ocean and we're still just starting to explore there."

"Ah!" Candle laughed, "You're letting your cultural prejudices show. Bellinen isn't in the space race although I will admit that Orentans in general have a better knowledge of the world beneath the seas than either humans or Granomen."

"It just seems to make more sense," Hasawa maintained, "And it isn't anywhere near as expensive as spaceflight."

"Both fields are worth pursuing," Candle told him. "Besides there's no breathable air in the deep sea either, so both forms of exploration have a lot to offer each other."

"We want to go on the big roller coaster!" her sons told her suddenly.

"Fine by me," their mother told them, "but the park thinks you're not big enough yet. Maybe next year, dear ones."

"Aww!" they both replied.

"They're tall enough to ride the smaller coaster," Sextant supplied just as Oceanvine noticed how tired Hasawa was looking.

"Six and I'll go with them," she offered.

Four

The approach to the airport at Mith, was directly over the head of the Bay of Rhosda. Reading a brochure on the Air Querna jet, Oceanvine learned that the bay was renowned for its tidal bore, and she looked out on the water to see if she could detect any rapid rise or fall in its height. Then she realized that was silly. A tidal chart in the brochure assured her that they were in the middle of the neap tides just now and that the tide would be in for the next few hours anyway.

"Will we have time to see the Reversing Falls, Uncle?" she asked Candle. The mouth of the bay was unique in the entire world and as the tide rushed in and out each day it formed a waterfall for an hour or so regardless of which direction it traveled. Candle privately felt that the word "Falls" was an exaggeration and that "rapids" was more to the point, although at the more extreme spring tides they might actually look like a fall. Because of the falls, it was unsafe to enter or leave the bay by boat, although Granomish engineers had constructed locks on either side of the bay's mouth for nautical traffic.

"Perhaps," Candle allowed, "but I want to get you two settled in and get your summer lessons going before we plan any field trips."

The plane was practically skimming the waves as it came up on the long runway. Then it seemed like forever before it finally touched down. However, Mith's port was a small one with only two runways and the plane did not have far to roll before it reached the gate. Once again they were left at the furthest gate from the terminal. "See?" Candle told them. "It never fails."

However it was not a very long concourse and they soon found themselves presenting their passports to

the customs agents. The agent inspecting Oceanvine's credentials raised an eyebrow although whether it was at her title or mage name, she was not sure. All he asked was, "Anything to declare?"

"No, sir," she replied. He nodded and paused as though trying to decide if it was worth inspecting her obviously half-full duffle bag. Then he shrugged, stamped the passport and handed it back to her.

"Welcome to Granom, my lady," he told her in as perfunctory a manner as possible.

"Oceanvine!" she heard her name being called as she left the customs station through an automatic door. "Over here!"

Looking to her right she saw two familiar figures. "Fireiron! Artifice!" she called to them, hurrying over. Those were their mage names, but most denizens of Maiyim knew these two as the goddess Methis and the god Aritos. Methis looked like a typical Granomish woman in her mid to late twenties, but Aritos did not look exactly like any living race on Maiyim. He appeared mostly human although his skin tone seemed to have a touch of charcoal gray to it and his eyes were an unnaturally bright green. "It's great to see you both!"

"Where's Candle and Six?" Methis asked after hugging Oceanvine.

"Still going through customs, I imagine," Oceanvine replied. "How have you two been?" Then she rethought the question. These two were eternal, and given who they were, likely to be well regardless. "Hmm, stupid question?"

"But very polite, dear," Methis told her. "We've been fine, of course. And you? I loved your graduation speech."

"You were there?" Oceanvine asked.

"Briefly," Methis nodded. "My word! How ever did you manage to fit all those trite passages together in the same speech?"

"Maia helped me," Oceanvine admitted shyly.

"Well, I thought it was inspired," Methis laughed. "I don't think very many of your audience quite understood you were delivering a parody, mind you."

"That was kind of the point," Oceanvine pointed out.

"Of course," Methis nodded.

"It wasn't a complete parody, though," Aritos noted. "Somewhere within the clichés you managed to make a few very apt points. Of course I suspect your dean may not be entirely happy with you if he ever figures it out."

"By now it's too late," Oceanvine predicted. "He's the Dean of Randona College, the undergraduate school, so as a graduate student, I'm beyond his reach, unless he gets promoted this year too."

"Stranger things have been known to happen," Aritos told her, "but I doubt he'd make trouble on account of your speech. At least it didn't go over the line like the one your valedictorian gave."

“There they are,” Methis interrupted, spotting Candle and Sextant. “Over here, guys!”

Methis and Aritos led them out into the parking lot where a large blue van was waiting.

“That’s funny,” Candle mused.

“What is?” Methis asked.

“I sort of expected You to translocate us just like that time You brought Silverwind, Oceanvine and me to see the first powered flight. I certainly didn’t expect You to pick us up in a van,” he added as the large side door was opened. Inside the van had been rehabbed for luxury travel. There was a love seat, just large enough for two behind the driver’s seat but the back of the van featured several comfortable chairs around a small table. The floor was covered with a warm brown carpet and the windows had blinds.

“Um, nice van. Find much use for it?”

“I made it just for you, dear,” Methis told him sweetly, but with a smirk that assured him She was just teasing.

“But why aren’t we translocating?” Candle asked as he finally got inside.

“We will,” Methis replied. “But that sort of thing can attract attention when we move more than just ourselves. So we’ll drive off and translocate as soon as we’re out of anyone’s sight.”

“What sort of attention does it attract?” Oceanvine asked.

“A flash of light, a rumble of thunder,” Methis replied casually. “The usual thing. We can move Ourselves quietly enough so that no one notices unless they’re looking right at Us, but We get a bit clumsy carrying others.”

“Funny,” Candle remarked again, “I don’t recall any of that last time.”

“Of course not, dear,” Methis laughed. “It happened where we weren’t so you weren’t there to hear or see it.”

“Oh,” Candle shook his head. “I think that makes sense.”

The transition, when it came, was as quiet to them as Candle remembered and when it was over they were just pulling into the front yard of Methis’ and Aritos’ home. “You’ve modernized the place,” Candle remarked.

Methis’ home had previously appeared to be a quaint country cottage, with a detached barn. The architecture was typical of the early part of the previous century. The house had appeared from the outside to be a one story affair with maybe a loft inside for storage, or at least that’s how Candle imagined it until he got inside. The barn had been Methis’ workshop, Her forge, although its internal appearance changed depending on Her needs. Now however there was a single, somewhat larger structure. It was two stories high and v-shaped with the longer right-hand wing encompassing the area on which the barn had stood and maybe a bit more. There were more and larger windows on the new exterior, so while the place still had slate tiles on the roof rather than the more common asphalt ones, the whole structure looked thoroughly modern.

“Only the outside,” Aritos informed him. “We decided the place was looking a bit archaic from the

outside and the whole point is to not attract attention, so it was either change the appearance every now and then or keep moving from place to place like Nildar and Wenni do.”

“It looks a little like my family’s home,” Oceanvine noted, “although not quite as large.”

“Yes,” Methis agreed. “It’s a fairly common style to copy among the relatively newly rich, and being way out here away from almost everything, We felt the house would be taken for the private estate of some successful and presumptuous merchant.”

Aritos continued driving toward one of two large garage doors on the far end of the right wing. The door opened for Him automatically and He drove right in and parked the van.

“Very nice,” Candle admitted, “although I understand you can buy remote devices that can do that for you these days.”

“Well, I do have certain advantages, don’t I,” Aritos chuckled. “Actually the garage openers involve a relatively simple spell. So simple, in fact that even an apprentice could learn it.”

“Telekinesis,” Oceanvine identified what they were discussing. “Yes, it was the first thing Uncle Candle had me do.”

“And now she uses it to turn the television on,” Sextant laughed, earning himself a mild hit on the arm.

“I imagine a device that does that will be along soon,” Aritos remarked. “Well, let’s make ourselves comfortable, shall we? You must be tired after the trip from Randona.”

“Vine’s more tired from all the rollercoaster rides in Killo,” Candle retorted.

“If I’d known that, We’d have joined you there,” Methis commented, getting out of the van and offering her hand to Candle, “I love the rides at Tonalá Park. Now there’s a set of inventions I can only wish I did have something to do with.”

“But the rollercoaster is an Orentan invention, dear,” Aritos pointed out as he opened the door to the rest of the house..

“I may be a Granom,” Methis contended, “but I can inspire anyone regardless of species. Wenni and Nildar wouldn’t mind,”

“I thought You were only observing these days,” Sextant pointed out.

“Oh,” Methis replied, blushing slightly, “That’s true. Old habits and all. You have to expect that sort of thing at My age.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Sextant told her with a wry grin, “should I ever happen to reach Your age. How many millennia is that now?”

Methis scowled just a bit and Sextant flinched ever so slightly, which made Methis forgive him. Instead She smiled sweetly and told him, “Now, a nice boy like you knows it’s not polite to ask a lady her age.”

“That’s what Mom keeps telling me,” Sextant sighed with relief.

“Sounds like a nice lady,” Methis commented. “I’ll have to look her up next time I’m in the right archipelago.”

“I’m just going to pay and pay and pay for that remark, aren’t I?” Sextant asked hesitantly. Methis flashed him a wicked grin. “Whoa! Nice workshop you have here,” he whistled as they left the garage. The room was cavernous, but with every sort of hand and machine tool imaginable spread out in an orderly manner along the walls. There were a dozen or more table-mounted tools – lathes, milling machines, table saws and more – set up in the middle of the floor with still more room left over. “You must have enough equipment and parts here to build a cruise ship from scratch!”

Methis’ smile warmed considerably. “I never thought of building a ship that large,” She admitted.

“The wharf area is almost large enough to launch one though,” Candle put in.

“Wharf?” Sextant asked. “Where?”

“About a quarter of a mile that way,” Candle pointed.

“You’re turned around, dear,” Methis told him gently and corrected the direction. “On the other side of the trees. I have had an ocean view from time to time, but the privacy is better this way. If it was summer, however, we could sit and swim on the beach.”

“It’s not all that cold today,” Aritos noted, “and we are in a subtropical area, but the currents here come down the Strait of Sinid from the north and east, so the water is too cold to be enjoyed.” Then he opened the door between the workshop and the house proper.

“Oceanvine?” Methis asked, slightly concerned.

Oceanvine had stopped in her tracks just inside the door, blocking Candle and Sextant from entering. “Books!” she breathed in wonder.

Candle had mentioned how Methis had bookshelves lining every wall of her house and in fact how She owned every book ever published on Maiyim. Further he had told Oceanvine how the interior of Methis’ home was much larger than the exterior, but the full implications had not struck her until this very moment. The home had ceilings at least twelve feet high and the bookshelves stretched all the way to the top of every wall. Every now and then there was space set aside for artwork, but bookshelves directly abutted the frames. There were even bookshelves running up the staircases.

Methis smiled again, and gently led Oceanvine a bit deeper into the room so the others could enter. “This is actually the game room,” She told them, pointing out a dartboard and a billiards table. There was a card table in one of the corners and comfortable chairs everywhere. “Oh, where are my manners? Have you eaten yet?”

“On the plane a couple hours ago,” Candle shrugged.

“Then you really ought to have something else now,” She retorted. “Otherwise come breakfast time you’ll be eating the fixtures.”

“Actually, we’re a bit turned about with the time change,” Sextant commented. “My stomach is still telling me it’s time for breakfast.”

“Mine isn’t being quite that picky,” Oceanvine commented, finally coming out of the daze brought on by the sight of thousands of books. “Something light if you have it, please,” she requested.

“Anything you like, dear,” Methis told her fondly. “I can whip up anything that food box on the *Maiyim Bourne* can, after all.”

Oceanvine smiled, remembering the versatility of the food box and the other fixtures in the boat as well. “Surprise me,” she replied, recalling occasions when she had told the box the same thing.

“If you all don’t mind,” Aritos announced, “I’m going into my office for a few hours. There are a few minor situations I’ve been monitoring lately and…” He trailed off.

“We’ll see you in the morning,” Candle replied, “local time, that is.”

Aritos nodded and faded out. There was a soft sound that accompanied his disappearance, no louder than a soft breeze in the trees and then it was quiet once more.

Methis returned almost instantly with a large tray. On it was a large coffee pot, sugar, cream, four mugs and a large platter filled with small round pastries that Oceanvine instantly recognized as being from Sahren. Until now the only time she had eaten them was aboard the *Maiyim Bourne*. “Oh, I love those!” she told Methis, quickly taking the platter from Her and putting it on a nearby coffee table. Then she grabbed several pastries.

“You’ve had these before?” Methis seemed surprised. She put the rest of the tray down and started pouring coffee.

“On the boat,” Oceanvine replied around her first pastry. “One morning Maia and I got up before the others and I asked the food box for something different. We didn’t know what they were until Uncle Candle woke up, other than utterly delicious, of course.” The pastries did not look like much. They had no frosting or powdered sugar coating and were small – just bite sized – and filled with any of a large variety of fillings.

“That explains it,” Methis nodded, handing Candle a cup of black coffee. “I didn’t think you could find these except on Sahren anymore. Not this small anyway. There was a single school on Sahren in which pastry chefs had to undergo special training in order to learn how to do them. Only the true masters could ever do them like these. Like many things that are hard to do though, people figured out shortcuts. Most Sahrenese pastry these days is either much larger, like a donut, or are open-faced tarts. The flavors are similar, but none of the modern pastry has the same crispiness combined with the fresh filling these old-style ones do. There are only a few old chefs willing to even make these any longer.”

“That settles it, then,” Oceanvine replied to Methis, but looking at Candle. “Next summer no matter where we go, we take the *Maiyim Bourne* .”

“Just for a few pastries?” Candle asked pointedly.

Oceanvine paused just a moment while accepting a cup from Methis. She added cream and sugar before answering, “Yes.” She looked and sounded serious, but a moment later, she broke the pose and started laughing. “I do love that boat, though,” she added a few minutes later after Sextant and Methis had their first few sips of the coffee.

“Well, it was part of your great-grandmother’s legacy to you,” Candle admitted, “along with a share of

her estate.”

“A share, yes,” Oceanvine nodded far more seriously. “The university got one third of her estate, the other two-thirds were split between her family on Kern and me. Why didn’t my brother and first cousins get a share?”

“Vine never met them,” Candle replied. “Had they needed the inheritance, I’m certain she would have left them something, but she knew you were all well off and she was not sure what the reaction might be if they suddenly heard from an unknown ancestor. She was particularly worried about how Myrrha might react. But she did know you and even if nobody else in the family knew your relationship, you had a clear connection, having been her companion.”

“I suppose,” Oceanvine nodded. “Even my small share was a lot of money - more than enough to get me through grad school. I know Dad isn’t paying my tuition from here on in. After that I ought to be able to get a job to support myself.” Absently she noticed that while they were all eating the little pastries from Sahren, the size of the pile never seemed to diminish.

“You’re already getting paid as one of my lab assistants,” Candle pointed out.

“And you can always support yourself by using money from the Maiyim Bourne,” Methis told her.

“I’d like to think I could make my way without having to resort to that,” Oceanvine replied. “I doubt Nildar and Wenni built the boat to ensure I would be able to breeze my way through life.”

“I don’t think they would begrudge you a stake if you truly needed it,” Methis told her.

“Why don’t I think of it as a test?” Oceanvine suggested. “That does seem to be the unofficial motto of your family, doesn’t it?”

“I suppose it does,” Methis grinned.

“Perhaps it should be my personal motto as well,” Oceanvine mused. “So when may I start studying?” she asked both Candle and Methis. “And where should I begin?”

“We’ll be here all summer,” Candle assured her. “There’s no need to rush. Take a night off.”

“Besides,” Methis added, helping herself to another of the Sahrenese pastries, “I want you both well rested before you start my class.”

“What class is that?” Sextant asked.

“Life 101,” Methis told him. “And it starts tomorrow morning. I haven’t decided whether the first session is before or after breakfast, though, so you should at least get enough rest.”

Five

Oceanvine woke up the next morning feeling more than merely refreshed. She felt ready, eager even, to take on the world. Remembering Methis’ threat to start classes before breakfast, she rushed through her usual morning routine. Then she stuck her head out the window to see how cold it was in case they were

to work outside and decided she could wear what she and Maia referred to as their “uniform;” a blouse of Orentan silk, emblazoned with the usual garish floral pattern and a cream-colored skirt.

She hesitated while slipping on the skirt when she recalled Candle explaining about the time Methis taught him how to knap flint. “Jeans would be more appropriate for that,” she thought out loud, then decided to go with her first instincts. She could always change quickly enough. When she was ready, she all but ran down the stairs to discover Methis had created a large Granomish country-style breakfast. “Wow!” Oceanvine breathed appreciatively.

“Good morning, dear,” Methis greeted her. The goddess was sitting in one of her many reading chairs with an open book in her hands. It was a position and action Oceanvine came to think of as Methis’ default. Reading was the one activity Methis seemed to do most. “Nice outfit.”

“Is it appropriate for my first day of class?” Oceanvine asked hesitantly at the odd tone of Methis’ compliment.

“Entirely,” Methis assured her. “It’s just that I saw your great-grandmother dressed like that so often that for a moment it was as though she was back with us. Admittedly she would have had to have dyed her hair and lost about sixty years, but...”

“I’ve never even seen pictures of her at my age,” Oceanvine admitted.

“Neither have I,” Methis admitted. “She was several years older when we first met, but does this help?” She reached over to the table next to her chair and picked up a small, framed thaumagraph. Thaumagraphy was an antiquated means of producing pictures that had reached its peak in popularity some fifty-five years earlier. Since then other, more reliable methods had been developed.

“That’s her?” Oceanvine asked, looking at the portrait of a blonde woman in her mid-twenties beside a man in his forties. She tried to spot a resemblance between this and the elderly woman she had known and nearly failed until she noted a certain determined look about her eyes. That, at least, had never changed.

“And Silverwind,” Methis replied.

Oceanvine took her first good look at her great-grandfather. Candle had told her that Silverwind had been clean shaven throughout most of the time he had known him except for the first year or two before Silverwind had married Oceanvine. This portrait was obviously from before their wedding. Silverwind had black hair with a salt and pepper beard. The beard was short and neatly trimmed and not at all like the long flowing brush the statue on Ketch had depicted him wearing. Something about the shape of his face looked familiar, however, and then she realized what it was. Her father’s face was similarly shaped, so was her brother’s. So too, she suddenly realized was that of her grandmother and to a somewhat lesser extent was her own. Uncle Candle had told her there was something about the line of her chin that reminded him of the Oceanvine that had been his sister, but there was actually a stronger resemblance between her and Silverwind. They even had almost the same hair color.

Remembering her classes in genetics, Oceanvine wondered how dominant the genes for the shape of her face and the color of her hair must have been for them to still be visibly effective three generations later. She was the only member of the family with very dark, nearly black hair, however, so perhaps that was just a matter of chance and perhaps she was reading more into this portrait than was really there.

“You may keep that if you like,” Methis told her.



“Thank you. When did they pose for this?” Oceanvine asked.

Methis chuckled, “They didn’t. This is how I remember them on our first meeting. But I guarantee the likenesses are exact. You can ask your Uncle Candle.”

“Ask me what?” Candle inquired as he came down the stairs. “Hey, nice spread! Last time I saw a breakfast like that was in the WurraPalace.”

“About this, Uncle,” Oceanvine answered, showing him the portrait.

“Oh my!” Candle sighed. “That’s just marvelous.”

“I believe Oceanvine was questioning the accuracy of my memory,” Methis commented wryly.

“I was not!” Oceanvine retorted immediately, but then caught Methis grinning at her and realized she was being teased.

“This is perfect,” Candle informed the journeywoman. “Why aren’t we eating?”

“I got distracted, I guess,” Oceanvine admitted. “Shouldn’t we wait for Six?”

“Sextant can look out for himself,” Candle replied, chuckling. “Besides, I heard him banging about upstairs. He should be down soon.”

Once breakfast was over, Methis decided it was time for “school” to begin. Oceanvine had been doing her morning exercises with the hex nut and set it once more to circling her head. “History lessons today, I think,” Methis decided as Candle excused himself to study in another part of the house. “Let’s get comfortable and then I’ll start.” Oceanvine noticed as she moved to one of the reading chairs that the table they had so recently eaten off of was now completely cleared save for a vase of flowers in its center. “Let’s start off from the very beginning of the world. “Your priests would have you believe that Midbar was created by My parents and Their siblings before Maiyim and was an error. The only part that is actually true is that the Elder Gods created it. They would also have you believe that it was entirely at the insistent urging of My husband, Aritos. He may have had the initial idea, but the decision was arrived at jointly and Midbar was actually created just after Maiyim, by pinching off a bit of the still molten world and setting it in orbit. It was all according to their plan. They knew that in order to create the world as we know it, Maiyim would need significant tides.”

“Did They know that instinctively?” Sextant asked.

“By experience,” Methis replied. “Maiyim was not Their first attempt. The mythology has that right at least.”

“So which world was their first attempt?” Oceanvine asked.

“It no longer exists as such,” Methis replied. “And in another sense, we live on it. The material was reused to create Maiyim.”

“Did the first world have a name?” Sextant asked.

Methis looked puzzled. “I don’t think so. You would have to ask Aritos. To tell the truth, I never

thought to ask. Anyway, the first attempt was really the equivalent of a science experiment, I understand. The Elders were learning how the universe works. It was not really an attempt to create a living world so much as learning enough in preparation to creating one.”

“Keep that in mind,” Candle told them as he walked through the room on the way toward the staircase. “You have to know the physical laws of the world in order to excel as a mage. Methis, I don’t mean to barge in on your instruction, but I was hoping we could strengthen that aspect of Oceanvine’s knowledge while we’re here.”

“I am rather weak on that,” Oceanvine admitted. “Until senior year I was most strong on the liberal arts.”

“That liberal arts education, dear, stands you in better stead to excel as a mage than Sextant’s physical sciences training stands him. Not that you’re at a disadvantage, Six,” She added hastily. “It’s just that Oceanvine is better versed in philosophy, history and the other social sciences that will really give her the flexibility a wizard needs most. Candle, I’m surprised you didn’t remember your own training along those lines. Didn’t you study with Serabawa?”

“Yes,” Candle nodded. “He taught me how to surf.”

“Among other things, I’m sure,” Methis laughed.

“I’ve never learned how to surf,” Oceanvine noted absently.

“Neither have I,” Sextant told her. “Not much in the line of surf on Ketch unless there’s a big storm coming and if that happens we generally have other matters on our minds.”

“Never trust a philosopher who cannot surf,” Candle told them sententiously. “Serabawa told me that in my very first session, but he taught me mathematics as well.”

“That’s because the Orenta used to lump math and philosophy together,” Methis nodded. “I always found it an amazing combination of disciplines, but it made sense in its own way. It certainly made Orentan scientists the most thoughtful on Maiyim.”

“So when are you going to teach me to surf, Uncle?” Oceanvine asked him.

“Not this summer,” Candle admitted. “Maybe next year. Too cold to go surfing around here, you know.”

Methis laughed. “Oceanvine if you really want to go surfing, we can always take the time to find a warm beach in Bellinen.”

“How?” Oceanvine asked.

“Dear, I do have a few talents that have obviously slipped your mind,” Methis explained, smiling.

“Oh, yeah,” Oceanvine agreed sheepishly.

Just then a bell rang in the next room. “Time for a rapid shift in subject,” Methis announced, “or maybe not. It’s still history, but this time it will be history in the making.” She gestured to the other side of the room where a large television screen had just appeared.”

“That’s quite a set,” Candle commented.

“Just a few decades ahead of its time,” Methis admitted.

“Since when do You need a television?” Candle asked.

“Sometimes it comes in handy to keep track of what news is or is not being reported,” Methis replied as the set suddenly came to life. The screen was filled with the same massive rocket they had viewed on the screen in Killo.

“I thought they launched yesterday,” Sextant commented.

“They stopped the countdown just before ignition again,” Methis told him, “because of heavy clouds downrange. This is the day they actually take off and a good thing too, since this is the last day of the current window. They would have had to wait another month if today did not work.”

Then She stopped speaking and they all just watched the Gran 4 spaceship lift off on its way to Midbar, Maiyim’s one natural satellite, while a newsman commented on the spaceship’s progress. Finally, about half an hour later, the launch coverage ended and the program switched to a game show. Methis caused the set to dematerialize and she returned to her lecture on the creation of Maiyim.

In the afternoon, She took them into her workroom for a practical lesson in magic. “Translocation,” She announced. “It’s a fairly advanced technique, but I believe you two are both up to it. You are certainly further along with your training than Candle was when he first attempted it.”

“But Uncle Candle was sick at the time and nearly killed himself trying it,” Oceanvine replied.

“Ah, he’s told you the story? Good,” Methis nodded. “We’re not going to attempt to move large objects or even living ones just yet. The difficulty of translocation increases proportionately with the size of the object you are attempting to move multiplied by the distance you are attempting to move it. Candle tells me you’ve been working with hex nuts, as if I couldn’t see for myself,” She giggled. Oceanvine’s hex nut from her morning exercises was still in orbit about her head.

“Oh, sorry,” Oceanvine replied. “I forget it’s up there a lot.”

“No need to apologize,” Methis assured her. “The fact that you are doing that completely with the power of your mind, rather than using an external power source, for so long is really quite impressive. You’ve been able to keep enough of your mind on keeping the nut going around you while also paying attention to Me. The ability to concentrate will be very useful for this lesson. You may as well stop it for now since it’s going to take everything you have to translocate, especially the first time.” She continued to discuss what she wanted and how important it was to keep their goal in mind, but did not actually tell them how to accomplish the act.

“Think of it as a test,” Oceanvine quipped when Methis finally left her and Sextant alone to make their attempts.

“I’d rather think of it as a laboratory session,” Sextant grumbled.

While they worked, Methis went back into the house proper where she found Candle pouring laboriously over several fairly dusty treatises on advanced magic techniques. “Just what are you

researching, dear?" She asked.

"You already know how the One Maiyim organization has resurfaced," Candle began. "Heck! You predicted it all too literally, didn't you? You told Vine the time to act against One Maiyim would not come within her lifetime. She died a year ago and we immediately had to deal with rogue mages from One Maiyim."

"Oceanvine was a very tired woman those last few years, Candle," Methis reminded him. "Even if Grovinsk or one of his colleagues had started up before she died, she still wouldn't have been in any shape to have helped you. And you wouldn't have let her try either."

"Like I'd have been able to stop her," Candle laughed mirthlessly. "No, You're right. The exertion alone might have killed her. Vine's mind was as sharp as ever, but her body was falling apart, wasn't it?"

"One of the penalties of growing old, I fear," Methis sighed. "I do wish mortals would finally work out the solution to long and healthy lives."

"How do You stand it?" Candle asked Her. "You live forever..."

"Not forever, dear," Methis told him. "Nothing lasts forever."

"Then for an uncountable number of millennia if you would rather," Candle corrected himself, "For all intents and purposes You are eternal."

"No, just indefinitely prolonged," Methis replied.

"Good enough, but how do you stand losing so many friends?" Candle asked. "You aren't exactly a hermit even way out here. Not everyone who knows You knows exactly who You are, but You've said on numerous occasions that You often have visitors." Methis nodded silently. "You've lost, what? Thousands of friends over the years? Millions? Can you even stand to keep track of how many?"

"Dear, Candle," Methis spoke at last, "I prefer to remember in terms of how many friends I have made, not how many I've lost."

"Of course," Candle nodded. "I should have realized."

"So what about One Maiyim?" Methis asked.

"Well, ever since our encounter with Grovinsk in Sutheria, I've been trying to track down other members of One Maiyim. That organization is dedicated to ruling the world just like they were the last few times around. For a change, I'd rather stop them before they start."

"Certainly it would be more effective than waiting for them to act," Methis agreed.

"Sometimes I wonder if making it an outlaw organization was a good idea," Candle admitted. "At least they were easier to find before they went underground."

"The people you want to stop have always been underground, dear," Methis replied.

"And they've been using forms of magic I still haven't been able to fathom. Those rings they used in Querna and Randona for example."

“That’s not so hard,” Methis told him. “At least if I were trying to accomplish the same sort of thing, I would first charge the rings with power and then impress my instructions on them. That could include instructions on how to work alone or in concert with other activated rings in the vicinity.”

Candle looked at Her strangely. “You don’t usually give me that sort of information in such a straight-forward way.”

“You usually ask how something very specific is done, dear,” Methis replied. “This was just speculation on My part. I said it was how I would have done such a thing. Perhaps you should experiment along those lines while you’re here this summer.”

“I will,” Candle decided. “I’m also concerned about the way Grovinsk was using the so-called Bond of Aritos last year.”

“Yes, that is disturbing, but predictable,” Methis commented. “The Bond is one of the most powerful manifestations of magic available to mortals.”

“But it is always ultimately destructive,” Candle replied. “With the demons imprisoned you might get away with using the Bond once or twice; maybe a few more times, but ultimately it will destroy you.”

“As you say,” Methis told him, “you might get away with it a few times- more than once or twice because the demons are imprisoned, but that just means that the dangers are that much greater. Anyone using it thinks he’ll know when to stop. I doubt anyone doing so will know their limits though. The arrogance you need to even try it once will be enough to convince you to keep using it. But don’t worry, dear. It’s as I told you; nothing lasts forever. One Maiyim is nowhere as powerful as its leaders think it is and their threat won’t last forever.”

“But will I live to see the day?” Candle countered. He didn’t let Methis have the time to answer that. “No, I know you won’t answer that sort of question and I’m not sure I would really want to know. It’s just that I’ve been feeling my mortality lately, especially since Vine died.” They were both silent for a few minutes; Candle because he was deep in thought and Methis because She realized Candle had returned to the matter that most concerned him just now.

“She was alone when it happened, you know,” he finally continued. “I would like to have been with her at the end.”

“Candle,” Methis told him gently, “she died in her sleep. She would never have known you were there.”

Candle sighed. “I wasn’t home when Jillanda died either.”

“Your wife understood, Candle. She was so very proud of you,” Methis replied. Then she saw to the heart of Her friend’s problem. “You’re afraid of dying alone, aren’t you?” Candle, tears running down his face, looked up and nodded. “Don’t be, dear heart. I promise you won’t die alone. No matter when or where it happens, I’ll be with you.”

It was a long time before either of them spoke again.

Neither Oceanvine nor Sextant managed to achieve a successful translocation that first day, nor at all during the next week. Oceanvine tried a technique that had worked for her before, attaching a string of energy, known among mages as a spell string between the hex nut and its ultimate destination, but when she commanded it to move, it just slid across the floor. This led to a brief period of experimentation on both Oceanvine's and Sextant's parts in which they discovered they could predetermine the path such an enchanted object would move once set on its way.

Aritos and Candle walked in on them as their hex nuts were skittering in strangely convoluted paths all over the floor of the workshop. "That's an interesting use of magic and may even turn out to be useful," Aritos told them patiently, "but the process you want is really much more direct. There is nothing subtle about translocation."

"I'll say," Candle agreed. "Keep in mind that until a bit over a century and a half ago, mages didn't even realize it was possible."

"And yet you did it while sick," Oceanvine observed.

"Sometimes being out of your mind just a bit helps you take short cuts. If it makes you feel any better, it was a long time after that before I finally translocated an object while healthy and thinking straight," Candle admitted.

They accepted those hints and began working on their concentration once more. After another hour of not accomplishing their goal Sextant observed, "We're too tense. The energy can't flow."

"True," Oceanvine nodded. "Well, you know what Uncle Candle says in that sort of case. 'Go back to basics.'" She performed a fair imitation of the wizard that made Sextant snort a stifled laugh. Then she took her hex nut and let it orbit her head again, before reaching for another three which she soon began to juggle. Sextant joined her in the telekinetic juggling and they were soon moving two trios of hex nuts back and forth in a number of complex patterns.

"If you fail as mages, I suppose you can always join the circus," Methis giggled when she caught them at it a few minutes later. But before they could explain, she nodded and told them, "That's a good way to relax and to work cooperatively. Candle is right about you two. You're advancing much faster than your colleagues would have a few decades ago. Why do you always keep your eyes open though?"

"Uncle Candle told us to," Oceanvine replied. "We know it makes magic harder to accomplish that way with all the distractions, but he says it makes us stronger mages when we finally do accomplish something."

"He isn't wrong," Methis considered, "but you have to realize he grew up with Silverwind who always made magic look so easy. Silverwind had an amazing level of concentration in any being whether divine or mortal and he was able to accomplish some fairly amazing feats without needing to sink himself into a self-hypnotic trance like most mages did. But translocation is a very advanced technique. Perhaps you should try closing your eyes while doing it, at least the first few times. Um, do you even know how to use self-hypnosis?"

Sextant nodded and Oceanvine replied, "Great-grandmother taught me."

"Good," Methis nodded. "Well, I think this may be a good time to use it. We'll worry about real-world conditions after you have managed to translocate your hex nuts a few times."

The two journeymen stopped juggling and prepared to sink themselves into a light trance. Oceanvine felt the light calmness that always flowed over and through her as she used this technique and she immediately reached a level of relaxation she rarely achieved while fully conscious.

Once she felt she was ready, she reached out with her mind to observe her surroundings. The workshop was just as she knew it would be, although now everything seemed to have odd auras or textures or some other properties for which she did not even have a name. Sextant was sitting next to her, although his aura appeared to have retracted and tightened around him as he concentrated on his task. Then she saw the hex nut that was her object lying on the floor and its target a few feet away.

She began to muster all her ability and power to bear on the hex nut when suddenly she noted Sextant's nut had flashed out and instantly back again into its own target. In that moment she had seen how Sextant had accomplished the feat and she quickly changed her strategy to match his. Her own hex nut winked out and appeared within its target and she opened her eyes.

"That was a lot easier than I expected," Oceanvine noted happily.

"Easy?" Sextant asked incredulously. "It took us days to figure out."

"It took you days to figure it out," she corrected him. "I saw how you did it and was able to copy you. It would have taken me even longer if I hadn't seen you do it first."

"Well," Sextant replied, looking relieved that he had finally accomplished a difficult new technique before she had, "I guess it wasn't too hard once we knew what to do, was it?"

"Let's do it a few more times," Oceanvine suggested, "before we try larger objects and greater distances. It always takes a few days before we truly master a new trick, but this time I'll do it with my usual satellite."

"Why do you do that?" Sextant asked. "You've had that trick down cold for a year now."

"I have," she agreed, "but anytime I can accomplish a new spell while continuing to maintain that one I improve a bit. For that matter the more I maintain the levitation spell while doing anything else, I improve, but keeping it in motion is a good way to gauge how well I've learned a new spell." She set one hex nut back in orbit around her head then concentrated on translocating another to the target circle. A minute later another nut popped into the target circle. "Next, with my eyes open," she told Sextant.

"Hey, it's my turn next," he protested.

"Were we taking turns?" she asked innocently.

They were still trying to do each other one better half an hour later when Methis stuck her head through the door. "Better come in here," she advised them. "Something big is happening on the Gran 4."

Candle and Aritos were already watching the big screen when they entered the room. The scene was one of several dozen control consoles each manned by a concerned-looking Granom. Oceanvine realized it was her own prejudice showing, but with their naturally pale coloration, it seemed like they were, in fact, frightened. She was not completely wrong.

"For those of you just tuning in," a newscaster recapped, "minutes ago Colonel Stepan Forodnin,

captain of the Gran 4, radioed to report a malfunction aboard the space craft as it made its way toward Midbar.”

“Honnea Command,” the terse, almost emotionless voice of Colonel Forodnin was played back for the viewing audience, “something is very wrong. Half our telemetry lights have gone red and most of the rest are dead.”

The Announcer came back almost immediately. “We do not yet know exactly what caused the problem, but a source in mission control admitted that most of the controls, including those for life-support, have suddenly failed.”

Over the next hour a few more details filtered in. The ethernauts aboard the Gran 4 had orbited Maiyim for four days, until they were in the correct position for the engine module of the Gran spacecraft to insert them into the course that would bring them to Midbar. Then when they were just past the midway point, the entire craft had shaken violently but briefly, after which most of their instruments went dead. For the next few minutes several members of the Royal Granom Space Administration were very quick to make statements and then suddenly there was complete silence leaving the news media to speculate as to what was actually happening.

Speculations ran as wild as imagination could carry them for the next few hours as the Space Administration worked feverishly behind the scenes to simulate the problem and evaluate ways and means of bringing the crew back alive. Finally, nearly a day after the news first broke, Agency officials held a press conference.

“So far as we can determine, there was a malfunction of some sort in the engine module,” the head of the RGSA began his brief statement. “The engines themselves still appear to be useable and while we have a small reserve tank of fuel, as far as we can tell, we’ve lost all the fuel from the main tank and life support is completely non-functional. Exactly what happened, we have not yet concluded to our satisfaction, but now our main concern is bringing our ethernauts back home safely.

“To this end we have a team working in the mission simulator. The simulator is an exact model of the Gran 4 craft in a special laboratory where we can produce the same conditions our men up there are experiencing. At the moment we are working through a number of rescue scenarios, but have not yet decided on the best course of action.” He went on to show on a chart the course of the Gran 4, the mission as it had proceeded so far and the plans to bring the craft back by flying by Midbar and using its gravity to help sling them back to Maiyim. “Any questions?” he asked once he was finished.

“Morres Hanovic,” the first reporter introduced himself, “*The Herald*. If they have no life support, what are they using for air?”

“Fortunately, Mister Hanovic,” the spokesman replied “This mission had been intended to land on Midbar. The section of the craft designed for that, the Midbar Excursion Module or MEM carries its own supply of air, food and water. Right now our men are spending most of their time in the MEM. Yes?”

“Katerelle Nisi,” a female Granom stood up, “Querna Broadcasting Company. They’re in the Mem? There’s an access passage between the Command Module and the MEM, isn’t there? Wouldn’t the air just fill both cabins without their needing to all be in that cramped section of the craft?”

“Miss Nisi,” the spokesman replied with respect to the woman for obviously having done her homework, “you are correct that the air would flow into the Command module, but the problem is the



heating and cooling units in the main cabin are also nonfunctional. The MEM is a bit cramped as you say, but it is more comfortable at present than the command module where the temperature has dropped to only ten degrees above freezing on one side and is uncomfortably hot on the other.”

“You could spin the craft to distribute the heat more evenly, couldn’t you?” she persisted.

“We did try that,” came the reply, “using the engines on the MEM, but the ethernauts reported dizziness and nausea after only a few minutes. Also, the course became less stable, that is, hard to maintain, so we had to stop the spin. Now we are rotating the craft once an hour to keep the extremes from further harming the command module, but it is still not a comfortable environment. Our men are only staying in there to perform various necessary functions. Next?”

“Gorden Yarnoric,” the third reporter began, “Morning Times of Querna. You’re taking the ethernauts all the way around Midbar before bringing them home? Wouldn’t it be faster to just turn the craft around and head back?”

Most of the other reporters gave him a sour look as the head of RGSA attempted to compose a civil reply. “Oh, Gods!” Oceanvine exclaimed. “Even I know why they can’t do that!”

The spokesman, however, was prepared for the question and even had a visual aid, a chart of the course they planned for the Gran 4. “Once the Midbar insertion burn was enacted, we were fully committed to going to Midbar,” he explained. “Space flight is not like traveling down a highway, you see. To get to Midbar, we run the main engine of the Engine Module to start us heading toward Midbar. Then, barring some minor corrections to the path, the Gran 4 is supposed to coast all the way until we use the engine again to enter orbit over the moon. The space craft has no means of breaking aside from the engine module and there’s essentially no air or friction in space to slow us down without the engine. Deceleration is really just reversed acceleration; the difference is only significant when considered relative to another object such as Midbar or Maiyim. So we can’t just slam on the brakes, turn around and come back. We would need to use as much fuel to do that as we used to get started, then we would need still more fuel to start back again. We don’t have that much fuel on board to do that when the tanks are full.

“Strange as it may sound, it takes more fuel to get to Midbar than it takes to come back,” he continued. “In a sense that’s because on the way back it’s mostly downhill. The gravity of Midbar is a bit greater than eighteen percent of Maiyim’s so it doesn’t take as much fuel to leave Midbar. So even if we still had all the fuel left over after the Midbar insertion burn, we still could not simply turn the craft around and return to Maiyim.

“Actually the time it would take to do that, even if we had the fuel to accomplish it, would take longer than what we do plan. We’re going to use the gravity of Midbar to sling the craft around and shoot her back home again. This will increase the Gran 4’s velocity, of course, but then we’ll use Maiyim’s gravity to slow her down again.” He spent several minutes explaining how and why this would work.

“I doubt those reporters will get it,” Sextant remarked. “He may as well told them it was magic.”

“Except they wouldn’t have understood that either,” Oceanvine added.

“Be nice, children,” Methis told them indulgently. “They can’t help it. Besides, this really is rocket science.”

There were many more questions, but the answers were either repetitions of what had previously been said or admissions of a lack of knowledge. Finally the press conference came to an end and Methis

turned the television off although this time she left it standing where it was.

“What really happened up there?” Oceanvine asked.

She was really asking Methis and Aritos, but it was Candle who hastily answered. “It’s hard to say with so little to go on,” he told her, sparing the gods the necessity of hedging their answers or having to refuse to answer outright. “If I have to guess, however, I would say that some safety feature, say some insulation on just the wrong wire, failed at just the wrong time and caused a short circuit. It’s quite possible, however, that one of the ethernauts will perform a space walk and repair what damage is there, although they did lose most of their fuel, so maybe the damage was more extensive.”

“At least they have the ability to make a space walk for repairs,” Sextant commented. “The Emmine ethernauts aren’t equipped to do that. They have not been wearing spacesuits during the last several missions and even if they had been, the Osprey capsules’ hatches can only be opened once, and if they were opened in space the craft would have to reenter with the hatch open and that would be certain death.”

“Sounds like a silly way to build them,” Oceanvine opined.

“I’ve said this before,” Candle replied, “but the engineers of Emmine’s space program have been far too hasty in their attempt to keep up with the Granomish program. Of course, now it looks as though the Granomish spacecraft could have different, but equally dangerous, flaws.”

Just then an odd noise could be heard from the next room. “What’s that?” Sextant asked.

“The radio,” Methis explained.

“Radio?” Sextant echoed.

“The special one Candle sometimes calls Us on,” Methis explained.

“Oh right, like the one we used on the Maiyim Bourne last year,” Sextant remembered. “Why is it on now?”

“I usually leave it on,” Methis admitted, “in case Candle or even you two need to call, although since you returned from Sutheria most of Candle’s calls have all been by telephone. It’s been a while, I suppose, since we used the radio on a regular basis.”

“It’s still a good way to communicate when I’m worried about my phone usage being traced,” Candle told Her.

“Yes,” She agreed. “Anyway, sometimes the background noise gets loud enough to get past the squelch circuitry so it sounds like hisses and scratches. It usually stops after a minute or so.”

However, instead of stopping a moderately long trumpet fanfare began and they all went into the next room to listen more closely. The music sounded wobbly. The signal kept fading in and out and the notes were not evenly pitched as though the player was having trouble staying in tune. “Sounds like someone else is using your frequency,” Sextant noted.

“That’s been happening for a little over a year,” Methis admitted. “I was going to suggest changing frequencies, but this doesn’t happen often.”

“Yes,” Aritos nodded as the fanfare continued, “but who is using this frequency? That’s what I want to know. Also why?”

“This sounds like the odd broadcasts we heard last year while on the *Maiyim Bourne*,” Oceanvine remarked.

“You heard these too?” Methis asked. “When?”

“Once while on our way to Silamon, just after we left Ketch,” Oceanvine replied.

“Not long before the new volcano erupted,” Sextant added.

“I doubt that was related, Six,” she told him.

“No, probably not,” Sextant agreed, “but that’s the case anyway.”

Just then the sound of the trumpet faded out and a female voice started speaking in the same wobbly and distant manner the trumpet had played the fanfare, “One. Bravo. Delta. Seven. Five. Five. Three. Two. Adamant. Five.” The voice paused a second then continued, “Four. Eight. Niner. Niner. One. Niner...”

“Adamant!” Oceanvine felt a chill run down her spine. “Last year the code for ‘A’ was Apple. Adamant was Terabawa’s Grovinsk’s mage name.”

“Could be a different bunch of people with a different code,” Aritos conjectured.

“Don’t you know?” Candle asked.

“No,” Aritos admitted. “Actually We don’t. Whoever is doing this has found a way to shield themselves from Our prescience. I doubt it was on purpose.”

“So do I,” Candle admitted. “No one worries about having the Gods spy on them. However they managed it, it was probably an accident, or a byproduct of whatever security measures they’ve been taking against being found out by mortal agencies.”

“There are a few ways that could happen,” Aritos told them, “but it doesn’t happen often. These broadcasts have been one of my main topics of research the last few years. A very frustrating one too.”

“Two. One. Three. Three. Niner. Six. Seven. Victor. Whiskey. One. Three. Seven. Niner...” the radio voice droned on.

“We heard a second such broadcast during the storm on the *Methis Ocean*,” Oceanvine remembered, “while we were on our way to Petronelle Station.”

“On this frequency?” Methis asked, concerned.

“I believe so,” Candle told her. “Yes. Now that I think about it, the boat’s radio was set to this frequency.”

“We had better change that, then,” Methis decided, “I don’t like the idea of having my private conversations listened to and that’s starting to sound like more sharing of the frequency than is

comfortable.”

“This isn’t a legal frequency anywhere,” Candle pointed out. “That’s why we decided on it.”

“Why would a spy organization only use a legal frequency?” Oceanvine asked pointedly.

“Spy organizations are usually parts of governments,” Candle replied. “While it does not always follow, they are supposed to be acting within the law of their own lands.”

“Funny,” Sextant noted, “I seem to recall a lot of trouble a couple of years ago with one of His Majesty’s intelligence ministries in which the agents were breaking all sorts of laws.”

“There is that,” Candle agreed, “and maybe you’re right. And maybe they do secretly have permission to use this frequency and maybe they are just using it. Methis, let’s choose a new frequency to use in the future, but I think continuing to monitor this one is a good idea at least until we learn more about what this is.”

“You told us it was some sort of code,” Oceanvine reminded him.

“It is,” Candle nodded. “But whose code and what are they saying?”

“Bravo. Charley. Niner. Eight. Seven. Emsday. Five,” the wavering voice paused a moment, then, “One. Bravo. Delta. Seven. Five. Five. Three. Two. Adamant. Five.” The trumpet fanfare started again.

“Hmm,” Aritos muttered, “That final set of codes is the same they started with.”

“Is it?” Candle asked. “Are You certain.”

“My memory is perfect,” Aritos replied cheerfully. Then for just a moment, his face grew sad, “Unfortunately.”

Seven

For the most part, they learned, Methis did not like to lecture. She preferred, instead, to discuss various subjects with her students. Consequently, Oceanvine and Sextant often found themselves staying up late, reading various books in Her library in preparation for the next morning’s discussion. They also discovered that Methis was very easy to divert from her educational plans if they could come up with a discussion subject She found worthy and interesting.

However, it was Oceanvine who pointed out to Sextant they would only be cheating themselves if they did that too often. She need not have worried since after the first week Methis suggested taking turns choosing the subject of the day. That turned out to involve even more work for them, but neither student complained. In fact, their only complaints were that sleep got in the way of their learning time.

Methis was not their only teacher, however. Candle took over some afternoons, such as when they discussed the staves once used by mages. “Wizard Bowsprit rediscovered the technique of charging a physical object with magical energy,” he told them after lunch one afternoon.

“Yes, sir,” Sextant replied. “You told us that was the basis of modern magical batteries.”

“True enough,” Candle replied, “but today you’re going to actually learn how to make such a battery. Sending power into an object is fairly simple actually, but if you overdo it or simply funnel power in too quickly, that object is likely to blow up in your face. Each material has its own properties for storage and you already know that stone and metal are capable of holding more power than mere wood. However, wood is sufficient for most usages and it’s more convenient to carry a staff around than keeping a grapefruit-sized rock in your pocket.”

“Uncle,” Oceanvine interrupted, “you told us how our mage stones hold a fairly high charge of magical energy.”

“That is true, but you need to break them to release the power,” Candle admitted. “Actually most of the charge is being held by the symbol embedded within the crystal, but should you ever be in a life or death situation, you can use the energy within your mage stone or at least you will be able to by the time we’re finished.”

He went on to explain the theory and practice of charging up a wooden staff, which woods would serve them best and then finally he presented each of them with a five-foot tall oaken staff and supervised as they learned how to charge them up. By the end of the day both staves held a small charge only, but Candle was pleased with their progress.

“Is this how you charge that golden staff of yours?” Oceanvine asked Candle after their afternoon session was over.

“Pretty much, yes,” he replied. “There is one major difference, though. The staff doesn’t need a lot of encouragement to soak up magical energy and unlike those wooden ones, it holds a lot more within it and amplifies the power as well.”

“I noticed that in Silamon,” Oceanvine nodded. “It revitalized me instantly when I touched it and over-powered my spells as well.”

“Not as much as you think,” Candle told her. “Your protective ward was the most powerful you’ve ever cast, but the projectile ward you cast and the fireball after it I think came entirely from you. Neither was beyond your abilities even then, although the added confidence the staff gave you may have helped too. But as to the staff, well, perhaps we should ask Aritos about it.”

“Yes, the staff does naturally respond differently to each user,” Aritos told them, after dinner. “Although with sufficient concentration and practice any one of you ought to be able to duplicate each other’s efforts. What it comes down to is that the staff has many abilities but for some reason only some of them are easily exploited and which ones are depends on the user and the way he or she thinks and sometimes on what the user’s needs are, although I would not depend on that if I were you.”

“What other abilities does the staff have?” Sextant asked.

Aritos smiled in response, but merely replied, “If you work on it, I’m sure you’ll figure it out eventually.”

“Think of it as a test,” Oceanvine quipped with a grin directed at Sextant.

After that, Candle allowed them several sessions in which all three studied the staff more closely. “I think that we need more mages,” Candle decided a few days later.

“Why is that, Uncle?” Oceanvine asked.

“Well, if each of us naturally brings out different properties of the staff, then perhaps we need a greater sample base of mages bringing out what comes naturally,” Candle replied.

“We don’t have a lot more mages to get a sample of, though do we, sir?” Sextant asked.

“Not really, no,” Candle admitted, “and I don’t think handing this off to anyone capable of casting a spell is a good idea either. Still, I think it is time to catalog just what we have seen the staff do in various people’s hands. I already know we ought not to try one of its basic abilities.”

“What’s that?” Oceanvine asked.

“The demons, or Arithan anyway, used it to create a special sort of pathway beneath the surface of Maiyim. By following those pathways they could go from one place to another rapidly and appear to be translocating themselves. It was Aritos’ way of giving His children a way to accomplish what the Gods do easily. The reason we cannot use those paths is that the demons were nearly indestructible. Our frail bodies cannot withstand the stress we would be under while on such a path.”

“Not even while protected by a ward?” Oceanvine asked.

Candle stared at her for a moment. “Maybe,” he replied, nearly lost in contemplation of the notion. “I never thought of that.” Then he snapped back to full alertness, “However, if your ward were to fail for even just a moment, you would be dead. Besides, I don’t know how to create or travel on such a pathway and Aritos won’t tell me. Still I have to admit, I’ve been wondering about that since I was your age.”

Near the end of their third week, the phone rang while they were having a lesson one morning with Methis. That Methis and Aritos had a telephone in their home was something both journeymen knew, but this was the first time they actually heard it ring.

“Hello?” Methis answered the phone. “This is Fireiron.” She paused and, after a bit, grinned at Oceanvine and Sextant. “Yes, dear, I really am Methis. Thank you. Candle’s outside at the moment, I’ll get him for you, dear. Why don’t you talk to Oceanvine while you wait. It’s Candle’s secretary,” She whispered as She passed the phone to Oceanvine.

“Hi, Maia? What’s new in Randona? I wish we could have brought you here. It’s just amazing all the things we’re learning!”

Methis stepped out the front door and saw Candle attempting to do something with the golden staff. She reached out with her mind and stopped him easily. “Not a good idea,” she remarked, when he turned to see what had happened. “You would have probably gotten off with a few bruises, but that tree would have been destroyed and I like that tree.”

“Sorry,” Candle apologized. “Oceanvine gave me an idea last week about how the demons may have traveled along their mystic pathways.”

“You’re frighteningly close,” Methis admitted, “but not close enough. If you’re that insistent, perhaps I’d better show you how it was done, but frankly you’re better off taking a plane. It’s safer and really quite a bit faster.”

“Faster?” Candle asked.

“Yes,” Methis replied. “Just because you can take a shortcut underground doesn’t mean you move any faster than your legs will carry you. Well, okay, you can fly. Most mages couldn’t, but you could. However, even then you would be very tired once you reached the other end, assuming you reached the end. Remember, like the Gods, the demons never slept. I doubt you would stay awake long enough to walk or fly a thousand miles or more.

“By the way,” She continued, “you have a phone call; Maia Denfirth. How did she know who I was?”

“I told her,” Candle confessed. “As my administrative assistant I thought she had a need to know where I was and who I was with. How else could she properly evaluate whether to interrupt me?”

“Of course, dear,” Methis nodded. “We all have to trust someone and I trust your judgment. I’ll make it a point to meet Maia at my next opportunity. If she has your trust, I’m sure she’s someone worth knowing.”

Oceanvine and Maia were still chatting when Candle finally got inside. Oceanvine handed him the receiver and he began, “Yes, Maia, something’s come up, I assume?”

“Yes, sir,” Maia responded immediately in a businesslike tone. “A letter arrived today from the Isle of Fire. I opened it according to your instruction and it sounds like she really should have called.”

“Phone connections from Rjalkatyp have been spotty since their New Island’s formation cut the submarine cable last year,” Candle remarked. “They’ve been relying on that new telephone satellite, but it’s in a polar orbit so they can only call out for a few minutes at a time and the new cable won’t be ready for another few months.”

“Yes, sir,” Maia responded. “Should I read the letter? It’s from Madame Blizzard.”

“Yes,” Candle nodded automatically, then added, “please do.”

“Dear Candle,” Maia read, “I hope this finds you well. Thank you very much for that copy of Oceanvine’s paper on the new wards she invented. I must admit it gave me quite a start to see Oceanvine’s name on a paper some months after her funeral until I read about how her great-granddaughter received the Order of the Star of Emmine. Please extend my congratulations to her and to Journeyman Sextant.

“I was sorry to miss you when I came to pay my respects to Doctor Oceanvine. Yes, I did figure out where her remains were; it was obvious once I heard Countess Myrrha’s claim the body had been moved and it gave me a chance to spend some time with your granddaughters. They’re both quite charming, you know. I think Sally wants to be a wizard.

“Uh,” Maia stopped reading and explained, “she continues to chat a bit for the rest of the page. Should I skip ahead?”

“Yes,” Candle told her. “I can read up on what’s new in Rjalkatyp when we get home.”

“More like see for yourself, Wizard,” Maia retorted and then started reading again. “That brings me to the point of this letter. There have been a number of odd occurrences on the Isle of Fire of late. Each by itself would probably not be a cause for concern, but when taken together, I find myself worrying for my

country and her people.

“First of all there is a new political party here. The People’s Party has been around for a few years. Until the last election it had no real power but in a drastic electoral upset they have gained a plurality in the Congress. The People’s Party has an ultra-conservative platform with goals that will erode the civil rights of the populace of the Isle of Fire. Considering how hard I fought to establish those rights, I find this party unbearable. Sadly I am retired, as you know, and I fear I am probably too old to get back in the political arena. Even if I were to do so, however, that would do nothing against the new plague-like illness that has broken out in Rjalkatyp and some of the other cities on our island. It reminds me strongly of the plague that broke out shortly after the Revolution almost seventy years ago.

“I never achieved your mastery of magic, Candle, but I think I have detected traces of a powerful and evil magic. If there is even a small chance I may be right, I fear for my people, Candle. Please, please, please, won’t you consider coming to Rjalkatyp and taking a look for yourself? Perhaps all you will accomplish is to still an old lady’s fears, but even that will be a favor I can never completely repay.

“Ever faithfully, Blizzard.

“Wizard,” Maia added her own comments, “The illness is making news even here in Randona. The doctors say it is just a moderately strong strain of Influenza, but the Peoples’ Party? Well, that’s being talked about here as well. Normally I’d say leave the politics of other countries to the people of those countries, but I remember our discussions about One Maiyim. They have a platform that, while it pushes ecological awareness, also wants to pursue those goals not just by putting limits on civil rights but also by outlawing magic.”

“We all know what happened last time such a platform gained popularity,” Candle remarked. “Well, even if I weren’t concerned enough to go and take a look for myself, I would go anyway simply because Blizzard asked. I’ll need to book a flight for all three of us.”

“Already done, Wizard,” Maia reported. “I arranged for first class reservations on Air Querna Flight 203 from Mith to Rjalkatyp tomorrow afternoon. Say the word and I will confirm those reservations and arrange payment.”

“I’m impressed,” Candle commended her. “Consider the word given. How did you know what I would decide?”

“You came to help in Silamon without an invitation, Wizard,” Maia told him. “How could you not go when an old friend begs for your aid?”

“There is that,” Candle admitted. He spoke to Maia for another few minutes. When he hung up he told Oceanvine and Sextant, “Better pack your bags, kids. Our plans have changed.”

Rjalkatyp

One

“We never went shopping!” Oceanvine remarked after Candle explained the situation. “All Six and I



have are some summer clothes and a cotton sweater each. It's all we needed while we were here, but it's been snowing on the Isle of Fire. Do we have time to buy a heavier outfit or two?"

"No need," Methis assured her. "Feel free to take anything you find in your bedroom closet."

"Anything?" she echoed, then realized what Methis must have meant. "Oh. Thank you!"

She and Sextant went upstairs to start packing. In her room, Oceanvine opened the door to her closet to find it filled, not only with the clothing she had brought with her but several winter outfits of Granomish woolens and even a nice warm coat trimmed with some sort of sleek, warm fur. Curious as to why she might have thought up this particular assortment in which everything was either gray, brown or a combination of both, Oceanvine closed the closet door, and concentrated on something a bit more colorful.

When she reopened the door, however, nothing had changed and she realized that Methis had created a new wardrobe for her, but had not duplicated the closets of the *Maiyim Bourne*. "Nothing to complain about," she noted aloud. "These would be very expensive if I had to buy them."

Before she began her magical training, that thought might never have occurred to her. Daddy would have paid for anything she bought. Not that she had ever wasted money on frivolous shopping, but it was always a given that she would only buy the best. Now her status as an heiress was uncertain. With the legacy from her great-grandmother, she was well taken care of for the next few years at least. If she was really desperate, there were always the ever-full money bags on the *Maiyim Bourne*, but Nildar had told Silverwind to think of the boat and everything in it as a test. She did feel that those instructions applied equally to any future crewperson or passenger as well and while both Wenni and Methis felt Silverwind and Candle had both taken that too seriously, it seemed reasonable that attempting to live entirely off the proceeds of the boat would be frowned on.

However, money, she reflected, was the least of her problems. Right now she was getting ready to enter a possible plague zone. That she might also find herself fighting another rogue mage or in opposition to the strongest political party in a foreign land didn't bother her so much as the possibility of dying of Influenza. Candle had spoken about it calmly enough, but she remembered that his wife, a woman she may well have come to call Auntie Jillanda, died of the same disease. When she thought about it while packing, it scared her terribly, but as she finished closing her duffle bag, it was as though she was also closing a door on that fear as well. She knew it was still there, but maybe she could handle it.

She came downstairs just as Aritos arrived from his office on Rallena. He was not behaving like his usual cheerful self either. Over dinner they all learned why.

"I learned today that there is a new political party rising in Querna," Aritos began.

"The People's Party?" Sextant asked.

"Uh, yes," Aritos nodded, showing some surprise. "That's the name."

"Ultra-conservative platform whose goals threaten to erode the civil rights of the populace?" Oceanvine asked.

"Right," Aritos admitted.

"Possibly a front for the One Maiyim conspiracy?" Candle asked.

“No,” Aritos replied firmly. “That would imply there is a chance they might not be affiliated. It’s not a possibility. It’s a certainty. But you’ve heard of them, have you?”

“Just this afternoon,” Candle replied. “It seems they also have a branch on the Isle of Fire.” He went on to describe Blizzard’s letter.

“That makes sense, you know,” Sextant put in. “Granom and the Isle of Fire have had a very close relationship since the Counter Revolution, sixty-nine years ago.”

“And Terabawa Grovinsk was probably from the Isle of Fire,” Oceanvine added. “It seems to follow that the People’s Party could be a public, political face for One Maiyim. Is there a known relationship between the two parties?”

“The two parties, here and on the Isle of Fire,” Aritos replied, staring into space for just a moment, “are one and the same. I brought up the one in Granom as that’s where we are at the moment, but it seems to be more deeply established in Rjalkatyp and the other cities of the Isle of Fire. It is not a majority party in either country although they do hold a plurality of seats in the Isle of Fire Congress. In Querna, it may not yet have reached ascendancy among the lords of Parliament and the politicians of more local governments, but it does have a strong voice among the minority parties. The pro-ecological plank of their platform makes them popular with anyone not looking any deeper into their ideology, of course, but the draconian means by which they seek to achieve their goals includes much longer terms for elected officials, more powers for them as well, which means fewer elections. After a while I suspect that will translate out to no elections. Of course the last one on the Isle of Fire was a joke anyway.”

“What do you mean?” Oceanvine asked.

“It was rigged,” Aritos told her. “The People’s Party got their members in just the right places of the key wards in order to stuff the ballot boxes and destroy legitimate ballots as well. Had they been just a bit more successful, they’d have held the first Senate majority since Blizzard served as Prime Minister and a very strong plurality in the House of Commons. Here in Granom, they were not as successful in rigging the last election in Querna, and, of course, the Granomish Parliament is not an elective body, so they have been forced to use persuasion, gain new members and are more concentrated in the city governments. Naturally that forces them to be more round-about in their dealings, but I foresee a time when they will become direct. It appears you have your work cut out for you, old friend,” He concluded, looking at Candle eye-to-eye. Then he tilted his head toward Oceanvine and Sextant. “It’s a good thing you have help. They’re learning fast.”

“They are,” Candle confirmed, smiling at the two journeymen, “but if we’re to unseat a political party, it’s going to take an entirely different sort of magic.”

“Don’t worry about the political side of all this,” Aritos advised him. “You solve the more immediate problems and the rest will fix itself.”

Oceanvine suddenly felt a great weight lift from her shoulders. If Aritos wasn’t warning them about the Influenza in Rjalkatyp, perhaps that wasn’t going to be a problem.

Candle, in the meantime was frowning at Aritos. “Isn’t that more help than you’re usually supposed to give me?” he asked archly.

Aritos chuckled. “I won’t tell if you don’t.”

## Two

Aritos was already out of the house when they woke up the next morning. Methis greeted them all with a lavish breakfast. I figure you deserve a good send-off," she explained. She spent another two hours giving Oceanvine and Sextant what she called a final exam, asking them questions based on their studies of the previous three weeks. As they drove back to the airport, She assured them they had both passed with high marks, "but please come back again," She continued. "We really didn't have enough time together this year."

"I wish we could have stayed the entire break," Oceanvine told Her.

"Another time, I promise you, dear," Methis assured her as they suddenly appeared at the entrance to the departures gate of the port. "I think I'm going to pop over to Randona next. I'd really like to meet your Maia," She told Candle. "Anything you'd like me to pass on"

"Keep up the good work?" Candle suggested. "I can't think of anything more at the moment. Tell her I'll give her a call once we've settled in on the Isle of Fire. I'm not sure where we'll be staying yet. Until then she can call Blizzard if she needs to find us."

"I'll let her know," Methis agreed, stopping in front of the airport's main gate. They got out, then each hugged the goddess in turn before hurrying to find their flight.

After checking their luggage, Candle noted they still had an hour before their flight actually took off and he suggested they get a bite to eat in the airport's restaurant. "The food they serve on the planes won't kill us, but this ought to be a bit better. Besides this is a very long flight. We aren't likely to be fed until dinner time."

"Will we be flying a great circle route?" Oceanvine asked.

"I'll be very disappointed in Air Querna's navigational abilities if we don't," Candle told her.

"Then we'll be going over the north polar ice cap?" she asked interestedly.

"Yep," Candle nodded. "Thousands of miles of desolate landscape, make that icescape, where it's winter every day of the year. Not exactly a tourist magnet. Why do you ask?"

"I've never seen the northern ice cap," Oceanvine replied.

"You've never been on this side of the equator before," Candle reminded her. "Too bad we flew though. There used to be a ceremony among sailors the first time one crossed the equator, sort of like a fraternity or sorority hazing. I hear the merchant marine still does that sort of thing."

"I intentionally never joined a fraternity," Sextant commented. "The hazing seemed a bit childish to me, and certainly nothing I cared to go through just for the dubious privilege of joining a club."

"Pretty much the way I felt too," Oceanvine agreed.

"I was never much of a joiner either," Candle told them. "It's a common trait among the most successful

riages.”

“I’m hardly a successful mage yet,” Oceanvine laughed.

“You’re still alive,” Candle pointed out, “and it’s a small field. You’re definitely the top journeywoman in your class.”

“Not much of a distinction,” she pointed out. “I’m the only journeywoman in decades.”

“Ah! Blazing the trail for future generations,” Candle quoted one of the lines from Oceanvine’s salutatorian speech.

After lunch they walked out to the gate which once more was at the end of the single long concourse. The plane, a large new jet, painted in the black and gold colors of the Air Querna Corporation, was less than half full. “How do you stay in business?” Candle asked the flight attendant, a short, white-faced woman with the dark brown hair typical of most Granomen. Impolite humans and Orenta would have called her a troll, but Sextant thought she was pretty enough, given the Granomish heavy-set bones and short stature.

“We normally have more passengers, sir,” she replied, “but business is down this week with reports of the Flu in Rjalkatyp.”

“You don’t sound very concerned about it,” Candle remarked.

“It’s just the Flu,” the Granomish woman shrugged. “I could catch it and I know it would be miserable, but I stay at the airport hotel, so I don’t have much contact with people in the city.”

“Local people run the hotel, don’t they?” Oceanvine asked.

“True,” the attendant admitted, her already white skin turning translucent, then she swallowed and continued, “but it’s just the Flu. I’m young and healthy. I can survive it.”

Oceanvine nodded politely, deciding not to point out how sometimes young and healthy people could die of Influenza anyway. Instead she asked, “Will we be flying over the North Pole?”

“Not directly, Miss,” the attendant replied, “although we might come within sight of that region. Frankly, it all looks like so much ice. Also most of the flight will be in darkness, so there won’t be anything to see tonight.”

“Not even by the light of Midbar?” Oceanvine pressed.

“Midbar is only half full this evening, Miss and it is often cloudy over the pole. The chance of seeing the ice pack at this time of year is pretty slim.”

“Good thing I brought a book to read,” Oceanvine sighed as they found their seats.

Instead of reading at first, however, Oceanvine and Sextant performed one of their favorite daily exercises, juggling hex nuts by telekinesis. “I can’t imagine you two are getting much benefit out of that exercise anymore,” Candle commented after they had been served from the drinks cart. “I think it may be time to try for true collaborative magic. Try joining your powers to do that. You’ve done that a couple times when in a bind, now start off by taking turns with one of you supplying power to the other as you

keep the nuts moving.”

“That’s the first step. Later on as you get to know each other’s magical style better you’ll be able to do the same thing cooperatively, but I don’t want you doing that just now. It is very dangerous for two mages who have never worked together before to try working cooperatively. It’s dangerous even for two who have learned and worked together before like you two. If you join your power and then try to perform contradictory spells you can be badly hurt; the force can crush you or pull you apart. Nasty stuff. So unless you know exactly how to work in concert, you should only try that after carefully discussing your plans. However, I don’t want you to try that until I’m certain you’re ready. Don’t worry, I’ll watch the two of you and keep you from using too much power.”

It took a few attempts to get comfortable with the concept and twice, Candle had to “catch” the hex nuts before they smashed into the roof of the cabin or into another passenger. After their initial clumsiness, they mastered the technique easily and started experimenting with multiple spells using this basic collaborative method.

“That’s enough for today,” Candle told them when he saw the dinner trolley being wheeled down the aisle.

“How long were we doing that?” Oceanvine asked. “It only felt like half an hour.”

“About three and a half hours, actually,” Sextant informed her, checking his watch.

“Wow!” she breathed. “The trick was getting used to the additional power. Why were you sending so much across the link between us?” she asked Sextant.

“I didn’t think I was,” Sextant replied.

“I’ve warned you about that in the past,” Candle reminded them. “Two mages working together can accomplish more than they can working separately. Part of that is because energy seems to be amplified in the process. Actually you aren’t getting extra energy from nowhere, but when it comes from another mage it is more efficient. You don’t have to expend any of your own energy to maintain the spell. You can practice again tomorrow, but for now you ought to rest for the remainder of the flight.”

After dinner, Oceanvine read a physics textbook for an hour or so, stopping every once in a while to ask Sextant or Candle a technical question, but eventually she put it away and fell asleep. The sun was just rising and they were on the other side of the world by the time she woke up. Looking out the small window to her right, she saw a large island in the distance. “Is that the Isle of Fire?” she asked a still sleepy Sextant.

“Huh?” he grunted unintelligibly, and then turned to look. “Oh, yeah, almost has to be. Nothing else that large around here, assuming we are where we ought to be by now.”

“Is that a plume of smoke, Six?” she asked, still looking out the window.

“Where?” Sextant asked.

“Almost directly in front of us,” she replied, pressing her head closer to the window to get a better look.

“I can’t see it from here,” Sextant admitted.

“That’s probably a plume of volcanic ash from New Island ,” Candle informed them.

“The volcano Silverwind created?” Sextant asked.

“Well, he didn’t so much create the volcano as set up the circumstances in which it had to form there,” Candle explained. “It was after we routed Arithan from Rjalkatyp. Silverwind wanted to ensure Arithan would not be able to return to the Isle of Fire easily, so he closed up the mystic path by which the demon had traveled there. That would not normally have made much of a change in the local geography, but he said there was something about the way the path came up the volcanic pipe of Mount Rjal that forced him to seal the volcano shut as well.”

“You can do that with magic?” Sextant asked, amazed.

“Can I?” Candle countered. “Don’t know. I’ve never had to try, but I know how he did it and I probably could if I had to. I doubt I’ll ever have to, though. Anyway, Mount Rjal will never erupt again. I hear there are a few miners looking to see if they can find diamonds in that old pipe. Could be, I suppose, but there have to be easier ways to make a living. Anyway the plutonic pressure that sent the magma to the surface of Mount Rjal had to go somewhere and it eventually broke through where New Island is now. You’ll probably get a better view of it on the other side of the plane in a few minutes as the pilot makes his approach to Lavro International Airport .”

Candle’s prediction proved true and both Sextant and Oceanvine rushed to get a better look at the first new island to form in modern times, reminding each other that they had witnessed the start of what would probably turn out to be the second.

“Is New Island always this active?” Sextant asked once the novelty had worn off a bit.

“Off and on,” Candle replied. “Mount Rjal was the same way. Why?”

“Oh, it’s just that One Maiyim, or Grovinsk at least, used the Bond of Aritos to activate those other volcanoes last summer and it seemed a bit of a coincidence to have New Island erupting just when we’re here to investigate another possible One Maiyim activity.”

“It’s a possibility,” Candle allowed, “but New Island has been active for over half a century. I can’t detect any spell traces from here, but just in case, you’re in charge of verifying this is not unusual.”

“Me?” Sextant asked.

“Why not?” Candle countered. “Check the local records to see if the activity has been fairly steady since it formed. That should determine if this activity is particularly unusual.”

“Why not just check it for spell traces?” Oceanvine asked.

“I can’t see any from here,” Candle reminded her. “Can you? Anyway, this is as close as we’re likely to get to the island unless we make a special trip. If Sextant finds evidence that this is not normal activity, we’ll do just that, but for now there are more immediate concerns on the Isle of Fire itself.”

Two

There was no one to meet them in the large sprawling airport, but Candle had not really expected there would be. After collecting their bags and passing through customs, they hired a cab and rode to Madame Blizzard's townhouse.

The townhouse was a wide, three-story affair made of the gray bricks characteristic of Rjalkatyp architecture and in a long double row of similar townhouses. "I wonder how anyone ever finds his or her own place," Candle mused.

"There is a certain sort of similarity between them," Oceanvine admitted. "That may be why the doors are all painted different colors."

"The people of the Isle of Fire are fairly colorful themselves," Candle told her, holding the taxi's door open for her. "Don't be fooled by all the gray. That's just the color of the local clay. And you'll notice after a while that they have hundreds of different patterns in which they lay all those bricks. An experienced viewer can tell exactly where he is in the city, merely by looking at the brickwork." He paid the driver and they walked up the stairs to the violet front door.

Instead of a stairway, there was a ramp that switched back once to make its way gently up to the door. "Does everyone have ramps at their front doors here?" Oceanvine asked, looking around.

"Absolutely, yes," Candle replied as they made their way up. "It's a peculiarity of architecture here. They use stairways to get from floor to floor, but ramps to reach an exterior door. It's just the way things are done here. There are sillier things in the world."

"I was just thinking it was a good idea," Oceanvine replied.

Candle rang the doorbell and they soon found themselves facing an elderly Orentan woman dressed in brown Granomish woolens. She coughed lightly, covering her mouth, but on inspecting them, her mouth formed a broad smile. "You must be Wizard Candle," she concluded instantly.

"And you must be Senator Olanna," Candle replied. "It's nice to meet you at last. I'm sorry to just arrive on your doorstep, but I wasn't sure which hotels are worth checking into these days."

Oceanvine and Sextant learned later that Olanna was Blizzard's long-time friend and companion. Like Blizzard, she had also served several terms in the Senate of the Isle of Fire. By the time the two women retired, they had both outlived their husbands, so they decided to retire together. It turned out to be a sensible arrangement. Their families visited them frequently, but by helping each other out the two women were able to maintain their independence.

Olanna coughed again. "You'll stay here, Wizard," she told him firmly, pushing an errant strand of her long gray hair back from her dark-skinned, finely featured face. "We have several guest rooms. And that's 'Former-senator.' I'm retired. Now please come in, it's freezing out here and I don't imagine you and your students consider this ideal summer weather."

"It's not summer here," Candle replied, entering the house.

"No, but it is in Emmine," Olanna retorted, "and Blizzard warned me you tend to forget to make the polite introductions," she added with a laugh. "Hello," she greeted Oceanvine and Six and offered her hand. "I am Olanna Kalienta."

"Sextant, but most of my friends still call me Six," Sextant replied.

“Oceanvine,” Oceanvine introduced herself.

Olanna’s eyes sparkled, “Oh! The one with the new wards. Blizzard has told me all about your paper. I can’t say I understood any of the technical aspects, but Blizzard was very impressed. She said she would expect no less from someone named Oceanvine.” She started leading them through the house.

Oceanvine blushed. “It’s wasn’t so much,” she replied shyly.

“Nonsense!” Olanna told her emphatically. She broke out into another brief coughing fit, but held her hand up to forestall any concerned questions. “I may know nothing about magic, but I do know Blizzard and if she tells me some bit of magic is new and impressive, I know it’s the truth.”

“Now you’ll embarrass us both, Olanna,” Blizzard commented, stepping out of a nearby doorway. It had been some years since Candle had seen his old friend in person and while her formerly dark hair was now the same color as her chalk-white skin, the years had treated her well and while she used a cane now to walk, even around her own home, she was still capable of living without assistance. However, she too, had to stifle a cough before continuing. “Candle! It’s been ages!” she greeted him with a warm hug and a kiss on the cheek. “And this just has to be Oceanvine!” she added turning on the young journeywoman. “I knew your great-grandmother well. She wrote to me once about you, although you were still calling yourself Elie at the time.”

“She wrote about me?” Oceanvine asked.

“Oh yes, indeed!” Blizzard laughed, leading them into a comfortable sitting room. “She was very proud of you, you know. Excellent grades in school and much better behaved than she ever was. She also told me you could be a great mage if you got the opportunity. She would have been over Midbar had she lived to see what you accomplished in Silamon.”

“If she had still been alive,” Oceanvine admitted, “I probably would not have been in Silamon. Oh, this is Journeyman Sextant and a cousin of Silverwind, by the way.”

“Marvelous!” Blizzard enthused and asked Sextant about himself for the next quarter of an hour until Oceanvine thought she had successfully diverted this famous woman’s attention from her. That turned out not to be the case. “So, Oceanvine, why do you say you wouldn’t have been in Silamon had your great-grandmother still been alive?”

“Because I would never have been on the *Maiyim Bourne*, learning magic from Uncle Candle. I wouldn’t even have known he was my uncle or met my relatives on Kern or Ketch. I wouldn’t even have known Six was distantly related as well. All that happened because she made me promise that after she died I would get on board the boat.”

“I found her in the Royal Museum trying to jump over the fence to that fake I gave the king,” Candle laughed. “Have to admit, I was sorely tempted to let you try it, but decided it was too likely the curator had armed the boat with security alarms. You couldn’t possibly have been the only one to try that stunt, especially since anyone could sit in that old airplane they have on the front lawn.”

“You mean the *Hope of Nildar*?” Blizzard asked, around another cough. It wasn’t much of a cough, only a step above clearing her throat. “It’s a rather famous plane, you know. Nearly as famous as the *Maiyim Bourne*. ”



“It is,” Candle agreed, “but I never flew in the *Hope of Nildar*. Can’t say I would have wanted to. Must have been horribly uncomfortable.”

“Not to mention you don’t need a plane if you really want to fly,” Blizzard laughed.

“Randona to Querna with only one stop,” Candle countered, “is beyond even my abilities.”

Olanna entered the room just then with coffee, tea and a plate filled with cream pastries. “Have you had breakfast yet?”

“Coffee and doughnuts on the plane,” Candle replied easily.

“That doesn’t count,” Olanna admonished him. “And lunch isn’t for another two hours. I understand you liked these on your last visit.”

“He practically ate nothing else for several days the first time he was here,” Blizzard chuckled.

“Hey!” Candle complained. “I was only thirteen at the time. Still, you can’t find pastries like these in Randona.” He ate half of his pastry and had a few sips of coffee before asking, “So, what’s the situation here?”

Blizzard took a deep breath. “It’s as I said in my letter. Did you actually have a chance to read it?”

“Maia read the salient points to me,” Candle replied. “You have an epidemic of something, possibly the Influenza, possibly a curse disease, and you’re also concerned about this new People’s Party. Which should we discuss first?”

“The disease, I think,” Blizzard decided. “The doctors seem absolutely certain it’s just a bad strain of the Flu.”

A stricken look came over Candle’s face and Oceanvine remembered the gravestone in Renton on which the name “Jillanda” had been inscribed.. “I never thought I’d think of any form of Influenza as ‘just a bad strain,’ but I take your meaning. A disease spread as part of a curse would be much worse. Why do you think the disease is magical in nature?”

“I took a good look at some of the victims,” Blizzard told him. “I checked their auras. I may be a bit rusty as a mage, but I haven’t forgotten everything.”

“I doubt you have forgotten anything,” Candle chuckled and Blizzard smiled in response.

“Some of the victims are carrying a curse,” she continued. “Not all of them. Perhaps we have a real Flu epidemic going on as well. It’s true that Olanna and I were very ill a few weeks ago, back when the first people were starting to get sick. Maybe it is just the Flu in most cases or maybe someone is being entirely too clever and has found a way to mask the traces of a curse in some cases.”

“I doubt that last part,” Candle replied automatically. “Oh wait, maybe not. I discussed this with someone once. Was it Silverwind? Maybe. It may have been Hyssop and Airblossom. We were in Merinta at the time and I was showing off my shiny new education. I was definitely full of myself, considering I’d only been a journeyman a few months. Anyway as I recall, I described how to build spells with a complex system of conditional modifiers.”

“You don’t think this is your fault, do you?” Blizzard scoffed.

“What?” Candle was shaken by the thought. “No! None of the mages with us at the time would have ever used magic this way. Actually, Airblossom is the only one still alive, aside from myself, of course. I did lecture on the subject to a fair number of classes, but none of those students ever went into general practice. They’re all magic technicians. Besides, I didn’t invent the technique. It was based on stuff I learned at University, and it’s the basis for a lot of modern magic technology. Everything from light switches to computers use it to one extent or another, but I don’t know anyone who might have used it in an everyday, old-fashioned type of spell.”

“Even if one of your old students did this, Uncle, it would hardly be your fault,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“Exactly what I was trying to say,” Blizzard agreed. “Besides I only detected traces of a possible curse in a few of the affected. For all I know, they could be priestly temple blessings that had degenerated after a while.”

“I doubt you could be mistaken about that,” Candle told her.

“What are conditional modifiers?” Sextant asked. Beside him, Oceanvine nodded.

“Well, it’s fairly advanced as these things go,” Candle explained. “To simplify it, though, they are parts of a spell that cause it to act in one manner if the conditions are in a certain way, but act differently if the conditions are different. In a sense we already cast many spells that are conditional. Keyed wards are a good example. If you set a ward designed to cause the lights in a room to come on if someone touches it, it’s a very simple conditional spell. In one state, that in which nothing touches the ward, the room remains dark. In the other state, when someone actually touches the ward, the room lights up.

“You can make such conditions even more complex if you want. For example the ward instead of being keyed to light the room up if anyone touched it, might have also been set to leave the lights off, but turn on the phonograph if I touch it. In a case like that I would have to construct within the spell a module that was capable of distinguishing me from everyone else in the world. Building such a spell takes a fair amount of time and energy, but it is possible, but I think we may be getting off the subject. What aspects of these traces made you think they were similar to last time?” he finally asked Blizzard.

“Candle,” Blizzard told him with deadly seriousness, “no one who has ever seen the Bond of Aritos in action is likely to forget it.”

“It was the Bond?” he asked. “Why didn’t you say so in the letter?”

“That relates to my other problem,” she admitted. “The political situation here has changed and I can’t be sure someone isn’t screening the mail. I know my phone has been tapped off and on, that’s why I didn’t call.”

“But Maia called you, didn’t she?” Candle asked. “One Maiyim might already know I’m here.”

“One Maiyim?” Blizzard echoed. “The organization was outlawed decades ago.”

“I have it from an unimpeachable source that the People’s Party is just a new public face for One Maiyim,” Candle informed her.

Olanna slammed her hand down on the table in front of her. “What?”

“You didn’t know?” Sextant asked.

“Of course we didn’t!” Blizzard snapped. “Candle, Olanna and I and a whole lot of other people worked hard to have One Maiyim banished from our nation.”

“Far harder than we should have had to,” Olanna added, “and I, for one, do not appreciate any attempt by them to violate that banishment.”

“I can’t expect you to work on that point directly, Candle,” Blizzard told him, beginning to regain her composure. That’s more in Olanna’s and my bailiwick.”

“I thought you were retired,” Candle commented.

“Well, there’s retired and retired,” Blizzard sighed, “though it’s times like this I wish I had stayed in police work. We still have favors that can be called in, and men and women in Congress who will work for us should we ask.”

“All right,” Candle nodded. “You work the political end of this and we’ll have a look at this hyperthyroid cold everyone seems to be catching. You say you two were sick at the beginning of this?”

“We were,” Olanna replied.

“That’s why you both have been coughing off and on,” Oceanvine concluded. In the background her fear of getting sick started tickling at her again.

“The fever passed two weeks ago,” Olanna told her, “but the cough lives on. That happens even after a cold sometimes. It’s been much better the last few days, though. We’re hardly coughing at...” she paused to cough delicately a few times, “all now. Well, we really are much better.”

“Where do we start?” Oceanvine asked, silently telling herself to be brave.

“The Department of Health, of course,” Candle told her.

“Perhaps not,” Blizzard disagreed. “There’s no clinic there anymore and I fear you’ll find too many People’s Party members on staff. Best to go to Master Eyesplice Memorial Hospital. I’ll make an appointment for you with Doctor Bors Maronov. He heads up the epidemiology department there. A good man and incidentally the grandson of Master Ironblade.”

Three

The man for whom Eyesplice Memorial Hospital had been named had been the chief medical official sixty-nine years earlier when Candle had been here with Silverwind and Oceanvine. Candle remembered him as a tired-looking man who had been selflessly sacrificing his sleep and comfort in the cause of finding a cure for a mysterious disease. That disease had turned out to be a manifestation of the Bond of Aritos, however, and the actual cure had been worked out by a team of mages in Belinnen of whom Candle was proud to say he was one, although the lion’s share of the credit truly belonged to Oceanvine’s long-time friend, Journeywoman Airblossom.

Candle thought it fitting, however, that this new hospital bear Eyesplice's name because even without the delivery of the cure by Silverwind and Oceanvine, there would have been far fewer survivors had Eyesplice and his staff not been on the job.

The hospital itself was a study in white tile and gray polymerized floors. Oceanvine and Sextant each privately wondered why a more cheerful décor had not been chosen. Not that this was atypical. Someone in the world had decided that since hospitals were serious places, they should look serious. Unfortunately, serious was translated in this case to mean stark and forbidding. They had learned that in spite of the gray look to the entire city, the interiors of the homes on the Isle of Fire were usually quite colorful and inviting. The hospital appeared to be the antithesis of this.

*Perhaps, Oceanvine speculated to herself, this helps to encourage patients to get well faster by making them want to leave?*

The mages had barely gotten beyond the reception desk when they were greeted cheerfully by Doctor Maronov. "Wizard Candle! It's wonderful to have you and your students here. I can't tell you how grateful we all are that a mage of your standing could find the time to assist us."

"It's our pleasure to be able to help, Doctor," Candle replied modestly. He introduced Sextant and Oceanvine and continued, "I haven't been keeping up in the field of medicine. I can only hope we'll actually do some good."

"Merely being here is of inestimable value," Doctor Maronov told them.

"Very well," Candle nodded as the doctor led them back to his office. "I recall that magic medicinal practice was already on the decline here sixty-nine years ago."

"The basis of our medicine is physical even now," Maronov agreed, "although most doctors on the Isle of Fire use magical diagnostic techniques. It's an odd reversal, I admit. When you were last here, we were leading the way on Maiyim toward physical medicine, but now we've embraced some of the older techniques to help us accomplish our jobs. I fear our colleagues in the rest of the world may see us as backwards."

"They shouldn't," Candle told him as they entered the office. "Most modern diagnostic machines are based on the old spells."

"We have those too," Doctor Maronov replied, sitting behind his desk, "but a machine, for all the data it supplies, cannot think for itself. We like to verify our findings for ourselves. Admittedly it is a rare occasion when a diagnostic spell disagrees with a machine's findings, but it does happen and most often in life-threatening cases."

"All right," Candle nodded, "So what do we have going on here? Blizzard gave me a run-down on the situation, but she's no more a medical mage than I am."

"Almost all of us believe we are merely dealing with a moderate strain of Influenza," Doctor Maronov explained. "There have been some deaths among the weak and elderly, although we were all relieved when Madame Blizzard and Madame Olanna recovered after only a week of high fever."

"They're still coughing quite a bit," Sextant noted.

"That's normal," the doctor replied. "Once the fever breaks, it can take a few weeks for full health to

return, but so long as they stay warm and eat and drink normally, I believe they will be fine. Younger patients, say the ages of Oceanvine and Sextant here, would probably have fully recovered by now. I don't think Blizzard and Olanna are still infected, it's just that their bodies have not recovered their full strength yet. I understand they are both taking antibiotics to stave off secondary infections"

"Are most patients recovering?" Oceanvine asked, a bit of nervousness in her voice.

"Most are, yes," Doctor Maronov assured her. "The ones who do not, fall into two classes. The first are the elderly and the very young; also those who have been chronically ill all their lives. We hate to lose any patient, you understand, but we are not the Gods and there is only so much we can do with the current state of our knowledge. The second sort, however, are those Madame Blizzard asked you here to see. She tells me she detected what she believed to be the same or similar curse that accompanied the Great Plague of sixty-nine years ago. That was long before my time. Before the time of anyone on my staff, for that matter, at least before the time any of us were qualified as medical experts, but I must admit that some of our patients are giving us different diagnostic results.

"I told you a few minutes ago that it is rare that our diagnostic spells conflict with the findings of our machines, but this is what is happening in these cases," Doctor Maronov continued. "This is why I'm glad you're here, Wizard. You were here at the time of the Great Plague."

"I was thirteen or fourteen at the time," Candle informed him, "but I did help out the day we spent in the clinic curing the curse victims. I would certainly know that particular curse if I saw it again. Are you keeping these patients in separate wards?"

"No," Doctor Maronov replied. "I'd like to, but we don't really have the room to do that and there are only eight of the possibly cursed patients with us at the moment. I suppose we could try to set up a remote facility if you think it is necessary, but that would be very expensive and it might be difficult to arrange. Also, I should mention we have yet to be able to cure anyone exhibiting what Blizzard claims are traces of this curse. They have all died eventually."

"This isn't the only hospital in Rjalkatyp, is it?" Oceanvine asked.

"Not at all," Doctor Maronov shook his head, "but this is the largest, most modern facility," he added proudly, "and it is the only one on the Isle to which these particular patients are being sent, although so far they have all come from Rjalkatyp."

"There haven't been any cases of this sort in the other cities? No? Well that adds a certain amount of isolation," Candle noted with satisfaction. "We should have a look at your patients, I think."

Candle had Oceanvine and Sextant stay back when he inspected the first of the potentially cursed patients, reminding them, "If it really is a degenerate form of the Bond of Aritos, it can be more dangerous than when it is pristine. Keep in mind the various protections I've been drilling you on since we returned from Sutheria." They both nodded, allowing Candle to take his first look. "Why are these patients being restrained?" he asked Doctor Maronov.

"They kept getting out of their beds and attacking their fellow patients," Doctor Maronov informed him.

"You didn't mention that before," Candle noted sharply. "Attacking? They don't seem nearly strong enough."

"Not now, no," Doctor Maronov agreed, "but early on, they were capable of getting out of bed

unassisted. And by attacking, I don't mean they were trying to kill the others. It was more like they were trying to spread the disease, by touching them and breathing on them."

"Did the symptoms spread that way?" Candle asked.

"No," Maronov responded. "Most of my staff got sick with the Flu early on, but none of them ever developed these complications."

"Complications, eh?" Candle chuckled. "Well, I suppose that's as good a description as any. Let me take a look now."

He sat down next to one of the patients and, to both Oceanvine's and Sextant's surprise, closed his eyes. He had been training them not to rely on self-hypnosis to cast their spells, so to see him do it was unexpected. Oceanvine studied him for a moment and realized that while Candle had always warned them that they might not have the time or luxury to sink into a trance in every situation, this was one situation in which speed was not only unnecessary, but could be harmful to the very people they were here to help, so when Sextant commented, "He never lets us do that," Oceanvine explained just how important it was to be even more careful than usual this time.

"Well, it's something," Candle eventually reported back in Doctor Maronov's office after examining all the patients. "If your original diagnoses are correct, then yes, the others have normal cases of Influenza. It's a serious disease, but you and your staff are more qualified to treat the victims than I am. These others, however, I'm not sure about. Blizzard may be right. These could be vestigial traces of the Bond of Aritos, or they could be traces of somebody's old home remedy. Most of those old home healing spells weren't particularly effective, especially against Influenza and some were actually counter-productive, but I'll have to examine these patients more closely before I can give you a good answer."

"If they survive that long," Doctor Maronov commented.

"I think it's probable that those eight with the additional 'complications' as you called them," Candle continued, "actually have two problems. First, they do seem to be infected with the same Flu the others are, but there is also that magical component we've been noticing. Tell me, has anyone tried using the cure Silverwind, Oceanvine and I brought here sixty-nine years ago?"

"Madame Blizzard tried," Doctor Maronov reported. "She was not sure she was still performing it correctly, however, so I brought in a retired doctor who actually remembered using the curative spell and he was fairly certain he did perform it correctly. There did not seem to be any effect."

"I didn't expect there would be," Candle admitted. "The cure was very specifically written to be used against a curse that incorporated the version of the Bond of Aritos that was associated with the Demon Arithan. Arithan is dead now so it stands to follow that version of the Bond is now powerless. I say it stands to reason, but I thought all forms of the Bond were powerless until last year, so I could have been wrong yet again."

"Didn't Ar... Artifice tell you that Bond really was useless now?" Sextant asked.

"He did," Candle confirmed, "but Artifice has been in error once or twice before. I didn't want to take chances, is all."

"Uncle Candle, you're looking a bit tired," Oceanvine told him concernedly. The truth was both she and

Sextant were very tired after the flight from Mith as well.

“Only a bit?” Candle asked wryly. “Then I feel worse than I look. In any case I doubt any of us are awake enough to do those people much good. Doctor, we just arrived this morning and it’s already dark outside.”

“The sun sets about Two in the afternoon at this time of year,” Doctor Maronov explained, “but it is almost dinner time. Wizard, Journeymen, I appreciate that you came here so quickly, but if you really just landed, why don’t you get some rest?”

Four

They returned to the hospital the next morning ready to work in earnest. Candle, convinced that the spell traces, whatever they were, were not contagious, showed what he had seen the day before to Oceanvine and Sextant.

“That does sort of look like the Bond of Aritos we saw in Sutheria,” Oceanvine noted, “although there are a lot of differences.”

“The variant Grovinsk used was associated with the Demon Xenlabit,” Candle explained. “I’m certain this is not that variant and for the reasons I explained yesterday, it won’t be associated with Arithan either.”

“So is it associated with another demon?” Sextant asked.

“I don’t know yet,” Candle explained. “The traces are too degenerate to tell for certain. Given the complexity I would rule out the possibility of it being part of Pahn’s Bond, which leaves either Gredac or Kerawlat.”

“Good thing Aritos gave up after his fifth failure,” Sextant remarked.

“Indeed,” Candle agreed. “Too bad these traces are so degenerated I can’t make out just what we’re dealing with.”

“Assuming it is the Bond of Aritos at all,” Oceanvine told him.

“Yes,” Candle agreed, “it could be something else and it’s more important that we cure these people at this point than worry about the ultimate source of the curse.”

“So it is a curse?” Doctor Maronov asked.

“A curse, by definition, is any malevolent form of magic,” Candle explained. “The magical component of these people’s disease is malevolent, therefore it is a curse. But curse is just a word and there’s no such thing as a universal cure. We’re going to have to handle each case individually and because no two sets of traces are exactly alike we’ll have to handle each one in a unique manner. Well, let’s get started. Oceanvine, I want you to erect a ward to shield you and Sextant just in case these traces go wild when I try to neutralize them. Sextant, I want you to erect a similar ward, but in your case use it to shield everyone else in this ward.”

“I can handle both, you know, Uncle,” Oceanvine maintained.

“I’m sure you can under normal circumstances,” Candle allowed, “but I honestly don’t know what’s going to happen once I start. Splitting the load will make it safer for everyone.”

Oceanvine nodded and hastily erected her ward. Sextant followed a moment later. Candle inspected their work, then applied himself to the job at hand. Dispelling any spell cast by an unknown mage was a difficult and dangerous project, but when that spell was also a potentially destructive curse, extra special care was required.

He had no intention of just jumping in until he felt there was nothing further to be learned by studying the spell traces. “Look here,” he instructed Oceanvine and Sextant, pointing at the aural traces of the spell.

“Where?” both journeymen asked.

“Sorry,” Candle apologized, “from your angle I’m probably pointing at this man’s feet. Check his aura, but see if you can keep your eyes open.”

“I’m much better at that now, Uncle,” Oceanvine assured him.

“Sextant?” Candle asked.

“I’m there now,” Sextant announced. “Vine’s a bit better than I am at seeing two things at once,” he explained without apology. It was a matter of fact and while he obviously wanted to improve his own performance, he admired her strengths.

“Oceanvine,” she corrected him automatically.

“Later,” Candle admonished them sternly. “Now see the little red dot?”

“They’d better,” the man in the bed told them hoarsely. “I can.”

Candle laughed. “Simple light spell. I’m sorry we woke you up.”

“That’s okay, Doc,” the man replied. “Everyone else does.”

“Well, I’ll try to be a bit quieter,” Candle promised. He continued, whispering, “Now follow the little red light. See the structure of these traces.”

“It looks like part of the Bond of Aritos,” Sextant identified it, “only it’s sort of flat and stretched out.”

“And the energy isn’t flowing through it,” Oceanvine added. “It’s just sort of pulsing.”

“It is,” Candle confirmed. “I hadn’t gotten that far yet, but you’re right. That’s likely because it’s just a trace of the original spell. The Bond, like most spells, is sort of like an electric circuit, but unlike an electric circuit, when the circuit is broken, the traces behave like a battery, storing that energy in what’s left of the original spell. That’s actually a metaphorical explanation. Spells are directed energy, really, which is why such traces stay together like this. The energy is still trying to do what it was directed to do. It’s up to us to bring that to an end, but because there’s still a lot of potential energy locked up here we need to be very careful to understand what we’re dealing with.



“Now,” Candle continued, “do you see how the spell traces appear to bond with something else?”

“Yes,” Oceanvine agreed. “It’s like two different spells are attacking this man.”

“No,” Candle corrected her, “only one spell. The other element is the aura of the disease itself. All forms of life, even viruses, have auras. The problem here is that this spell trace has become attached to the virus.”

“Why just here, sir?” Sextant asked. “Why not in every Flu victim?”

“I don’t know,” Candle admitted, “but that little discussion we had about conditional modifiers yesterday might apply. It’s possible that this spell we’re dealing with is only supposed to work on otherwise healthy people.”

“What’s the point of that?” Sextant asked.

“If it is a curse, perhaps whoever cast it wants to spread it to a maximum number of people. Sick people don’t get around much, so instead the spell just starts shutting down,” Candle replied.

“And starts shutting down the victim as well?” Oceanvine asked.

“Could be,” Candle nodded.

“Or perhaps, the curse attacked the first life form it met,” Oceanvine proposed, “which in this case could have been the virus?”

“Not impossible,” Candle allowed, “but this one is intertwined with an uncountable number of viruses. I think it’s more likely that the spell was not crafted with sufficient precision so that when this gentleman was infected with the curse, he was already infected with the Influenza. The curse, unable to work properly and spread itself, moved on to the next step which is to ultimately kill the victim. The problem is, it also hasn’t managed to spread itself so it’s also trying to kill the Flu virus. It can’t do that, because it’s also supposed to kill the victim and to cure the Flu will help rather than hurt. However it’s using the victim’s energy in the process so eventually it would succeed in killing him.

“At least that’s what I think happened here,” he concluded. “Now we’re going to work on removing the curse.” He turned his attention back to the traces of the spell, but the moment he tried to excise it from its attachments, the trace simply dissipated. “That was incredibly simple,” Candle noted.

“Was it?” Oceanvine asked. “You were at it for four hours.”

“I was?” Candle asked. “My, how time flies when you’re having fun. Let’s make sure I actually did the trick, shall we?” They all looked at the patient carefully, but while he was still affected by the Flu, he was no longer cursed. “Let’s find something to eat, then we’ll see if we can speed the process up a bit. I thought it only took a few minutes.”

After lunch, Candle showed Sextant and Oceanvine exactly how he had dissipated the curse by doing it a second time. “I don’t think we’ll need to keep you both maintaining wards this time, I can cast and maintain one for myself. It’s important to keep the ward intact because it’s always possible you’ll get different results, but you have both shown me you can maintain more than one spell at a time. This should not be any more difficult. Now we’ve discussed how to unravel complex malignant spells, but if this proceeds like the last one, very little of that will be necessary. Let’s see how that goes.”

This time Candle was more aware of the passage of time, but while progress was slow, it was still as simple as before. He slowly pried the trace of the spell that was still not sufficiently complex to be anything more than a badly cast curse, but as soon as he had done much more than to start the process, the spell traces seemed to evaporate. "It still took over three hours, Uncle," Oceanvine observed, "but I saw how you did it. I'm fairly certain I could do the same."

"It looked fairly easy to me too, sir," Sextant agreed. "Perhaps tomorrow morning we can all work alone and cure the remaining six patients before evening."

"Yes," Candle agreed tiredly. "We'll try that tomorrow."

Candle fell asleep in one of Blizzard's easy chairs before dinner and on being awakened only ate lightly before excusing himself to go to his guest room. "He must have worked very hard today," Blizzard commented.

"He makes it look so easy," Oceanvine told her. "He says he thinks we can do the same thing tomorrow."

"Magic can be like that sometimes," Blizzard told her. "An otherwise simple spell requires a lot of energy and time to actually perform. While you're doing it, it seems like only a few moments have passed, but to observers hours can go by."

"Yes!" Oceanvine agreed. "That's exactly what happened."

"Then he really did work hard today," Blizzard told her "That sort of magic always takes a lot out of you. Keep that in mind when you go to work tomorrow."

Oceanvine and Sextant did both keep that in mind. They too experienced the amazing loss of time as morning instantly turned into lunchtime while they cured their first curse victims. Oceanvine emerged from her work first, discovering she was both a bit dazed and very hungry. "No wonder Uncle Candle suggested lunch yesterday," she said out loud to herself.

"Are you all right?" one of the nurses, a woman named Nila, asked her. Nila was an Orente, tall with dark skin and pointed ears that would have protruded through her hair had it not been tied back. Her hair, a deep brown, was unusually light for an Orente and her eyes were gray, another unusual coloration for an Orente, although Oceanvine later learned that such differences were considered normal on the Isle of Fire.

"I'll be fine," Oceanvine assured her. "I should probably get some lunch soon though, but maybe I should wait for Sextant and Uncle Candle."

"You look like it's more important for you to have something to eat and drink," Nila insisted. "Doctor Maronov assigned one of us to each of you when he saw how deeply immersed you were in your magic." Oceanvine looked and saw that was that case. "So let's get you to the cafeteria. The others can join us when they're ready."

"Good point," Oceanvine admitted, remembering just how tired Candle had been the previous evening. She followed Nila to the cafeteria although it took them longer to get there than the day before as nearly everyone they met along the way stopped to thank Oceanvine for being there to help. Still more stopped by the table after she and Nila finally sat down. "Everyone seems so friendly," she wondered aloud once

she'd had a few sips of coffee, "and grateful."

"Of course," Nila smiled. "Why shouldn't we be?"

"In Silamon, the police weren't at all happy to see us at first," Oceanvine explained. "They refused to have anything to do with us, in fact; not until sometime later when they got really desperate."

"Well, we still remember the Great Plague here," Nila told her.

"You hardly look old enough," Oceanvine remarked. "It was sixty-nine years ago, wasn't it?"

"Some events leave an indelible mark on people," Nila told her seriously. "Some are so powerful they affect the next generation or more. The Plague was one such, but what we remember most was that Silverwind, Oceanvine and Candle were here and they delivered the cure. I've been meaning to ask; you're far too young to be the original Oceanvine, aren't you?"

"I'm twenty," Oceanvine laughed. "The Oceanvine you've heard of was my great-grandmother."

"So you inherited the name?" Nila asked.

"Sort of," Oceanvine shrugged. "When it came time to choose a mage name, it was the only one that fit. I just hope I can live up to it. Uncle Candle – and he is the same one who was here – tells me that a lot of mages used to choose names that commemorated their ancestors, but very few of them were ever as outstanding as the ancestors they tried to commemorate. My great-grandmother was a great lady... uh a great person," she smiled remembering something Methis had told her in a dream once. "Neither gender nor station had anything to do with it."

"She was quite remarkable," Nila agreed.

"I have a very long way to go to even start to emulate her," Oceanvine sighed.

"Looks to me like you're making a very good start," Nila informed her.

"Oh, here you are!" Candle remarked as he and Sextant entered the cafeteria with their own assistants. "Getting a headstart on us?"

"Just following doctor's... uh nurse's orders," Oceanvine shot back. "Hey, get your own chips, Six!" she told him when he grabbed one of the fried potatoes from her plate.

"I will, Vine," he laughed.

"Oceanvine!" she told him retreating back, "And bring back an extra order for me! Please," she added hastily.

"You really are much nicer than my sister," Candle chuckled. She looked at him skeptically, "She probably would have burnt his hand," he explained as he sat down.

"Aren't you eating, Uncle?" Oceanvine asked concernedly. He was looking nearly as tired as he had the previous evening.

"Marala offered to get me soup and a sandwich of some sort," Candle explained, indicating the assistant

who had accompanied him into the cafeteria. “Normally I’d have gotten it myself, but sitting seemed like a good idea all of a sudden.”

“Maybe you should take the afternoon off,” Oceanvine suggested.

“I’m okay,” Candle told her stubbornly. “I’ll be much better after lunch, you’ll see.”

“And if not, you’ll let either Six or me finish the cures,” she told him firmly.

“I’ll be better,” he repeated. She did not believe him, but decided she would wait to see how he was in an hour.

They were halfway through their meals when there was a small commotion by a television set on the far side of the cafeteria. “Turn it up!” someone shouted. Candle and his students turned to see a new bulletin about the Gran 4 space mission.

The picture was almost entirely blue with some wisps of white near the edge of the screen. Someone had trained his camera on an otherwise empty sky. “I repeat,” an unseen announcer spoke, “We have just learned that the Gran 4 capsule has re-entered the atmosphere and is currently under ionization blackout. We hope to be able to hear from them again in a few minutes.”

“What sort of blackout?” Nila asked. “Are they keeping something from us?”

“No, I’d say the Granomen are being unusually open if they’re actually broadcasting the recovery,” Candle remarked. “Ionization blackout occurs when a space capsule reenters the atmosphere. The heat shield is smashing into the gaseous molecules causing them to heat up and ionize. Surrounded by an envelope of ionized gas, the radio is unable to transmit or receive until they slow down enough to no longer cause ionization. It only lasts a few minutes, but understandably it’s the most nervous part of a mission aside, perhaps, from the lift-off. In any case we won’t hear from them for a bit yet.”

The commentator droned on as the unedifying view continued. He explained how the ethernauts had used the Midbar Excursion Module life-support system to stay alive for the entire trip, albeit in very cold conditions aboard the space craft. While the MEM had a sufficient air supply to get them home, it did not have a heating unit capable of warming the entire craft sufficiently for the ethernauts to be comfortable. Finally, they had to separate from the MEM, and their only source of air to begin their descent back to the surface of Maiyim. As he spoke, the announcer worried as to whether there was enough air in the capsule to bring them back down alive and that if the blackout continued longer than it might normally then it could be a bad sign.

The blackout continued over a minute longer than normal as the world seemed to hold its breath until the terse report, “Honnea Control, this is Gran 4,” could be heard. Cheers rang out across the cafeteria and a moment later a small black dot appeared on the television screen. Slowly, the dot became larger and then three large parachutes deployed and it became larger still. The cameraman lost the spaceship for a moment as he attempted to refocus on it and by the time he found it again, it was only a few hundred yards over the waters of the Nildar Ocean. It dropped in and then bobbed to the surface like a cork. Several helicopters were swiftly dispatched to the scene and three men in wetsuits jumped into the sea beside the capsule. One attached a large hook to a loop on top of the capsule, while the other two raced to open the capsule’s hatch.

The hatch opened and the camera zoomed in to see four relieved looking Granomen, who to Oceanvine’s eyes appeared to have been just turning a bit blue from lack of good air. The ethernauts were assisted

out of the capsule and into an inflatable raft where they waited while their rescuers rowed a few strokes to a waiting amphibious helicopter that had landed as nearby as safety allowed while the capsule was lifted away and back to the deck of a nearby ship. Then the helicopter with the rescued ethernauts followed its mate to where several admirals and a small band welcomed them back to Maiyim. Oceanvine noted they were still having trouble standing up and walking straight after their ordeal, but they were all obviously alive.

“Well, that’s good news, at least,” Candle remarked. “Maybe now Emmine will slow down her own space program for safety’s sake before they suffer another nearly fatal incident.”

“You mean like the launch failure last year?” Sextant asked.

“A good example,” Candle agreed. “That was nearly a repeat of the launch pad fire of five years ago and we only lost one ethernaut that time. We need to be more careful. This isn’t about winning races and it’s about time our kings realized that. Well, we aren’t going to accomplish anything by just talking about it. Let’s go finish our own work, shall we?”

Five

“You look terrible, Oceanvine,” Olanna observed the next morning when the journeywoman stumbled into the kitchen just as the pale winter sun was lifting off the horizon.

“It matches how I feel,” Oceanvine admitted with a raspy voice. “I’m very thirsty, though.”

“Sit down, I’ll pour you some winberry juice,” Olanna told her in a motherly tone. She did so and gave Oceanvine the glass while checking her forehead with the other, “Oh, Wenni, child! You’re burning up.”

“Is it the Flu?” Oceanvine asked worriedly, barely audible.

“More likely than appendicitis,” Sextant told her from the doorway to the kitchen. “I’m not feeling too great either. Sore throat, headache, I probably have a fever or soon will have.”

Olanna checked his forehead and confirmed, “You’re warm, but not as much as Oceanvine is.”

“Oh, well, Vine always has to be the first,” Sextant remarked hoarsely. He accepted a glass of juice and started sipping it.

“That’s Oceanvine!” she tried to protest but, in trying to raise her voice, only a few squeaks came out.

“That does it,” Olanna told them. “You’ll both finish up that juice then go right back to bed. I’ll bring you something to eat.”

“I’m not sure I’ll be able to keep it down,” Oceanvine warned her.

“I’ll bring you a bucket too then, but you will force yourselves to eat something. Feed a fever, starve a cold. Now, back to bed!” Olanna told them.

“I have other jobs for them today, Olanna,” Candle told her as he entered the room.

“They have the next week or so off, Wizard,” she told him firmly, “or you will answer to me.”

“Why?” Candle began and then caught sight of the two journeymen. “You two look positively green. Olanna’s right, get back to bed.”

Olanna refilled their glasses and sent them on their way. “And how are you feeling?” she asked Candle as she popped slices of bread into a toaster. She was already at the sink filling the kettle before he could answer.

“I feel just fine,” Candle replied. “I note you’ve stopped coughing.”

“Not this morning yet,” Olanna admitted as she placed the kettle on the stove and turned on the gas. The gas flowed for a second and then was ignited by the pilot. She left the flames on high.

“Where’s Blizzard?”

“She had an appointment on the Hill this morning,” Olanna replied.

“Any news on the political front?” Candle asked.

“Not yet,” Olanna replied. “We’re still at the stage of trying to figure out who’s really on our side. It’s considerably more difficult this time around. Neither of us are in the Congress and while we can ask for favors, there’s not a whole lot we can do in return. Not exactly the way politics works.”

“What if Blizzard threatens to run for President again?” Candle suggested.

“It would kill her,” Olanna remarked flatly.

“I doubt it,” Candle shook his head.

“She’s in her nineties, Wizard.”

“So are you,” Candle pointed out.

“I’m an Orente,” Olanna reminded him as she measure out tea into two small pots. “The life expectancy on my species is one hundred years. She’s a Granom and her life expectancy is only sixty-eight. She’s already lived twenty-four years longer than the average female Granom.”

“I think she has a few good years left in her,” Candle replied. “Ksaveras IX was over ninety-six when he passed on and Granomish men don’t live as long as the women.”

“Ksaveras X was only sixty-eight,” Olanna countered as the kettle began to emit a steady stream of white vapor. She picked up the kettle and started making the tea. “He only reigned actively for two years.”

“Closer to three,” Candle corrected her.

“Nevertheless, I would prefer it if Blizzard was able to live out the rest of her life in peace. That won’t happen if she has to preside over that mad house on the Hill,” Olanna concluded as she placed the pots, two plates of toast and marmalade and cups on a tray. “So don’t start trying to convince her to run!”

"I wouldn't dream of it," Candle admitted, following her out of the kitchen. "But I know the sort you have to deal with in that 'mad house.' If they thought she would run, they'd scramble to do anything to stop it from happening. You have to admit Blizzard would be a voters' favorite in any election race she chose to enter. She doesn't have to run, she only has to threaten to run."

The front door opened as Candle said that and Blizzard entered the townhouse, "You have that right," she told Candle as Olanna rushed to bring the journeymen their tea and toast. "All I had to do was imply that I might run for President next year and there wasn't a man or woman there aside from members of the Peoples' Party who wasn't willing to do anything I wanted."

"Nice to know I guessed right," Candle told her. "I'm not the political expert you are."

"Nothing to it, Candle," Blizzard laughed. "Just think of the most rational and fair way of coming to a consensus then do just the opposite and you'll still come off as more reasonable than most of the jacks and jennies on the Hill. But the one thing you can count on is that none of them will do anything that might lose them votes, because if they can't get elected they stand in grave danger of being arrested as pickpockets or bank robbers."

"There must be some people of worth left there," Candle told her.

"A few," Blizzard sighed. "I think they got elected just to throw the rest of the scoundrels into sharp relief."

"My, aren't we cheerful and optimistic," Candle laughed.

"The Hill does that to me," Blizzard sighed, then a moment later started giggling.

"What?" Candle asked curiously.

"I ran into an old colleague. Well, not a really old colleague, but she's been playing politics on the Hill for the last twenty years or so. She's one of those independent Senators who keeps getting elected because she has just enough of a following in her own home town, although frankly I think they keep electing her to keep her from coming home permanently. She's one of those sorts who will fawn all over you, while checking to see if there's any room in your back for just one more dagger."

"You deal with all the nicest people," Candle remarked.

"Oh, I've been known to play dirty when I've had to," Blizzard confessed. "The difference is this one does it because she doesn't know any other way. Well, not being affiliated with any party, she's constantly trying to make deals with everyone on the Senate and Commons floor. How she keeps them all straight, I'll never know, but she was flitting from one meeting to another when we ran into one another."

"Well, I guess the word was out that I was up there talking to a few of the senators at a breakfast meeting, but only members of my old party, so she made a few empty compliments about how sordid the Hill has become since I retired and that's what gave me the idea," Blizzard continued. "So I invited her to walk with me and led her to the clerk's office. By this time she was infernally curious as to what I was doing, so she followed me in and I asked for the official forms and formally declared my intention to run for President."

"You didn't!" Olanna exclaimed on reentering the room.

“I did,” Blizzard laughed. “Oh, don’t worry, they couldn’t pay me to actually run again and so long as I don’t get enough signatures my name won’t even be on the ballot.”

“If word gets out about what you did,” Olanna warned her, “there are enough people in this town who would circulate their own petitions to be sure you had the signatures.”

“I can always withdraw from the race,” Blizzard assured her calmly, “but at the moment I think we’re going to put the People’s Party on the defensive. They may have a plurality, but my name still carries a clear majority,” she finished proudly.

“Just promise me you won’t run,” Olanna requested.

“I won’t campaign,” Blizzard promised.

“That’s not the same thing,” Olanna pointed out.

“Well, if elected I promise not to serve,” Blizzard laughed. “Seriously though, I doubt I’ll have to go that far. Let’s just let it sit for a few days and see how it all shakes out. I imagine just about now the People’s Party is getting rather nervous.”

“Not necessarily a good thing,” Candle told her. “They really are part of One Maiyim, and One Maiyim isn’t concerned over how many opponents they have to kill in order to get what they want. You’ve just hung a great target around your neck.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time someone has tried to assassinate me, you know,” Blizzard told Candle. “Having a mage’s training has saved my life at least twice.”

“One Maiyim has mages and they’ve managed a couple tricks I still haven’t figured out. Remember those rings they used in Querna?”

“I do, indeed,” Blizzard nodded. “Southgate and I had quite a struggle while waiting for you to figure out how to disrupt them.”

“It took a while to figure it out,” Candle replied defensively.

“I realize that,” Blizzard admitted. “I can’t say I would have in time, but then I’ll never be a wizard.”

“You could have been,” Candle told her. “But your true calling was to serve the Isle of Fire. So how are the kids?” he asked Olanna.

“Very sick,” Olanna replied. “Oceanvine did have a few bites of the toast and a cup of tea, but Sextant was already sleeping again by the time I got to his room. I don’t expect he’ll be able to sleep more than fitfully, though. Hopefully, he’ll have something when he wakes up.”

“What happened?” Blizzard asked. Together Candle and Olanna filled her in. “It was predictable, I suppose, what with you all going into the hospital ward with all those sick people. What about you, Candle?”

“I’m fine,” Candle replied easily. “Maybe I’ve had this strain before or one close enough to it or maybe I’ll get sick later. We’ll have to wait and see. In the meantime I need to consider my next move. I had



hoped to have Sextant and Oceanvine wander around town today seeing if they could find anything that seemed out of the ordinary. I could be wrong, but they seem to be good at stumbling into situations. Did I ever tell you about how they got mugged in the first port-of-call after they started their lessons?"

"You wrote about it when you sent me that copy of Oceanvine's paper," Blizzard nodded. "Do they have a lot of experiences like that?"

"Not being attacked," Candle replied, "but somehow when those two are together they seem to be a magnet for the extraordinary. This past winter, in fact, they went out for a cup of coffee after a lab session one afternoon and ended up giving advice on a minor matter to His Majesty."

"Well, she is a lady, the daughter of an earl," Blizzard allowed. "I'm not surprised that she is known in court."

"That's not it," Candle chuckled. "Before the events in Silamon, I doubt Hacon Ancel would have known her from any of a dozen other ladies her age. She had rarely been to court. I think that might have been her mother's influence. Erinne wanted her children to have as normal an upbringing as possible."

"In any case they weren't headed anywhere near the palace, but the king was riding by just as they were about to cross the street and invited them into his limousine," Candle explained.

"I can't see Ksaveras doing that," Blizzard remarked. "Then again his ministers seem intent on keeping him confined to the WurraPalace."

"Ksaveras is young yet and has only been king for two years now," Candle remarked. "I'm not sure he's realized yet that he really is the king, but if those ministers don't give him air soon, I imagine he'll give them more than a few surprises, but that's just the point. Hacon Ancel doesn't normally go parading through the city either and when he does he is not likely to stop midway. Oh, he goes out on official trips, anything from shopping to diplomatic missions, and he's wise enough to know the value of speaking to his subjects, but that's when he is at the destination of the day, not midway. The commentators were completely taken aback when the royal limo stopped and two students got in. It made the news all over the archipelago that week, mostly in the tabloids though so no one took it seriously."

"What was the matter they advised him on?" Blizzard asked.

"They wouldn't say," Candle admitted, "not that I pressed for an answer. Hacon Ancel's been inviting Vine to the palace all winter in the hopes that she might be as big a thorn in his side as her great-grandmother was. I figured he was just trying one of his ideas out on her to see what she thought about it."

"Now I would call that extraordinary," Blizzard remarked.

"I would too," Candle agreed, "if I hadn't seen how he reacted when my sister told him he was wrong about something. I think he found it refreshing. I think he figured that if Vine was in agreement he must be right. Young Oceanvine may eventually feel comfortable enough around the king to tell him off but at the moment she's too polite to disagree directly."

"I've met Hacon Ancel a number of times," Blizzard reminded Candle. "I think he's smart enough to be able to tell when someone disagrees, even indirectly. So what are you going to do without your favorite trouble magnets?"

"I'll wander around by myself, I guess," Candle shrugged. "I used to be a bit of a trouble magnet too, you know. Maybe I still have the knack."

Six

Candle spent the next several days wandering around, using the golden staff as a walking stick. He visited a variety of neighborhoods in Rjalkatyp, but for the first four days his only notable discovery occurred when he found the site of his encounter with the Demon Arithan.

The last time he had been here, the empty lot had been used by the local children as a playground, but now it was a park. Many of the trees in the park were deciduous, leaving Candle to wish he could have seen it in the summer, and in the middle of the park was a large statue featuring three people standing nobly together.

Approaching to get a closer view, he discovered there were several benches arranged around the statue and that a Orentan gentleman roughly Candle's age was sitting quietly on one of them, looking up at the statue. On a whim, Candle sat down next to him, leaning the staff against the side of the bench.

"We used to play Eight-base here," the old Orente told him by way of greeting.

"Yes," Candle nodded, "I remember there was an abandoned bat here."

"They played with us, you know," the man continued, still looking at the statue. "Silverwind and Oceanvine did, anyway. I think they were on the run from the Vogt at the time, but they stopped to play an inning with us."

"Sounds like Silverwind," Candle chuckled. "I have a hard time imagining Vine loosening up that much, though."

"Well she wasn't quite as enthusiastic at first, but she got into it once we gave her a turn at bat. We had to, of course. She demanded to know why girls couldn't play," the old Orente laughed. "Of course they could, they just usually didn't back then. I see more girls on the teams these days though. Candle didn't play with us that day though, he wasn't there."

"I was probably working with Blizzard that day," Candle remarked thoughtfully, then he took a second look at the statue. "That's us?"

"If you're really Wizard Candle," the man told him, "then yes, that's you."

"This may be the only time anyone ever noticed me when I was with them," Candle chuckled. "Pretty good likenesses, especially of Vine and Silverwind. Me too I think, but it's been a while since I saw that face in a mirror. Certainly Silverwind looks more like himself than the statue of him in his own hometown."

The Orente looked at Candle for a long moment, then as if they had been old friends asked, "So what have you been up to all these years?"

"A bit of everything," Candle shrugged.

“Yeah, I’ve heard,” the man chuckled.

“Have we met?” Candle asked.

“No,” the man replied, “I’m sure I’d remember, but I’ve been following your career since I was a kid. We’re the same age you know.”

“Are we?” Candle asked. “Okay, I believe it. So why have you been keeping track of me? It’s not like I’m generally well known outside of academic circles.”

“Hah!” the old Orente retorted. “Like nobody in Granom knows the Marquess of Sentendir! And you aren’t going to tell me the King of Emmine doesn’t know you.”

“Oh well, them,” Candle shrugged, “it’s not like I spend a lot of time in court.”

“I imagine there are still a few senators in Bellinen who remember what you and Oceanvine did sixty years ago or so,” the man continued.

“You*have* been studying my life,” Candle noted. “I probably ought to hire you as my biographer.” They both laughed.

“I don’t need a hobby that badly,” the man told him. “Still, I think someone ought to tell that tale. Think of it. You were educated by Silverwind and Oceanvine. You’ve saved the lives of prominent people the world over, been decorated by both Emmine and Granom, and yet few people would know you on sight.”

“I like it that way,” Candle replied. “When I was that kid on the pedestal, I was constantly annoyed that while I was there with Silverwind and Oceanvine, my name never showed up in any of the stories. I even harangued Silverwind’s ex-wife, the one who wrote them, to put me in, but it never happened, but you know, she did me a favor. Outside of our hometown, neither Silverwind nor Oceanvine could go anywhere without having people running up for autographs or take their pictures and yet I was able to move around freely without any of that bother. It certainly allowed me to pursue my studies without any of the inconvenience Oceanvine had to endure.”

“I hear you were fairly active in Silamon last year too,” the man continued.

“I had help,” Candle shrugged. “I took on a pair of apprentices and I must say they performed well.”

“Is she really Oceanvine’s granddaughter?”

“Her great-granddaughter,” Candle replied.

“Interesting,” the man commented, “and appropriate. I assume the young man is related to Silverwind too?”

“What makes you say that?” Candle asked.

“Ketch is a very small island,” came the reply, “at least it is according to the encyclopedia.”

Candle nodded, but he was suddenly suspicious. Reaching for the golden staff, Candle used it in a manner he had not done in years. Carefully, and as subtly as possible, he looked into the Orente’s mind.

It seemed as though the man knew a bit too much about him and the journeymen. However, his suspicions were baseless. It appeared he really was just very interested in Candle and his career.

Candle gently excised the man's memory of the few seconds during which Candle had probed his mind. Candle was certain he had probed gently enough that it wouldn't have been noticed, but he didn't want to shatter the man's illusions by seeming to be suspicious, and disrespectful of another's privacy. Only Candle knew that the probe had not actually read the man's thoughts, but only got an impression of how he felt about Candle and mages in general.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" Candle asked, feeling he owed the man a fairy tale sort of wish.

"No, I'm fine," the Orente told him. "I must say it was nice to meet you at last, though. You know, if I could live my life over again, maybe I would be a wizard too. You always made it seem like such fun."

"A cup of coffee, perhaps?" Candle persisted, "or *alseor* something?"

"Well it is a bit chilly, isn't it? How about I buy you a cup of hot chocolate?" the Orente offered.

"I'm all for that," Candle replied, "but I insist on paying."

"We'll see."

On his return to Blizzard's townhouse, Candle asked about the park and the statue. "I thought you knew about that," Blizzard remarked.

"No, it was a bit of a surprise," Candle admitted. "Heck it was a bit more than a shock if you want to know the truth and I could swear that man had been waiting there for me all his life."

"Maybe he was," Blizzard smiled. "I wouldn't know about that, but it was Master Ironblade who insisted they get the details of the statue right and it was he who insisted that you be included on it. He was quite impressed with you, you know. You had been apprenticed just over a year and were already capable of some master-level magic."

"He'd have been amazed by young Oceanvine and Sextant," Candle told her. "Remember that keyed ward I finally cast? The one that made the pebble float?"

Blizzard laughed. "Oh, yes! I also remember the look on that soldier's face when we stopped to see Senator Lavro. He just couldn't take his eyes off that stone."

Candle laughed at the memory too. "I had been apprenticed a bit over a year by then. Well," he finally continued, "I pretty much gave them the same exercise when they had only been practicing a few weeks. Maybe it was cruel of me, but I even suggested tying their wards to a levitation spell."

"Nasty," Blizzard shook her head, "but they seem to have survived the episode."

"Survived?" Candle countered. "Oceanvine figured it out in a couple hours or so. She probably would have figured it out even sooner if she hadn't gotten distracted by the spell complex that makes up the *Maiyim Bourne*."

"I'm impressed," Blizzard admitted.

“That reminds me,” Candle said suddenly. “Are they getting enough to drink?”

“Of course!” Blizzard told him. “Olanna and I have been taking turns. Why would you even ask?”

“Before I met you, Silverwind took me to Querna. I got sick there and I woke up thirstier than I have ever been before or since. In my delirium, I tried to translocate some water to my room.”

“What made you even think of it?” Blizzard asked.

“Oceanvine had been giving me history lessons on the ship to Granom,” Candle explained. “One of the highlights was the Treaty of Sinid and how Wizard Crossreed brought it about. Leastways I think that’s where I got the idea. I should never have been able to cast such a spell when healthy, never mind half out of my mind, but I managed it and nearly drowned myself in brackish water from an old well.”

“Okay, you were a prodigy,” Blizzard nodded. “We both knew that.”

“Those two can already translocate objects for real and they’ve been practicing for nearly three weeks,” Candle informed her.

“Interesting choice of curriculum,” Blizzard replied dryly. “What possessed you to teach them that?”

“I didn’t,” Candle shook his head, “That was Methis’ crazy idea.”

Blizzard sat there a moment. “Methis,” she repeated wistfully. “You know, I’d have loved to have met Her.”

“You’ve had more important things to do,” Candle told her. “Even She would have told you that. But you know where to find Her if you really want to visit.”

“Best to wait for an invitation,” Blizzard decided. “Besides what would I say?”

“Whatever you wanted, but actually, you have met her. You just didn’t know it at the time. But remember the summer you visited the Renton School ? Remember Fireiron?” Candle asked.

“You’re kidding?” Blizzard asked. “No, I can see you aren’t. Come to think of it, you haven’t been quite as amused with the world as you usually are since you got here.”

“I haven’t been as amused since I discovered One Maiyim was active again,” Candle admitted. “Now I get the feeling I’ve been wasting the past few decades when I should have been getting ready for them.”

“It won’t do any good to worry about what you didn’t do,” Blizzard told him. “You need to work with what you have.”

“You’re right,” Candle agreed. “I just hope I’m still up to handling them.”

“This from the boy who turned Arithan’s curse back on himself,” Blizzard laughed. Just then the phone rang. “Excuse me,” Blizzard told him. “This is probably yet another worried politician trying to talk me out of running or else it’s one trying to be my running mate. Why don’t you check on the kids?”

Candle nodded and strolled upstairs. Sextant was sleeping, so Candle refilled his water pitcher and chilled it down until it was half frozen, then stopped in to check on Oceanvine. She was sitting up in bed

trying to read a physics textbook. “Are you trying to put yourself back to sleep with that?” Candle asked wryly.

“Hi, Uncle Candle. I can’t get back to sleep,” she replied groggily. “but this is fascinating. If I were healthy it would probably keep me up all night.”

Candle checked her forehead. “I think your fever is lower than it was.”

“I still ache all over and the sore throat is terrible,” she reported, “but at least my voice doesn’t sound like it’s being produced by two pieces of sandpaper.”

Candle refilled and chilled her water pitcher before asking, “So what are you reading?”

“Methis loaned me this book,” she replied. “It’s cosmology. I didn’t realize the Steady State Theory was no longer considered valid in most parts of the world. Well, I always liked the idea of the Big Bang better anyway, but I never realized we had theorized the conditions of the universe to within a split second of creation. This is exciting stuff.”

“I’ll say,” Candle commented dryly. “May I see that a moment.” He took the book and checked its publication date. “Are you sure Methis said it was okay to borrow this particular book?”

“She handed it to me,” Oceanvine replied.

“Think of it as a test,” Candle told her.

“What?” she asked, looking at the cover. “Why?”

“That book hasn’t been written yet,” Candle explained. “Won’t have been for thirty-two years. However, I’d like to borrow it when you’ve finished. For the record, at the moment the Big Bang versus Steady State argument is still a hot issue and I’d have thought Steady State made more sense. Disproved is it?”

“So it appears,” Oceanvine nodded. “Why would Methis loan me a book that hasn’t been written?”

“Maybe she wants you to get a head start on the physical sciences,” Candle replied, “or maybe it’s something else entirely. The Gods are fully capable of doing several things at once, you know.”

“Could She be trying to tell me that Time and Space aren’t separate, but are inextricably bound together?” Oceanvine asked. “It says that in here too,” she added when Candle frowned.

“No, that’s been known for years, even if it hasn’t made it into popular knowledge yet,” he replied, “and it’s not Her style at all. More like She’s just telling you that there’s a lot of things even the experts don’t know yet so you need to keep your mind open to new facts as they come along.

Oceanvine sipped some of the water and nodded. Then she yawned, but the yawn devolved into a coughing fit. “Maybe I’d better try to get some sleep. You want to borrow this?” She offered the book.

“Thanks,” Candle accepted it. “Sleep well.” Then he turned off the light and left the room.

Seven

Candle tried reading Oceanvine's book for the rest of the evening, but kept tossing it down on the table in disbelief. "You can usually concentrate better than that," Blizzard remarked after the fifth time it happened.

"I need to rethink some of my own deeply cherished scientific theories, I fear," Candle admitted. "It seems the Universe wasn't built the way I was taught."

"Think of it as..." Blizzard began her retort.

"A test?" Candle completed the sentence for her.

"I was going to say an opportunity," Blizzard remarked, "but 'test' is good too. You're still not going to tell me what's in that book?"

"Sorry," Candle apologized, "I'm not sure even I'm supposed to know. When Vine showed me the book, I saw it as a chance to see the state of science as it will be after I'm long gone."

"Not all that long," Blizzard remarked.

"I'm not likely to live to be one hundred thirteen," Candle shot back. "But now I wonder if Methis meant me to see this at all."

"She may have," Blizzard told him. "She knew she was giving Oceanvine a book far more advanced than our current theories and She had to have known Oceanvine would have questions about it. Now to whom would she come to ask those questions now that you're all here?"

"There is that," Candle agreed. "I know Methis didn't like a book on cosmology I bought Vine last summer. Maybe this is Her way of setting Oceanvine straight on the subject. Hmm, does that mean this is the final word on the subject?" he mused, reaching once more for the book.

"Probably not," Blizzard decided. "If anything, She's just preparing Oceanvine for what will be considered common knowledge during the second half of her life. Give her a head start, you know."

"Hmm, maybe, that does sound more like Methis' style. But now I'm going to wonder what other advanced knowledge She may have given the girl. No, that's silly, the Gods don't do that. Odds are She gave Vine this book because in spite of her interest Vine isn't likely to concentrate on cosmology or even physics."

"What is she likely to concentrate on then?" Blizzard asked.

"I'm not sure," Candle admitted. "Most of her undergraduate credits were in the liberal arts."

"Not a bad thing," Blizzard nodded. "She should be well-grounded in philosophy and it certainly puts her in a good position to be a generalist."

"You too?" Candle asked. "Methis said similar things; that Vine's liberal arts education stood her in better stead than Sextant's scientific education at least in the long run."

"Obviously I agree," Blizzard nodded. "I said as much a month ago to my grandson, Kaspero. He wants

to study magic and be a wizard, you know. I've warned him there aren't many wizards left, but that does not seem to have dampened his enthusiasm."

"Invite him over some time while we're still here," Candle told her. "I'd like to meet him. Vine and Six are studying general magic. Why not young Kaspero?"

"I'll do that," Blizzard nodded. "So what sort of reading did Methis assign to Sextant?"

"Literature," Candle replied.

"From the future?" Blizzard asked interestedly.

"No," Candle shook his head, "from Granom and Bellinen though. I guess she felt he was steady enough in Emmine culture. Now why would he need to know what sort of stories Granomen and Orenta like to read?"

Candle was out, staff in hand, again the next morning before anyone else had managed to rise for breakfast. He walked a few blocks to a small café where he enjoyed coffee and pastry and then started walking the city again. So far he had been only visiting the middle and upper class residential neighborhoods and the business district of the city. His failure to find anything of note in those areas, however, indicated to him it was time to try some of the less reputable areas.

Passing a telephone booth, he decided he ought to check in at the hospital to see if there were any new patients who might have been infected with both Influenza and a curse, but Doctor Maronov informed him there were no new Flu patients in the ward at all and that he believed they were finally reaching a point where the epidemic was starting to recede. "Well, that's good news," Candle replied and wished him a good day.

He wandered on and into a neighborhood he remembered from his first visit to the Isle of Fire. There was an old hotel here where he had stayed with Silverwind and Oceanvine while in the city. He found it and while remembering how they had to levitate down to street level to avoid being arrested by Vogt Andriy's guards, he was unaware of the approach of a young woman in a short woolen dress and tight-fitting sweater.

"Looking to get lucky, handsome?" she asked him brazenly.

Prostitution, Candle recalled, was legal on the Isle of Fire and licenses were available for both the women and men who worked in various houses and on the streets. However, the street walkers were decidedly a lower class of prostitute and were likely as not to actually have a license. Candle turned to face her and was about to refuse the offer when he caught sight of the dead look in her eyes. It was a look utterly devoid of hope and while most people would have normally attributed it to the woman's occupation and social position, Candle suddenly realized he was facing yet another old enemy. This woman was under the influence of the Hook.

The Hook was a relatively low level spell; any vaguely competent apprentice was capable of casting it if he knew how, but it contained devastating power above and beyond all proportion to the exertion it took to cast it. In essence it was an enslavement charm; one so powerful and absolute that the victim had absolutely no defense against it. Once the Hook had been set, he or she had no choice but to obey the slavemaster. What made the spell even worse was that the slavemaster did not need to be the mage who cast the spell in the first place. Ownership of a slave was all too easily transferable and the spell could be used directly to discipline, torture and even kill a victim and it would work for nearly anyone with or



without magical training.

The woman tried to approach still closer to touch Candle, but he stopped her in her tracks with a quick ward designed to hold her in place. Then he took a closer look at the Hook that enveloped her. There it was; the Hook in all its malevolence, but there was something different about it this time. There almost underneath the Hook was a new and unusual power source for the spell. It was the Bond of Aritos.

*And there I thought I'd seen every perversion of magic possible*, Candle thought to himself, ignoring the woman's muffled screams of protest from within the ward. The Bond, however was doing far more than powering the Hook, it was adding an element of contagion to the Hook. Anyone in contact with a victim more than just passingly, would be infected as well. Candle estimated it would only take a minute or less of physical contact to spread the curse. Examining the spell complex more closely, he understood why the cursed Flu victims only carried traces of this spell and why the spell had not been immediately identifiable to him.

Candle had been correct when he speculated that the mage who cast the curse had been clumsy. Whoever it had been had implanted more conditions than absolutely necessary so that when the spell encountered the Influenza virus, it acted as if it was a competitive curse and tried to neutralize it unsuccessfully. It might also explain why this new, more virulent, variation on the Hook had not spread far enough to be noticed yet. There were too many sick people in Rjalkatyp. Fewer people were out and about; they were less likely to be in a position to contact the curse and the few who were ended up with the odd curse disease Candle had been curing.

He was about to release the prostitute from the Hook when he suddenly realized that if he did, the Bond would still remain and be completely unfettered. Anything might happen then, but no matter what other consequences ensued, this unfortunate woman would be dead.

Candle quickly tagged her with a tracer spell so he might find her again later, then rushed away releasing her from his confinement ward. The woman started screaming and running after him, so mustering his concentration and with the use of the golden staff, Candle was able to fly away from the scene and a few minutes later ended up back on Blizzard's doorstep.

He entered the house and with a quick nod toward Olanna who was reading in the living room, he picked up the phone and dialed a very long sequence of numbers, paused for thirty seconds, then dialed several more. He listened to the ring tone as it buzzed three times, then he could hear the sound of the handset being picked up followed by, "This is Fireiron."

"It's me," Candle replied. "No time for a really long explanation, dear, though I suspect you can see the situation for yourself, right?"

Methis paused for a few seconds then replied, "I see. You know I'm not supposed to get directly involved, Candle."

"I know," Candle replied. "This is my job, but given the nature of the spell I do need something special. Is Aritos home? I need permission to use his seal, if he'll let me use it again."

"He will, dear," Methis assured him. "It's a gift once given We really do not want to take back, but I've told you before that the seal of a God is not about power."

"I know," Candle agreed. "That why I still need to talk to Aritos. Last time I used the Seal it was against an application of sheer power. This time I'm up against powerful subtlety and I can't afford to be

clumsy.”

“You’re not as direct as your sister was,” Methis pointed out. “She might have been tempted to attack this Bond-reinforced Hook variant. I wish now I had shown you my Seal while we had the opportunity. It would have been better suited to the task you have.”

“Maybe next time,” Candle told her. “I have to use the tools at hand.”

“Yes,” She agreed. “Aritos may or may not tell you the same thing, but the key to success here will be in using the Seal to co-opt the power of the Bond. At least that’s what I would advise were you using My seal.”

“Sounds like good advice,” Candle considered. “I’ll see what Aritos advises too, if He tells me anything. Which office is He in today?”

“He should be in Midon,” Methis replied.

“Should be?” Candle asked. “Don’t you know?”

“Oh, Candle,” Methis sighed, “you know I like to at least adopt the conventions of mortal speech. A mortal wife wouldn’t know for certain.”

“I’m sorry. You just took me by surprise. I’ll let you know how this turns out,” Candle promised, knowing she would know without his report and possibly she would know before he did.

“That was really Methis?” Olanna asked as he hung up the phone.

“Oops,” Candle started. “I forgot you were there. Yes, that was Methis. Blizzard already knows, by the way. Please don’t spread it about. Methis likes Her privacy. All the Gods do.”

“I don’t blame them,” Olanna commented, “and next you’re calling Aritos. Should I leave the room?”

“You don’t seem alarmed that I’m about to talk to the devil,” Candle observe.

“You’re the one dealing with him, not me. I trust you know what you’re doing. Besides if Methis lives up to Her reputation I doubt she’d let you put your soul in mortal peril.”

“She wouldn’t,” Candle agreed. “Aritos doesn’t collect souls in any case. It’s just not one of His hobbies, I guess.”

“That’s too bad,” Olanna remarked, “I had hoped to ask Him what my first husband was up to these days.”

“You may ask if you like, but I assure you He doesn’t know,” Candle replied.

“Can’t count on anyone these days, can you?” she retorted with a perfectly straight face. Then after holding the pose for three seconds, she started laughing. Candle joined her and they both kept it up until their sides ached. “Oh dear,” Olanna gasped. “I haven’t laughed that hard in years. Feels good, in spite of the aches. Oh, go ahead and call your devil. I’ll behave.”

Candle picked up the receiver again and dialed once more. This time, however, he only spun the dial for

a single digit; the zero. “Overseas operator, please,” Candle requested when the line was picked up. “Yes, I’d like to place a call to Midon on Rallena in Emmine, please. MErcury 6-6671. I’ll hold.”

“You dialed Methis direct using some secret series of numbers that went on forever,” Olanna noted, “but to call Aritos you needed to go through a normal exchange?”

“Yeah,” Candle chuckled. “Methis’s number does not officially exist, but Aritos conducts business in Midon under the name of Artemus Face.”

“What sort of business?” Olanna asked curiously.

“He has a license as a marriage counselor,” Candle replied.

“You’re kidding, right?” she asked.

“Not at all,” Candle replied. “He doesn’t advertise, but somehow couples find him every once in a while. He tells me he only spends two or three hours counseling in the average week, but it gives him a perfect cover to operate under. Most of the time he sits in the quiet office reading, learning all he can about the world and the people in it.”

“Doesn’t he know that sort of thing already?” Olanna asked.

“Yes and no,” Candle replied. “The Gods have supernatural ways of learning all they want, but evidently it’s not the same as learning it by studying just as we might. I suspect it’s like reading a favorite book repeatedly. You know what is going to happen, but while reading you can put aside your memories and live with the characters once again. Also, the Gods are not omniscient, not in the way the priests tell us. They are, Methis always says that omniscience would be boring. She prefers to be surprised. I know she can see the future, although that is evidently not as simple as merely knowing what is to come.”

“Of course not,” Olanna replied matter-of-factly. “It’s hard to see what hasn’t happened yet. I imagine it’s more like seeing a multitude of possibilities some of which are more likely than others.”

“Could be,” Candle agreed. “That sounds as possible as anything else I can think of. Oh, hi!” he spoke into the phone. “It’s Candle.”

“I’d have never guessed,” Aritos replied dryly. “How’s the weather up there?”

“Cold,” Candle replied. “Next year I think we’ll spend the summer in Bellinen. Look, I’ve run into a major problem here in Rjalkatyp.” He went on to describe the situation.

“You may use My seal, of course,” Artios told Candle, “Permission was granted for life. I know you’ll never abuse the gift.”

“So Methis assured me, and thank you,” Candle replied. “If it was just reassurance I needed hers would have been more than sufficient, but I’m dealing with something entirely new and especially dirty. For myself, I’d just muddle through as always, but there are lives on the line here. Methis says I should use the Seal to co-opt the power of the Bond. Do you have a better idea?”

“Her idea would work, of course,” Aritos replied off-handedly, “but you also have the staff at your disposal, so in this case I would use the Seal to unravel the Bond. Take it apart bit by bit and as it comes undone funnel all the power into the staff. The staff will clean up the power, or rather it will store the

energy of the Bond, but not the Bond itself. Once the power has been sapped out of the Bond, the Bond will collapse and dissipate.”

“You make it sound easy,” Candle accused Him.

“Hah!” Aritos laughed mirthfully. “You will too when you describe it to Sextant and Oceanvine!”

“I probably will at that,” Candle chuckled. “I just hope I understand your instructions. That’s pretty much how I used the staff in Sutheria. But it’s not the way I used your seal”

He knew full well that Aritos would not give him more detailed instructions, but He did tell Candle one more thing. “I know,” Aritos chuckled. “Well, you’re capable of this. Otherwise, I’d have given you another method.”

“Or advised me not to try is more likely,” Candle replied.

“A possibility, but not much of one, old friend. With your knowledge, experience, tools and companions, there really is not much you aren’t capable of,” Aritos complimented him. “But now I have a nice, young couple due in a few minutes. It will probably be best if they don’t hear me giving you magic tips.”

“You never know,” Candle chuckled. “Just one more thing, though. If it was the Bond alone I wouldn’t have called for advice. I’m more concerned by what may happen when the Bond is disrupted. Won’t it kill the victims?”

“Not if you do it right,” Aritos assured him. “Anything else?”

“Everything,” Chandle laughed, “but you’ve given all the help you can at the moment. Thanks.”

Eight

“Must be nice to be able to just ask the Gods for help like that,” Olanna remarked.

“This was a unique circumstance,” Candle told her. “And They didn’t so much tell me what to do as give me a few hints. Normally, They just laugh and tell me to ‘Think of it as a test.’ I get that a lot, but this time the situation must be as dire as I think since They actually discussed the problem. Well, too late to do anything today. I think I’ll check in on the kids.”

The journeymen were both sleeping when Candle checked in on them, so he let them rest. He spent the evening standing at a window on the top floor of the townhouse looking at the city with the aid of the golden staff. He could detect several pockets of curse victims, the largest of which was the area in which he had met the cursed prostitute. Checking the locator spell he had tagged her with, he discovered she was still within a block of where he had left her. He tried, but discovered that even with the staff, he was unable to do anything for her from this distance. He also noticed that there were too many victims for a single mage to attempt to cure. He would have to wait until he had assistance.

Oceanvine and Sextant were both in the kitchen for breakfast the next morning. “I feel much better this morning,” Oceanvine assured him before breaking out in a coughing fit. “Still have a bit of a cough though.”

“That will last a while, I’m sure,” Candle remarked. “You look a bit flushed too.”

“I feel weak,” she admitted. Behind her, Sextant nodded his agreement. “But at least my fever broke last night. I can probably go out today.”

“No, better you should stay in and get a little more rest,” Candle told her. “I will have assignments for you this afternoon if you’re feeling up to it though.”

After breakfast Candle left the house and went to find a lumberyard. After walking several blocks, he found a police officer and asked directions.

“It’s about five or six miles away, sir,” the officer informed him. “You’d better take the bus or a taxi.” Candle thanked him and after finding a public phone, called for a cab.

When he finally returned home it was with a pair of ash wood poles and he gave one each to Oceanvine and Sextant. “I’m glad we covered staves back at Methis’ Forge,” he told them. “Having a cache of extra power is not only going to come in handy, but could very well save our lives.”

“Somehow these don’t look like staves,” Oceanvine opined. “The ones we used at Methis’ place were more like tree limbs that had been cut down and stripped of bark. These are more like extra-long dowels.”

“That doesn’t really matter,” Candle assured her. “The ones you used there were more traditional-looking, but these will do just as well. It’s the material that counts, not the shape. At least I’ve never noticed that the shape made any difference,” he hedged. “Never mind that for now. I want you to spend the afternoon storing as much power into those staves as you can.”

“Are you filling up your staff too, sir?” Sextant asked.

“I’ve never been able to find a limit as to how much this one will hold,” Candle admitted, “and after a bit of experimentation I’ve come to realize that I don’t want to test that limit. The more highly charged the staff is, the more it amplifies what I try to do with it. If it amplifies me too much, I can cause unintentional damage with almost any spell unless I’m very careful. I still don’t know exactly why it behaves this way, but it could be because it was created using the Seal of Aritos. It’s hard to say. In spite of all my years of research, I still do not know all that much about the full capabilities of a God’s sign and how they might be invoked. The Seal is as complex as Aritos himself.”

The two journeymen were looking much healthier the next day and in spite of the occasional cough, they were probably doing so less often than Blizzard and Olanna were. Candle decided it was time to see what they could do about the combination of Hook and Bond.

Oceanvine noted that they must have made a strange looking trio walking through the streets of Rjalkatyp that afternoon, dressed in modern Granomish garments, but walking with the staves in hand. “We look like,” she began, “well, I’m not sure what we must look like, but weird probably comes close.”

“Better we should look a bit weird, Vine,” Sextant told her, “than to find ourselves underpowered.”

“That’s Oceanvine,” she replied automatically.

“No, that’s a street light,” he corrected her. “We may cross now.”

To Oceanvine's surprise the red light district Candle had discovered was less than a quarter of a mile away from Blizzard's upscale townhouse. Following Candle's locator spell, they soon found the woman he had met two days earlier. She was still working the street, but as they scanned the area with magic senses they discovered that not only was she not the only victim in the area, but that almost everyone in sight had been infected by the same curse.

As if that realization had set off an alarm, a dozen or more of the curse victims suddenly became aware of the mages and turned to face them. "Okay," Candle noted, "I think we have achieved what our military friends would refer to as a target-rich environment."

Oceanvine frowned at the expression. "I hate euphemisms, Uncle," she replied.

"And I hate being the center of attention, Niece," Candle retorted, "but it seems neither of us is getting precisely what we want today."

"But we are getting what we asked for," Sextant told them both. "Wards up?"

Candle did not answer at first. None of the cursed were approaching them yet and it gave him a chance to assess the situation. While many of the women were dressed in the same cheap but provocative manner as the woman he had tagged two days earlier, there were still more in the area who were dressed in styles more common among the upper-middle class of the city. They were outwardly acting just like the prostitutes, but Candle's well trained senses determined they were doing so under the compulsion of the Bond and Hook. Then he noticed the men in the area. They too were affected by the curse. They seemed to represent a wide range of social classes and Candle remembered how the curse was being spread.

The original form of the Hook had to be cast on a victim over the course of several minutes, but this new form spread itself. Several minutes were still required for the spell to take complete hold of a victim, but the mage who originated it had no need to be anywhere near. The men had had sex with the prostitutes, or at least that had been their intention. Within minutes they too were slaves of the Hook. Then they went home and infected their families. Looking around, Candle saw children in the alleys, ready, no doubt, to help spread the curse.

In all, it was a sickening sight. He pointed out what he saw to Sextant and Oceanvine and Sextant, in turn, pointed out two men a block away who, while not yet victims, were both talking to women who were.

"Very cleverly planned," Candle noted, "and there appear to be at least four different groups here. That means there are probably four slave masters controlling them."

"I see spell strings going off into the distance," Oceanvine commented, "and some that go from victim to victim, but how can you tell there are only four groups?"

"My diagnoses are being augmented by the staff," Candle explained.

"Are we up to this?" Oceanvine worried.

"We don't have a lot of choice," Candle replied. "I was right about one thing, though. Whoever cast this spell was sloppy, or maybe just not sufficiently experienced. Now that I have a good look at the spell as it is supposed to work I can see why it failed against the Flu patients. You two could have done it better."

“I’d rather not try,” Oceanvine retorted.

“Good,” Candle nodded. “Uh, wards up now, please, and use those staves.” Two women and a man were approaching them, but were stopped by the wards raised by Oceanvine and Sextant. When that happened, however, another dozen of the cursed started running toward them.

“Will these wards hold?” Oceanvine fretted.

“They should,” Candle replied. “I could get through them, but I doubt any of these people could manage the trick.” He continued to study the spell as the people tried to get at them. “I think the Flu was a lucky break,” he told them a moment later. “It definitely slowed down the spread of the Hook. That’s about the only lucky break we got, I think. If I’m reading this correctly there are only fifty or sixty Hook slaves in the entire city. About half of them are here, and the rest I can cure from here.”

“I don’t think you have a choice,” Oceanvine told him. “This isn’t fifty or sixty curses here, it’s only four. You’ll have to dispel the curse over the entire group at once.”

“That’s right,” Candle agreed, unable to keep a touch of wonder from his voice. “How do you know that?”

“It seems obvious from the way the spell strings interact with each other,” Oceanvine explained.

“I hadn’t noticed that,” Sextant admitted.

“Neither had I,” Candle told him. “Not until I used the Staff to check out Vine’s observation. It appears you either have a natural affinity for spell diagnosis,” he told Oceanvine, “or you guessed lucky. We’ll find out in time, but I’m hoping for the former. All right. I’ll start in on this group. They seem like a friendly lot. Certainly they want to get to know us. Time to introduce ourselves. Keep those wards steady.

“The trick here is to drain the Bond of its energy. That’s not as easy as it sounds, though,” Candle warned them.

“Who said it sounded easy?” Sextant countered.

Candle ignored him. “You would need a few dozen uncharged staves to do what I’m going to do with just this one. Even then I’m not sure the staff has the capacity to hold it all. Also as we just discussed, the curse has spread by adding victims to the spell, which was cast only once for each group of victims, so we need to cure all of a group in a single shot.” Having made his evaluation, Candle brought the image of Aritos’ seal to his mind. The seal was even more adaptive than the Bond and even as the Bond had been magically stretched to encompass all its victims, Candle had no problem adapting his vision of the Seal to encompass the Bond he faced. It took surprisingly little encouragement on his behalf, actually. The Seal met him halfway and even began to adapt to its purpose before he had fully decided what he wanted it to do.

“What we didn’t discuss,” he continued to the journeymen, even as he started the process of draining the Bond component of the spell of its energy, “is the nature of the Bond. This one is not the same variant we encountered last summer. That’s just as well. I’d hate to have to do this against the Bond of Xenlabit even with the staff.”

“Which one is it?” Oceanvine asked.

“Gredac,” Candle replied. “If you can spare a touch of concentration, note how it looks like a sort of plant. A thorny vine of some sort, in fact, which is its more common manifestation. You’ll need to look at all the victims in this group at once, otherwise all you’ll see are pieces of the Bond, not that it would make it safer.”

“It’s a rather sick vine, isn’t it?,” Oceanvine observed.

“All forms of the Bond carry an element of illness,” Sextant reminded her. They had learned that while in Sutheria.

“Exactly,” Candle nodded. “The nice thing is that while each form has its strengths, each also has its own weaknesses. The Bond of Gredac is especially effective against plants. The fact it was used for this spell only shows how clumsy our enemies are with this sort of magic. I’m not complaining though, the Bond of Kerawlat would have been far more effective here and harder to dispel as well. The best way to fight the Bond of Gredac is to use curing spells designed to fight plant diseases. You are too busy keeping us safe to see the whole picture of what I’m doing and I don’t want you to take the risk of losing concentration on your wards, but what I’m doing is weakening the Bond with curative magic. The Bond is a very powerful spell, so I’m using the Seal of Aritos to power my curing spells. That not only makes my spells more effective merely by adding the power of a God, but also helps to neutralize some of the more insidious aspects of the Bond, by surrounding it, enveloping it within the divine power represented by the Seal. We can discuss this in detail later, of course, but for now just take my word that is what I’m doing. As I do so, it is starting to unravel. You have seen how intricate and convoluted the Bond of Aritos is in all its forms. What I’m doing right now is sort of uncurling some of those convolutions. There, that ought to do it. Now I’m draining the energy from the Bond with one hundred spell strings at once. That’s several for each victim in the group.”

“How does that work?” Oceanvine asked. “Is it like what you did to drain the Bond of Xenlabit in Neria?”

“Very similar and it’s probably the easiest part of the process,” Candle assured her. “All I did was to attach the spell strings from the staff to various parts of the Bond. The energy flows through the strings and into the staff. When this is over I’ll show you how it works on something a bit less lethal. When I’ve completely drained the energy from the Bond, it will collapse and dissipate.”

“What about the Hook component of the spell?” Oceanvine asked.

“Good question,” Candle replied. “As it happens, Master Windchime came up with a cure for the Hook many years ago. You remember Gerry Carter in Keesport? Windchime was his father. A few years later, Silverwind made a few improvements on the technique speeding up the process from weeks to seconds. That is what I’m about to do now. Got it! You may drop your wards now.”

Oceanvine had to close her eyes to see just what Candle was doing. That annoyed her because he kept encouraging her to practice with her eyes open, but there were still too many techniques that normal sight distracted her from. “You’ve latched into the spell?” she asked.

“Exactly,” Candle replied, “and I took control of it. I won’t fool you. This is not the simplest magic in the world, but you two are definitely capable. If we had the time I’d guide you through it, but at the moment there are lives at stake. I just reversed the energy flow from the victims to the slave master to the other way around. Normally I could just cut the spell string and be done, but this is much more complex since many of these slaves are connected to each other. That part was clever, but now that I’ve co-opted the



spell, I'm in the process of commanding the spell to shut itself down. Done."

"You still have hold of the one major string, Uncle," Oceanvine pointed out.

"Not for long," Candle assured her. Before she could ask what he meant she saw a huge surge of energy shoot away through the spell string. "That's one less slave master in the world," Candle said with great satisfaction.

"You killed him?" Oceanvine asked.

"I should hope so," Candle told her grimly. "He or she was dead the moment he chose to use magic that way. This is not just a rogue mage, but a serial killer and a slaver. That's three death sentences."

"And what about due process of law?" Oceanvine argued.

"If you can find a way to bring one of these mages in alive," Candle replied easily, "I'll be glad to keep them contained long enough to stand trial. The end result will be the same, but you are right. If we can bring them to trial, we should, but these are people like Grovinsk. They aren't likely to let us take them alive."

Oceanvine nodded, not really noticing the former slaves now lying on the ground all around them.

"Hope you're ready to go again," Sextant told them tightly, "Because we're under attack." He quickly raised another ward and Oceanvine just as quickly joined him. All the curse victims in the area were running directly at the mages and Oceanvine realized they needed a stronger ward than they had used last time.

She took Sextant's hand and told him, "Join me!" Their cooperative magic practices came to the fore as Oceanvine led him in the construction of a very powerful ward. Because of the use of their staves and their cooperative method it was by far the most protective shield she had ever created. Candle was proud of the progress his niece had made, but they did not have time to discuss it now.

"Well done," Candle told them as he went to work again. This time, however, he realized he was going to have to work faster and he stopped trying to talk at the same time. Outside the protective ward the curse victims were pulling the unconscious ones out of the way, while the children rushed in from the alley, trying to curse them all over again.

There were too many of them for Candle to do the job with as much finesse as he had the first time so keeping Aritos' sign firmly in mind he let thousands of spell threads spin out, letting them attach to the affected people where they could. Energy drained into the golden staff at an amazing rate and the staff began to get hot in his hands.

"Uncle!" Oceanvine warned him, "You're sending off sparks!"

So he was. That gave Candle an idea. He sent a small amount of the energy into Oceanvine's ward to recharge the journeymen's staff but let still more flow into the surface of the stone-paved sidewalk. Stone would hold far more of the energy than wooden staves could.

It was not an ideal solution, but it would work for now. Someone had used far more energy in the Bond-Hook spell that was strictly needed which was still more proof as far as Candle was concerned that whoever was behind all of this had not been fully trained. *Just what I need*, he thought to himself,<sup>a</sup>

*clever hobbyist!* However, he knew hobbyist was not the right description. Whoever had designed this spell may have just had a fascination for power. It happened, Candle knew. Several of his classmates had a tendency to over-power their spells.

It was something the faculty had attempted to train out of their students, but even so, some mages never quite outgrew the temptation to use raw power where subtlety would be more effective. The elder Oceanvine, in fact, had been that way when Candle had first met her, but she had Silverwind to teach her the more advanced techniques and she improved greatly even though Candle did not realize it until years later.

Candle was nearly finished with dissipating the three separate Bonds when Sextant asked, “Why are those spell strings flickering?”

“That’s bad,” Candle grunted, realizing that the other three slave masters had evidently decided to cut their losses at that point and were also cutting the spell strings between them and their slaves. Not only would that put them beyond Candle’s reach, but it would kill the slaves as well. “Oh no, you don’t,” Candle said mostly to himself. He directed a vast amount of energy from his staff back into the spell and sent it off destructively in the direction of the slave masters. He hoped he had scored three hits when a multitude of spell strings came whipping back at them.

Oceanvine’s ward held as the loose ends of the curse crashed into it and slid off. It was only then that Candle realized Oceanvine had cast one of her special “non-stick” wards. Attacks splashed against its sparkly surface, but were unable to blast their way through.

Candle, however, was too busy to really admire her work. Instead he had to keep all their attackers from dying in the backlash of the combined Bond of Aritos and Hook curses. The screams of pain all around them were horrendous and many of the cursed fell away from the protective ward although a handful continued their attacks. He had not time to find out why, however, as he took hold of the loose spell strings and finally depleted the Bond of Aritos of its power. Finally he was able to send some healing energy into the curse victims and let the Hook die as well, now that it was no longer a threat to their lives.

The screams stopped abruptly as the victims fell unconscious to the ground. However five curse victims continued to attack Oceanvine’s ward. Candle was about to find out why when two of them suddenly seemed to shimmer and then step right through the ward as it is wasn’t there.

Candle reacted instantly, grabbing hold of Oceanvine and Sextant by telekinesis and lifting them up into the air and beyond the reach of the remaining five attackers. Distracted by her sudden upward flight, Oceanvine’s ward flickered out. Candle could see she was about to recast the spell, but he stopped her. “Don’t bother. We need a different sort of ward now. We never did get to cover Vine’s alternating current wards, but it appears someone out there has read her thesis, or maybe not,” he corrected himself. “I’ve seen others figure out how to phase themselves through a ward.” He set them down over one hundred feet away from the remaining five and set up a new ward before they could reach them.

“Oh!” Oceanvine exclaimed. “Is that how you do it? You’ve told us about these, but...”

“Not now, please,” Candle replied. “I need to maintain this ward and examine the last five.”

“I’ll handle the ward,” Oceanvine told him with more confidence than he had heard from her before. Sure enough a second ward, also of the alternative current variety, formed just inside his own, so he allowed his to drop and devoted all his concentration on the remaining attackers.

He spared a moment to check the integrity of her ward and was surprised to find she had added a little extra twist to the spell. Anyone who actually touched the ward would not merely be stopped but would be shoved away. He nodded his respect even though she was unable to see it. This was not only a keyed ward; one to which an additional spell had been incorporated, but was also her first of the alternating current variety. The energy in most wards, most spells in fact, flowed along set courses within the mystic structure. The Bond of Aritos was just one such example, one could watch the energy pulse along the diseased vines and tendrils of the Gredac Bond. But in an alternating current ward the energy seemed to go everywhere at once in a chaotic fashion. It was a difficult sort of ward to build without instruction and young Oceanvine had figured it out just by watching him.

It had been a night of surprises and Candle decided it was his turn. He took a good hard look at the final five victims and noticed that there were no spell strings leading away from them. Somehow the loose strings had reattached forming a closed circuit among these five. They were both slave and master to each other and through it all the Bond of Aritos intertwined with both the Hook and their souls.

As Candle watched, the power of their combined curse was growing at a fantastic speed. The circuit of energy was closed in a feedback loop that would within a few minutes destroy them and possibly everything for several blocks in all directions. He wasted no more time considering his next move. There was still more he needed to know about the spell he was facing, but it was knowledge he would have to pass up.

Summoning the Seal of Aritos once more, he used it to smother the Bond. Energy flowed into the staff until it glowed brighter than the sun. It also began to heat up and Candle feared what would happen if he managed to reach its full capacity. Then he remembered a trick Silverwind had used on Elisto decades earlier and he allowed energy to escape the staff in a giant fountain of fire that reached a mile into the sky.

“Where the heck is all that energy coming from?” he wondered out loud.

He did not expect an answer, but a moment later Sextant replied, “The Bond is absorbing it from out of the ground, sir!”

Candle looked down and saw Sextant was right. The Bond had somehow tapped into the energy Candle had stored in the slate sidewalk. “Pretty darned clever for a spell,” Candle grumbled, “even the Bond of Aritos.” He quickly depleted that source of energy himself, causing his fountain of flame to reach still higher for a few seconds, then, suddenly bereft of all energy, the Bond’s structure seemed to crumble and the tiny pieces looked as though they were evaporating. The Hook in its strange configuration held together just a moment after the Bond no longer supplied power to it and then, unable to cope with the conflicting demands of multiple slave-master relationships it had never been designed for, it too just fell apart. For the sake of safety, Candle absorbed all the energy from that, then paused to evaluate his handiwork.

“What a Gods-awful mess!” he commented.

Nine

At the sounds of approaching sirens Candle suggested they ought to get moving. “Why?” protested Oceanvine. “We did nothing wrong.”

“Normally I would never abandon these people in this condition,” Candle replied, “but I think it has slipped your mind that there’s a political element to the problems here on the Isle of Fire. We don’t know where the police department stands at the moment and we are not here at the request of the government but because my old friend Blizzard asked us to help out, so it would probably be best if we don’t stick around long enough to be taken in for questioning.”

“It goes against everything I was taught, Uncle,” Oceanvine retorted even as she rapidly followed him and Sextant from the scene.

“My attitude toward authority is a bit more cavalier than yours,” Candle admitted, “but if you really want to explain to the People’s Party what we were doing here tonight...”

“Never mind,” she replied tartly, “but I want to stay nearby enough to watch and make sure their victims get medical attention.”

“You’ve got it,” Candle laughed, and once more lifted them all up by telekinesis and levitated them to the top of a nearby building. “I noticed you haven’t coughed since all this started.”

“Who’s had time to cough?” Oceanvine retorted.

“You know,” Candle changed the subject, “there is one benefit to magic being currently out of fashion. No one will think to look for us up here.”

“So does this wrap up what we had to do here?” Sextant asked.

“I doubt it,” Candle replied. “As I just said, there are political ramifications and even though Aritos said the politics would take care of themselves, there may still be some of One Maiyim’s rogue mages running around here. Even if they’re fresh out of mages, and I personally hope they are, they are still the strongest party in the Congress and if we just left town we would also be leaving Blizzard and Olanna at their mercy.”

“How would they know Blizzard and Olanna had anything to do with this?” Sextant asked.

“They know we’re here,” Oceanvine reminded him. “We made no secret of our arrival when we were at the hospital nor did we hide who had sent us. They know we’re here. They know who and what we are and they know we’re staying with Madame Blizzard. And if that isn’t enough they know Madame Blizzard has officially entered the race for President.”

“Good points,” Sextant agreed. “So what next?”

“Well, after Vine’s assured these people are well taken care of, we may as well get back to the house. It’s pretty darned cold out here, even with a heat spell to keep me warm.”

“I’m just glad the street lights are bright enough around here,” Oceanvine commented. “Did we manage to save everyone?”

“I think so,” Candle replied. “I cannot detect any other traces of the Hook anywhere in the city, even with the staff to help me look, although I suppose I might have missed a small group of slaves or two. We’ll know for certain in a few days, I’m sure. I’m more concerned over whether or not I got all the slave masters and most especially whether I got the mage or mages who cast that abomination of a spell. I certainly hope so. Nobody who would cast such a spell should be allowed to live.”

“Uncle Candle!” Oceanvine exclaimed disapprovingly.

“No, Vine,” he told her seriously. “That spell was pure evil. Trust me on that. I’ve fought demons and that was viler than anything I ever saw a demon come up with. Just like Grovinsk, that mage must be stopped permanently or he or she will just keep doing things like this again or worse.

“I was very impressed by you, Oceanvine,” Candle continued. “How did you figure out how to cast that alternating current ward?”

“I just watched you,” she replied. “I have to admit I was never very clear on just what you were talking about when you described such wards, and I’ve never read Great-grandmother’s thesis – they don’t have a copy in the University library - but it wasn’t all that hard to duplicate once I saw one.”

“Funny I don’t recall learning that trick quite that easily,” Candle commented dryly.

“I doubt I could do it that easily,” Sextant admitted grudgingly.

“Sure you could,” Oceanvine encouraged him. “Tomorrow morning after our warm-up exercises I’ll show you how.”

“Well, I think you both did quite well this afternoon,” Candle told them.

“Afternoon?” Oceanvine wondered. “It’s so dark now. Oh! It’s only three. Looks later. I’m not used to such short days.”

“We are near the Arctic Circle,” Sextant reminded her.

“It would be even colder if the island was not in the middle of a warm current,” Candle added. “Okay, the police are here. Are you happy?” he asked Oceanvine. “I’m sure they’ll find everyone, even those who are a block or two from here and those in the buildings around here.”

“Let’s wait for the ambulances, just in case,” she insisted.

“Have it your way,” Candle told her. “I had an interesting insight this evening about the Seal of Aritos, and the signs of the other Gods as well, really.”

“What did you learn?” Oceanvine asked interestedly.

“The Seal is representative of Aritos,” Candle explained. “We knew that before, but I don’t think any of us understand the full implications, although I believe I may have come a bit closer this evening. You see because the Seal represents Aritos it is most effective if used to cast spells in the same manner Aritos Himself would. That is why he advised me to use it to envelope the Bond. In Sutheria I used it differently, I matched aspect for aspect in a fairly direct manner, but Aritos is not a direct-minded person. Methis was right. Using the seal of a God is not about wielding power but about emulating Him or Her as closely as possible.”

“So you think you cast spells tonight in the same way Aritos does?” Sextant asked.

“Not precisely,” Candle shook his head, “but I did come closer than I have in the past.”

They stayed on the rooftop for another half hour before Oceanvine was satisfied that none of the curse victims had been neglected. Then, once the last ambulance had left the area and the police were getting back into their cars, Candle suggested they levitate themselves back to ground level. "I first did that about a year after I apprenticed," he told them, "and you're both further along than I was at the time."

Sextant was skeptical about that, but to his delight he had no trouble lifting himself up and off the roof, then gently setting himself down at ground level. Then together they walked back to Blizzard's home.

When they arrived, Blizzard and Olanna were looked nearly as tired as the mages felt. "Bad afternoon?" Candle asked.

"You have no idea," Blizzard retorted, "or then again, maybe you do. This is the first five minute gap between phone calls since shortly after you left."

"You've always been popular," Candle pointed out.

"Ha ha," Blizzard replied flatly. "It started out with requests from the press. Well, that we expected, didn't we? But two hours ago, Senators Gardner and Boroniko were found dead in a caucus room in the Capitol Building. It looked like they had been hit by lightning."

"That's two of the four," Candle noted. "Any others?"

"Two of the four?" Blizzard asked.

"We found evidence of four different slave masters using that Bond-enabled variant of the Hook," Candle replied. "I tried to kill all four, but I was only certain of the first." He went on to describe their afternoon.

"That explains a lot," Olanna remarked. She paused in thought then continued, "That must have been hungry work. Why don't we order something in?"

"There's that nice Wiladdan restaurant around the corner," Blizzard suggested.

"Nice choice, although it will be a shame not to eat there," Olanna commented.

"This could be our last chance to do so for a while," Blizzard considered. "Are you three up to a fairly adventurous dining experience?"

"I can take it if you can," Candle told her, "and it sounds like a good way to relax."

"I'll make reservations for half an hour from now," Olanna told them. "That should give us time to get changed first."

"Nothing alcoholic," Oceanvine decided when they got to the restaurant, looking pointedly at Sextant. "If there are still two mages unaccounted for, we need to be at our best. Sweet seltzer for me, please," she requested.

Candle and Sextant followed her example, although Olanna ordered a tart alcoholic drink using lemon juice, rum and sugar and Blizzard had a glass of Granomishalse. "I'm so far out of practice, I doubt a glass of beer will make much difference," she explained. "It's nice to get away from the phone."

"I hear there are several companies working on hand-held mobile telephones we'll be able to take anywhere," Oceanvine remarked.

"Sounds ghastly," Blizzard opined. "Always being on call, never able to just get away. I'll bet people's vacation time will be spent working over their phones. No way to relax like that."

"You could always turn such a phone off, you know," Candle suggested.

"I doubt anyone would," Blizzard predicted. "If everyone carries a phone, everyone will be expected to be available all day and night. And when do the clever inventors expect to be able to supply such telephones?"

"Ten or twenty years," Sextant replied. "There are a lot of problems still to be worked out, not the least of which is determining the best frequencies to work on and how to have a million or more such phones all running at once without interfering with each other."

"Tell them to take their time," Blizzard retorted. "For now, it's nice to still have some privacy on occasion."

As if that was a cue, however, a waiter immediately approached, carrying a telephone. "A call for you, Madame Blizzard," he said respectfully.

"Thank you, Carles," Blizzard replied politely as he plugged the phone into a nearby outlet "Then again," she commented, "maybe it wouldn't make much difference. This is Blizzard. Yes. Really. Details, Tilva. Give me details, please." Blizzard listened for a long time and then replied. "Hmm, Thank you. Please tell Stav I'll give him a call later this evening and sometime you'll have to tell me how you found me here. Uh huh. Yes, bye. An amazing woman, really," Blizzard told them at last. "If I were still seriously involved in politics I'd steal her away from Senator Davonova.

"Well, it appears you may have scored three out of four, Candle," she told him. "Senator Hawakamala is missing."

"Who is Senator Hawakamala when he's up and dressed?" Candle asked.

"She," Olanna corrected him. "Petrana Hawakamala. A thoroughly revolting woman, if you ask me, why the people of my old district elected her I'll never know."

"Well, if we're lucky, they'll be holding special elections soon," Blizzard remarked. Their drinks arrived just then and she pause to take a deep sip of her *alse* . "I frankly wouldn't put using the Hook past her and if she is dead, good riddance."

"I just hope she's not in hiding," Candle remarked.

"Why do you think the slave masters were all mages though?" Blizzard asked. "Anyone except a magic-null can control the spell once the Hook is set."

"Not this variant," Candle replied. "The Bond of Aritos makes it too aggressive. It would tend to turn on any non-mage slave master and subsume them into the spell. Once that happened all the infected would die in agony and in fairly short order. I suppose one could be trained in the self-discipline necessary, but since that's the same training a mage undertakes, I think it's likely the slave masters were all mages of one level of ability or another. In fact I doubt most apprentices could have controlled this spell. It would

have been difficult for most journeymen, in fact. You see the Bond and Hook worked together to do more than simply infect the victims. They made all the people integral parts of the spell. An insufficiently experienced mage would soon fall to what was a constant assault on his identity.”

“You think these were all master mages?” Blizzard asked.

“Could be,” Candle replied. “Although none of them have University degrees so technically, they’re not really entitled to the rank.”

“I’m sure they have their own ranks within One Maiyim,” Sextant remarked grimly.

“They probably do at that,” Candle agreed.

“But if all it takes is discipline,” Sextant objected, “you’ve taught us that the key to resistance against the Bond is awareness of our own self-identity and the discipline to maintain it. Our training allowed us to develop that discipline, but surely there must be people with sufficiently disciplined minds even without magical training.”

“I’m sure there are,” Candle agreed, “but without magical training, they would not know how to properly use that discipline to keep themselves safe. Well, maybe safe is not the word since they were essentially doomed from the moment the spell was cast. If one kept the spell going long enough eventually even a wizard would be overwhelmed. I suppose someone might get lucky on the first try, but I doubt it. And if he failed on the first try, he would not get a second.”

“So what do we do next?” Oceanvine asked.

“Now it’s my turn,” Blizzard told her. “The Times has been pestering me all day for an interview and I think the Times is about to get exactly what they asked for.”

“Just what do you propose to tell them?” Olanna asked worriedly.

“The truth,” Blizzard replied firmly. “I realize politicians aren’t supposed to do that sort of thing, but I think we’ll make a special exception this once. Let’s see, enslavement and homicide for starters. They’re both capital offenses even here. Not in Bellinen these days, but then we’re not in Bellinen.”

“You can’t accuse the Peoples’ Party of those crimes without proof,” Olanna objected.

“I can if it’s part of a political speech. We have a definite magical link between the slaves and Senators Gardner and Boroniko at the very least. Yes, I know we would have trouble using that evidence in court, but I’m not taking them to court. I’m going to blast them with political rhetoric. Oh, their heirs will protest against my accusations, but I’m still going to make them.”

“They could sue for slander,” Oceanvine remarked.

“Let them,” Blizzard laughed. “Then they’ll have to go to court and prove they didn’t do anything wrong. You can’t logically prove a negative. You can only try to confuse a jury in a case like that and frankly, by the time we go over all their papers I’m sure we’ll find all sorts of illegalities. Also if they sue us, we have all that magical evidence available. It will be far more credible as a defense by our rules of evidence. I always thought they were silly, especially when I was a cop, but I’m going to use them to our advantage this time.”



“You’re going to make a lot of enemies in the People’s Party,” Olanna warned her.

“I don’t have any friends there,” Blizzard shrugged, “and I’m not likely to no matter what happens.”

“None of us are,” Candle assured her. “And if you’re going to make an enemy, it may as well be someone who really is a villain, I say.”

“Well, this will certainly complete my life,” Blizzard chuckled. “I never did get to actually fight against One Maiyim here on the Island. We outlawed them directly after the attempted regicide in Querna even though they did not have a significant presence within the Republic.”

“Maybe they did,” Sextant remarked. “Maybe they were already here but were underground even then.”

“That’s possible,” Candle admitted. “They had a secret inner circle even sixty years ago when they attempted to overthrow the government of Bellinen and when that blew up in their faces, most hardcore members went underground.”

“My grandmother didn’t,” Oceanvine told them.

“No, Myrrha wouldn’t,” Candle shook his head. “But she wasn’t in the inner circle. Frankly, I think One Maiyim’s leadership used her as a sort of poster child. She was the daughter of the two most famous wizards on Maiyim and also married to an earl. She was very valuable to them and she was part of why they were able to remain a legal entity in Emmine until the attempted regicide there.”

“I didn’t know that,” Oceanvine admitted.

“There’s no reason you should have,” Candle told her. “It was before your time. It was before your mother was born for that matter and your father was still just a toddler. Well never mind that for now. I’m more concerned with your little spectacle, Blizzard. You do realize you might as well be painting a giant target on your chest and back?”

“Of course,” Blizzard told him calmly. “I’ve done this before. Although I’ve changed my mind. I’ll give the Times an interview, of course, but I think an open press conference is more in order. Let’s make sure all the news media get a chance.”

“We’re going to need an entire battalion of Republican Security guardsmen to protect you after this,” Olanna pointed out.

“No,” Blizzard disagreed. “Not them. We don’t know who might be a People’s Party supporter. I suppose I’ll need to hire a private company. . . No, same problem.”

“We’ll protect you,” Candle promised.

Ten

The Capitol building of the Republic of the Isle of Fire was relatively new, having been built since Candle’s last visit. The previous building had been outgrown forty years earlier and the new Capitol was constructed a mile further down the large ridge that overlooked Rjalkatyp from the “Hill,” which included

the presidential mansion and the old Capitol. Like its predecessor it stood on the edge of a cliff so it could be seen from almost anywhere in the city. The new one was obviously too large for the current members of Congress, but had apparently been constructed with expansion in mind. There were two chambers, a large one for the House of Commons and a somewhat smaller one for the Senate. Between them stood an even larger hall in which both houses might convene for joint sessions. There were dozens of smaller caucus rooms and, in an attached wing, hundreds of congressional offices for the Members of Congress.

For the press conference Madame Blizzard chose to speak in the large central chamber as was her prerogative as a former president.

“Madame Blizzard,” one of the reporters asked toward the end of the press conference, “are you certain you want to accuse so many respected senators and other politicians of these crimes? Sounds a bit irresponsible to me.”

“Mister Haimish,” Blizzard replied in as cold a tone as her mage name implied, “it would be even more irresponsible to ignore the murderers and slavers of the so-called People’s Party. I’m coming out of a very comfortable retirement in order to serve the people of my beloved nation. To do so I am almost definitely putting my own life on the line in order to cleanse the Congress of an organization that was outlawed in this land decades ago and to see it filled once more with hard-working servants of the people. Or perhaps you too belong to the People’s Party? Do you belong to One Maiyim?”

Haimish sputtered for a moment and the other reporters used the interruption to shout out their own questions, but after an hour, Blizzard had decided she had spoken enough for now and brought the conference to a close. She, along with Candle and Oceanvine, walked off stage to where Senator Davonova, a tall Orentan woman who had bleached her hair an unusual blonde, was waiting. “Well, that’s likely to stir things up,” Davonova commented.

“That was the point you may recall, Stav,” Blizzard replied as they entered a corridor that ran behind the large chamber they had just left..

“I suppose,” the senator agreed, “but I do wish I could have had a bit more notice of all this.”

“I wish I didn’t have to do it at all,” Blizzard replied. “Do you really think I want to be president again?”

“Not really, no,” Davonova shook her head. “I’m going to be busy up here on the Hill for the rest of the day. Oh, there’s an understatement! But why don’t you take my limosine home?”

“I’ve arranged for my own transport,” Blizzard replied. “The car should be here in another half an hour.”

“Why wait?” Davonova replied. “Besides, mine is armored. Given the nature of the danger that might not be a bad idea, you know.”

Just then the entire Capitol building shook as something large exploded outside. A great blast of searing-hot air came rocketing down the hallway, knocking everyone to the floor. Plaster avalached from the ceiling and the walls creaked alarmingly. Oceanvine, lying face down on the floor like the others, tried to get up only to feel something heavy and inflexible holding her pinned there. A moment later whatever it was disappeared and she was able to sit up.

All around them the remains of the ceiling were on the floor and there was sunlight pouring in from the far end of the hall, where a few moments earlier there had been a wall and a heavy door. She could hear

screams and moans and she immediately looked at her companions.

Blizzard and Candle were helping Stavras Davonova sit up and Senator Davonova's assistant, Tilva Herrinnay, was hurrying down to hall toward them. She was looking decidedly singed and bruised by the blast. "What happened, Tilva?" the senator asked.

"A bomb, I think, Senator," Tilva replied. Battered she might have been, but Tilva was keeping a clear head even though from the sounds all around very few others were. "We need to get you to safety."

"I'm safe enough for now," Davonova replied. "Better make sure we have emergency services on the way. And get some ointment on those burns of yours as well."

"Yes, ma'am!" Tilva replied and hurried away again.

"We appear to be in remarkably good shape considering how singed everything around us is," the senator noted.

"You're welcome," Candle replied. "I had a ward around us even before the explosion, just for safety sake you'll understand. Let's go find out what really happened, if we can."

The way was blocked on several levels and eventually they had to leave by crossing through Senate hall to another back corridor and out an emergency door behind the Capitol and then walk around the building.

A fleet of ambulances had arrived before they could get there and the wounded and dead were being tended. Oceanvine suggested, "We need to help out."

"None of us are medically trained," Candle stopped her. "We need to figure out what happened."

"It looks like someone planted a bomb in the main doorway," Blizzard opined. "That seems to be the center of the damaged area."

"It seems you're correct," Candle agreed. "No sign of magic. In a way that's a good thing. Maybe we got all the mages. On the other hand it also means we have no way of tracing this back to whomever did this."

Several hundred feet away a large black panel truck was making its way down the ridge at what Oceanvine felt was an alarming speed. Before she could point it out to Candle and the others, however, it hit one of the ambulances and continued on toward the center of damage. Without stopping to think it through, she cast a ward around the truck and instantly found herself being shoved backwards toward the cliff's edge.

Oceanvine, however, was still maintaining her ward when the truck exploded. There was a loud, but muffled roar and the ward expanded to twice its size, but still managed to keep the deadly force contained. When it was over, she looked around, proud of the fact that she had not lost her concentration even though she had failed to fully account for the mass and momentum of the large vehicle she was trying to stop. It was then she realized there was no ground under her feet.

"Nice catch!" Candle told her, from about thirty feet away. "But I see we still need to work on your grasp of physics."

“How do you know I didn’t mean to do this?” she asked defiantly.

“Oh, sorry, I’ll just let you get down then, okay?” he countered.

“No!” she replied immediately, looking at the ground nearly two hundred feet below her feet. “Just pull me back in,” she told him before hastily adding, “please!”

Candle chuckled, levitating her back to solid ground. “How do you feel?” he asked with considerably more concern.

“A little bruised,” Oceanvine admitted, “but not too bad. I think I instinctively redistributed most of the force, but there was more than I expected, I guess.”

“To say the least,” Blizzard commented. “That was very good, Oceanvine. Have you really only been studying magic for a year?”

“Just over,” Oceanvine replied.

“I don’t think I could have ever done that,” Blizzard admitted. “Projecting an impenetrable ward on the fly like that!”

“Your specialties centered on more subtle uses of magic,” Candle told Blizzard. “Don’t sell yourself short. You are a master mage and Oceanvine’s still barely a journeyman. There are a lot of things you can do she has not even heard of yet. Vine just happens to like to play with power,” he added in a bantering tone.

“That’s Oceanvine!” Oceanvine corrected him.

“You could be right,” Blizzard told Candle, “but she still does it better than I ever could and as I recall, better than you could have at her stage of development.”

“Ah,” Candle retorted, “but could she play mind games with a demon?”

“Fortunately,” Blizzard told him firmly, “we’re never going to have to find out.”

“You’re right,” Candle admitted, “but right now we’d better get you home and out of harm’s way.”

“My limousine is still available,” Senator Davonova offered.

“I don’t think so,” Candle shook his head. “That truck was the second bomb to go off here in minutes. One Maiyim appears to be thinking in terms of multiple attacks. That first bomb, while deadly, was relatively small, but it got us all here at the front of the Capitol building. The second would have killed us all if it hadn’t been for Vi. . . uh, Oceanvine’s quick thinking and even quicker action. I suspect it would have ripped at least half the buildings apart as well. If they are capable of launching a coordinated strike like this, they might also be waiting for us to drive past them on the way home.

“Face it,” he continued, “It’s no secret who we are and where we’re going and they have all those television cameras broadcasting live to tell them how well they did.. They would see the car we leave in although I’m sure they have some observers in the crowd here as well.”

“Rather suicidal observers for they too could have been killed when the truck exploded,” Davonova

remarked.

“One Maiyim isn’t the student organization it started out as,” Candle replied, “and all the less dedicated members left when they went underground. By now, I think they’re left with fanatics and who’s to say what a fanatic might do to further his cause? However, they don’t need to be that dedicated to be here. It’s possible an observer may not have known about the truck, or they may have joined in the crowd from the far corners of the building after the truck exploded.

“Or they may not be here at all,” Oceanvine added, “but the point is, we don’t know and cannot afford to take a chance.” She turned to Candle and asked, “So how are we going to get home, Uncle?”

“Like this!” he replied, scooping up both Blizzard and Oceanvine telekinetically and starting to fly out over the precipice. “We’ll call you later, Senator,” he called back over his shoulder. “For now, however, continue seeing to the victims here.”

Candle did not fly directly back to Blizzard’s townhouse, however. “We need to take an indirect path,” he explained as they continued to circle around to the east end of town. “I have a fairly strong ward protecting us at the moment, but I don’t know if we killed all their mages. I kind of suspect we did not and as easy as I make this look, I’d prefer no sudden surprises as we fly over the city.”

They finally landed at the edge of several hundred acres of forestland. Something about it looked odd to Oceanvine until she realized, “There are more trees here than I’ve seen on the rest of the island combined. “What did you do?” she asked Blizzard. “Round them up and plant them all on this spot?”

Blizzard laughed, “In a sense. This is the New Forest. The Isle of Fire is not, as you’ve noted, renowned for her limitless tracts of woodlands. Our moors are more the norm here. The New Forest is entirely man-made. We add trees to it every year, in fact, so that it is about twenty percent larger now than it was at the time of the Counterrevolution. Candle, would it be safe, do you think to visit one of the shrines within the forest? I think I ought to thank Methis or Wenni for having come through this morning’s events safely.

“I can give you their phone numbers if you want to do that,” Candle replied.

“It wouldn’t be the same,” Blizzard told him quietly.

That Candle considered the matter seriously amazed him. They had just fled the Hill for their lives and Blizzard wanted to stop and pray. It went completely against all reason, but the soft insistence with which his old friend made the request moved him more than he would have believed. “I think Wenni’s shrine is closest,” he replied at last.

“I won’t take too long,” Blizzard assured him. “Thank you.”

When the New Forest had been established over three centuries earlier, shrines had been built to honor the three younger gods, Nildar, Wenni and Methis. Unlike any those of any other land on Maiyim, the people of the Isle of Fire worshipped the younger gods exclusively. It was not that they disdained the Elder Gods, but they believed that their island was created by the joint action of the Elders’ children. They respected the Elders to be sure, but the only temples and shrines in this land were those dedicated to the Younger Gods. The shrines had been evenly spaced within the planned area of the original New Forest, so it was only because the forest had grown so much that they were now clustered near its western end.

Blizzard led the way into the forest along a walking path that led past a forest ranger's station. There was almost no vehicle traffic within the forest, although the rangers were allowed small, motorized three-wheeled vehicles to get them from place to place within the forest and to carry whatever tools they might need. Blizzard paused at a brochure rack at the rangers' station and found a small flyer on the history of the forest and handed it to Oceanvine.

"Thank you," the journeywoman replied politely.

"You looked curious," Blizzard smiled. "and that will probably answer any question better than I could."

They only had to walk a few hundred yards before reaching a small clearing in the forest. In the center of the clearing stood a narrow altar of stone on which many colorful flowers had been placed. Blizzard stepped forward, placed her hands on the altar and looked upward toward the blue patch of sky above her. A minute later she turned and walked back to where Candle and Oceanvine waited. "Thank you," she told them simply. "Let's go home now, shall we?"

There was a public phone at the ranger station and Blizzard used it to order a taxicab to come and pick them up. They did not have long to wait at the edge of the forest. "How did you know I didn't want to fly all the way back?" Candle asked curiously as the cab arrived a few minutes later.

"You wouldn't have set us down at the edge of the forest if you had," Blizzard replied then entered the cab. They were soon speeding through the eastern suburbs of Rjalkatyp and another fifteen minutes later they arrived at Blizzard's townhouse to find Olanna and Sextant waiting anxiously.

"You had a fun morning," Sextant remarked as they came in the door.

"Trade you," Oceanvine shot back instantly.

Olanna, however, was not even close to sanguine about the events of the morning, "You all could have been killed!" she told them, close to hysteria.

"Nonsense," Candle scoffed, "I had them both safely in hand as we flew away from the Hill." It was the wrong answer.

"You idiot!" Olanna rounded on him. "Do you think this is all just some elaborate joke set up to entertain you? Do you care so little about your own life and those around you?"

"Not at all," Candle replied seriously this time, "but we could just as easily have been killed on the way there in a car crash. A plane could have fallen out of the sky or Mount Rjal could have suddenly come back to life. Well, not that last, but anything could happen at anytime that could result in our deaths. If I sat around worrying about all the close calls I've had, I'd never get out of the house. Right now I'm far more concerned about what the Peoples' Party might be up to next."

"Then you know for certain they are behind the explosions?" Olanna asked, calming down a little.

"Not for a fact, no," Candle replied, "but I also don't know of anyone else who would benefit from such actions. Yes, they were trying to kill us. I'm fairly certain your local police will find evidence that points in some entirely different direction for that matter, because One Maiyim's leadership has proven itself nothing if not infernally clever and resourceful. So far, I'm happy to say, I've been even more clever and resourceful, but my little struggle with them is not over yet and may really just be beginning. We'll just have to wait and see. Where's Blizzard?"

“Right here,” Blizzard replied. “I was just making a few phone calls, calling in some favors. All that talk about attempts on our lives made me decide to ask for a bit of help. You remember General Hervasiv, Candle?”

“Sure,” Candle nodded. “He was one of the Triumvirs of the Revolution, but as I recall he turned out to be a pretty nice guy in spite of that.”

“His grandson is now the Chief of Staff for the Republican Army. We’ll have armed troops setting up a security perimeter around the us within the hour.”

“I thought you didn’t trust there wouldn’t be People’s Party members involved,” Candle commented.

“That was within the Republican Security Guard,” Blizzard told him. “For a department that is supposed to be politically neutral, they’ve been all too influenced by the People’s Party. The Army, on the other hand, makes no bones about neutrality. They are forever for the Republic regardless of who may be in office and they will protect the Republic from anyone. General Hervasiv, that’s Gregor Hervasiv, not the Liorren Hervasiv you knew, Candle, takes his job very seriously and considers anyone who had a hand in today’s bombings to be enemies of the State. He was more than willing to lend us protection. Our navy is very much the same, but my contacts are stronger in the Army these days which is why I spoke to Gregor.”

“So now we wait,” Candle remarked.

Eleven

As they had, while sailing around the Emmine Archipelago, the mages decided to work in shifts so that at least one of them would be awake at any time while they waited for the next development.

Sextant was awake at two twenty-five the next morning when he heard an odd snapping sound coming from the townhouse next door. He put his book down and got up to investigate and then jumped back when he found the adjoining wall felt hot. He started shouting for help, hoping someone would wake up but, not waiting, he closed his eyes and tried to imagine himself seeing what was on the other side of that wall. He knew Oceanvine preferred to think she was pushing a part of her mind to a remote location when she did this sort of thing, but Sextant’s magical metaphors were, on the whole, much more direct. If he wanted to see through a wall it worked best if he just thought of it as seeing through a wall.

What he saw this time, however, made his blood run cold. He saw nothing but flames filling the entire room. Exploring still further, he discovered the fire had started in the basement and had run up the stairway to the first floor. It had not yet spread to the upper floors and he quickly cast an air-tight ward to encompass the affected area.

“Good thinking,” Candle told him, rushing down the stairs holding the golden staff. “Don’t drop that ward until everything inside the area is cool. Hold on a minute or so, while I cool the area off.”

“Volume,” Sextant corrected him.

“What?”

“It’s not just an area, it’s a volume,” Sextant explained, although there was strain showing in his voice. “And hurry up, there may be people trapped in there.”

“You don’t know for certain?” Candle asked.

“I’m not a wizard yet,” Sextant grated, “sir. I’m having enough trouble just maintaining a ward this size.”

“Oh,” Candle grunted. “I keep forgetting.”

“Two people on the top floor,” Oceanvine reported, having just arrived in a borrowed dressing gown. “They’re still alive, but they’re having trouble breathing.”

“All right,” Candle announced a minute later. “It’s cool enough in there that the fire won’t just start up again. But keep the ward up for another few seconds and follow me.”

They ran outside, along with Blizzard and Olanna, and on reaching the sidewalk, Candle turned and used telekinesis to remove the house’s front door. “All right, now you can drop the ward.”

Sextant did and there was a loud whistling sound as air rushed into the space the ward had enclosed. “Oh, I see,” Sextant admitted tiredly. “I was wondering why you had me maintain the ward that long.” They all ran into the neighboring house.

“I didn’t want to suffocate the people upstairs,” Candle explained, “That might have happened if you let it drop before I opened the front door. What a mess!”

The front room was a charred ruin and in spite of the fact Candle had cooled the contents down below the ignition point, everything was still quite warm and smoking. “Is that floor safe to walk across?” Olanna wondered.

“Not really, no,” Candle told her. “I’ll reinforce it with a ward. Why don’t you call for an ambulance though, and where are those guards we supposedly have?” Olanna rushed back to her house.

“Here come a dozen or so down the street now,” Blizzard reported.

“Timing is everything,” Candle muttered darkly. “Vine, Six, get upstairs and see to our neighbors. Air out the room they’re in but keep them warm until the medics arrive.

It was another hour before Candle had a chance to confront the captain assigned to command their guards. He looked closely at the man, a tall human with short blond hair and a clean-shaven face. He also checked the man’s aura, looking for any sign of a foreign magical influence. Finding nothing, Candle demanded, “What the hell kind of security operation are you running here, Captain?”

“Sir!” the captain replied smartly. “I have five men posted along the street in front of Madame Blizzard’s house.”

“And where are they now?” Candle asked pointedly.

“Sir, one was found dead in the basement of the neighboring house.”

“Yes, I found him myself,” Candle agreed. “How about the other four?”



“I do not know, sir,” the captain admitted.

“Find them,” Candle commanded. “I want to talk to them personally,” he added in a particularly grim tone.

The captain swallowed hard, but finally replied, “Yes sir. I’ll see to it myself, sir.”

General Hervasiv himself arrived not too long after that. “I can’t explain it, Aunt Blizzard,” he told her remorsefully. “I can’t believe the People’s Party has infiltrated my command.”

“They’re a political party,” Candle told him harshly, “and your men are only mortal. Do you really think the largest party on the island wouldn’t have adherents within your army? I’ll bet you sent volunteers here too, right?”

“Of course,” Hervasiv replied.

“Didn’t it occur to you that some of your volunteers might have their own personal reasons for stepping forward? Reasons that would not necessarily coincide with your own?” Candle asked.

“I’ll send another two units here,” Hervasiv promised. “I’ll hand pick them personally from different brigades so it will be less likely the men will know each other.”

“That’s probably going to interfere with traffic on this street,” Candle observed.

“We’ve already blocked this street to all traffic,” Hervasiv informed him. “That was one of the first measures we took in light of the truck-based bomb at the Capitol yesterday.”

“Good idea,” Candle admitted, calming slightly. “I should have thought of that. Very well, send your additional men in. Let’s line the streets with soldiers if need be.”

Not only did additional soldiers arrive but the next morning President Garnon sent a platoon of Republican Guardsmen to assist in protecting Madame Blizzard. Candle was not pleased by that move. “Garnon is the leader of the People’s Party here. He’s probably trying to put his own assassins in place.”

“Let him try,” Blizzard remarked. “We’re all on guard now and if any of his people try something, the blame will go directly to him.”

“One Maiyim has had some very accomplished mages in the past and probably does now as well,” Candle pointed out. “None of us are perfect and it’s always possible they might get lucky and kill us.”

“I’m in no hurry to die,” Blizzard replied, “but if anything were to happen to us now that Garnon’s committed himself to our well-being, he’ll take the blame for anything that happens and his party will be blamed as well by extension.”

“You’re the expert,” Candle admitted, “but I’ve noticed that political moods in a nation are rarely that straight-forward.”

“We’ll see,” Blizzard replied resolutely.

The next two days were quiet ones. In spite of Candle’s fears, none of the men assigned by President Garnon did anything more than patrol the immediate neighborhood. Blizzard’s and Olanna’s neighbors

had been rushed to the hospital and after visiting them, Olanna reported that while they had suffered from smoke inhalation and would be in the hospital indefinitely, their doctor promised they would recover in time.

The third of four slave masters was found dead in his apartment on the second afternoon. Senator Fourschev was one of the prominent Members of Congress of the People's Party who had been missing ever since the mages had disrupted the Bond/Hook curse. Three others, including Hawakamala were still missing. However it was believed they had left the island by plane. At least Air Querna records showed they had purchased tickets to Granom. The airline, however, was unable to confirm the missing politicians had actually been on board.

Oceanvine and Sextant were performing their morning exercises on the third morning when the phone rang. "Hello?" Olanna answered the phone. "Yes, he's here. One moment please. It's for you," she told Candle.

"Wizard?" Maia's voice asked from the receiver. She sounded excited "I just took a message from His Majesty."

"I assume you passed on Vine's regrets," Candle replied. "She's a bit too far away to drop in for dinner."

"Not Hacon Ancel," Maia explained. "From His Granomish Majesty, Ksaveras XI. From Querna."

"Given the current political climate, I didn't think he's dropped in for tea in Randona," Candle replied dryly. "So what did the message say?"

"Maybe I didn't make myself clear, sir," Maia tried to explain. "I didn't just take a message. I spoke to the king himself!"

"Ksaveras is relatively inexperienced," Candle considered, "but if he called personally it must be important. I wouldn't have bet he knew how to dial a phone."

"Why not?" Maia asked.

"He's a king," Candle shrugged. "He has people to do almost everything for him, including make phone calls. What did he want?"

"He didn't tell me much," Maia admitted. "He just said to tell you he... uh, urgently requests the presence of the Marquess of Sentendir on a matter of the highest sensitivity. That's almost a direct quote, Wizard."

"That's it?" Candle asked.

"Well, I may be reading more into what was being said by others in the room while I was speaking to the king," Maia admitted, "but I got the impression that it has something to do with the Gran 4 space mission."

"I wonder what the newsmen haven't been allowed to report," Candle speculated. "Well, we're currently under siege here."

"Under siege, Wizard?" Maia asked. "I've heard about the explosions in the parliamentary hall there."

“The Capitol, Maia,” Candle corrected her. “It’s where their Congress meets, not Parliament, and yes this is part of what happened there. I’m surprised none of the local television companies sold news footage to Emmine broadcasters.”

“They may have,” Maia replied, “but I don’t have a television. Never really felt the need for one. I prefer a good book to the stuff they show.”

“Perhaps, but it’s important to keep up with what’s going on in the world and Television will have an increasingly important role in the dissemination of the news,” Candle told her. “In fact, now that I think of it, we ought to have a set in the office.”

“Whatever for?” Maia asked.

“To keep up with current events, of course,” Candle replied. “So at your earliest convenience I want you to have a set installed there.”

“I’ll have one in your office before the day is out,” Maia assure him.

“No,” Candle decided, “put it in the outer office with you.”

“If you insist, sir,” Maia replied in a businesslike tone.

“Now, please call Ksaveras back and let him know that while we’re tied down at the moment, I’m fairly certain we will be there in a few days at the outside. I’ll be very surprised if the situation here lasts much longer than that.”

Twelve

Oceanvine woke up thirsty in the middle of the night. She considered just having a glass of water from the nearby bathroom, but decided she wanted something with a bit of flavor. There was, she remembered, some sweet seltzer in the fridge downstairs, so she put on a robe and walked down the stairs.

“Morning,” Sextant greeted her. “Couldn’t sleep?”

“Just want something to drink,” she admitted, moving on through to the kitchen.

Opening the refrigerator, she found the bottle she wanted and poured herself a glass. She had only swallowed half the portion when the room was suddenly filled with a vivid blue light and her world turned to unmitigated pain.

She felt rather than heard herself screaming and she fell and writhed on the floor seeking unsuccessfully to find something to make the pain go away. She knew she was slamming herself against the nearby cupboards and refrigerator. She was fairly certain she had fallen on top off the glass, but the pain she felt in every fiber of her being was so overwhelming she was aware of nothing but it and her desperate attempt to bring it to an end.

Concentration was difficult. The agony was filling every shred of her mind, but somehow she managed to

cast a protective ward around herself and blessed, cooling relief swept over her, soothing and comforting. Then the bruises she had inflicted on herself came to the fore and also brought her mind back to alertness as well. She heard screams coming from the others in the house and she forced herself to her feet, noting distantly that the glass she had been drinking from had miraculously remained intact and had rolled to the far side of the kitchen. Forcing that from her mind, she ran into the sitting room, where she found Sextant, still screaming in agony, within the bright blue light.

The others, she knew, were in the same state on the second and third floors. She had never cast a ward that large and her staff was still sitting upstairs in her guestroom. Six's had been leaning up against the wall next to his chair. The chair itself had been pushed back violently as Sextant was hit by the blue light, but Oceanvine found the staff where it had fallen just behind it.

Grabbing Sextant's staff, Oceanvine cast a new ward spell, one that enveloped the entire townhouse. The screams ended abruptly, but now there were other sounds to be heard. Sextant was still moaning on the floor as Oceanvine became aware of an eerie hum that made the entire house vibrate. That was all she was able to take in, however as most of her concentration was taken up by the fight to maintain her ward against the attack. Maintaining a large ward was difficult enough, but she had never been forced to maintain one against a spell that seemed to be eating at the ward. She was constantly reinforcing it. It was almost like having to cast it anew every few seconds.

"What happened?" Sextant groaned as he sat up. Oceanvine was too lost in her battle to keep the ward up to reply, but he soon got the picture.

"Sixtus!" Candle called down from upstairs. "Are you all right?"

"I'll recover, sir," Sextant replied, "but we're under attack. Vine's thrown a large ward all around us, but she's obviously having trouble."

"Good," Candle replied, leaving Sextant to figure out what the wizard meant. "Go check on Blizzard and Olanna. I'll help Vine."

Candle came down and Sextant noted the wizard was still wearing his bed clothes as they passed on the stairs, although the wizard had obviously paused to grab the golden staff.

Candle used a trick he had once set his two students to using in a practice; he closed his eyes, and allowed his aura to reach out and join at one point with Oceanvine's. When Oceanvine had tried this, she found herself within an illusion that had been set up by Sextant. Oceanvine was not creating an illusion, however, so what Candle saw was the house, although with transparent walls, and the ward Oceanvine was maintaining just beyond those walls.

"You're doing very well," he told her softly, startling her slightly. "Whoa! Don't lose concentration. That could be disastrous," he added, gently funneling her some of his own energy to help with the ward.

"Uncle Candle, what is this?" she asked worriedly.

"An attack," he told her. "I'm not sure exactly what sort yet, but it's pretty nasty. Can you hold this shield up for a while longer?"

"I'll try," she promised, "but it isn't easy."

"No it isn't," Candle agreed. "Your great-grandmother would have had as much trouble with it as you

are and I'm not sure even she could have cast it after that attack began."

"I almost didn't either," Oceanvine admitted. "First I cast it just around myself. It was only after I recovered that I could protect us all."

Candle reconsidered; perhaps his sister could have managed it had she done it in stages like her great-granddaughter had if she had thought of it. Candle wasn't certain the elder Oceanvine would have thought of the solution, however. He wasn't sure he would have for that matter. Once you get beyond a certain level of mastery, the idea of doing something on a small scale first doesn't normally come up.

Then he thrust the matter from his mind and examined the ward. It was one of Oceanvine's specials - a non-stick ward - but she had also made it an alternating current ward, raising his respect for her ability still more. It did, however, raise a problem.

"Can you change the nature of this ward?" he asked.

"To what?" she replied.

"I need it to be a normal direct current sort," Candle told her. "I'm fairly certain that it will be just as effective and probably a little easier to keep going."

"I'll have to recast it," Oceanvine grunted, and Candle realized she had been speaking out loud while he was using his mind. "There!" she told him a moment later. "Now what?"

"Now I go outside and have a look around," Candle replied.

He opened the front door and studied the ward carefully. Then using Silverwind's old trick of walking through a ward by forcing himself in phase with it, Candle stepped through the door, creating a personal ward around himself as he emerged. He did not need the staff to fly, but it did make the process almost effortless, and he soared up and over the street. There below him he saw something that had not crossed his eyes in decades. Ten men and women had positioned themselves evenly around the block and stood with their right arms raised. Each of them was encased in a bright blue aura and wore a golden ring. The blue auras that surrounded them were also wards of impenetrable strength. Whoever had invented this spell must have thought the people who cast it would need to do so from complete safety. Lines of vivid blue light ran from ring to ring to form a large circle. Other lights ran from each ring to converge on a giant blue, glowing bubble that surrounded Oceanvine's ward. On the ground all around the block lay the fifty soldiers General Hervasiv had assigned to the security detail. The Republican Guardsmen stood outside the circle of light, however.

Candle knew immediately what he was facing, but was momentarily distracted when bullets ricocheted off his ward. The safety of the guardsmen was none of his concern, but he also had no desire to kill them, easy as it would have been. It was more challenging to imprison them where they stood, but Candle decided that Oceanvine would have approved of this more than anything else he might have done. He used telekinesis to gather all the guardsmen together on one side of the building then threw a fairly old-fashioned containment ward around them. Finally, he was ready to consider the real attackers.

Candle looked down and recognized the spell that was being used. He had not seen it used in nearly thirty-four years, but he knew exactly what it was and how to handle it. On his first two encounters with it, he learned that the spell had been stored in a number of gold rings on which the symbol of a breaking wave had been inset in blue stone. It was also a spell he still did not completely understand. The rings' ability had been destroyed the last two times he encountered the spell and this time he wanted them

intact.

The first thing Candle did was to reverse the direction of the spell's energy flow. Now he had control of the spell. Now he had the time to see just who had attacked Blizzard's home. He did not recognize most of the ten, but there was no mistaking the President of the Isle of Fire. His dark brown hair showed only traces of gray around his temples and the expression on his face was pure hatred. Previously when Candle turned the spell around, he caused it to torture those who wielded it, which at the time seemed only fair since they were intent on torturing their own victims to death. With the aid of the golden staff he had far more control. This time he was holding the spell back, keeping it from destroying the casters utterly as it had before. He still would not be able to dissipate it without killing the ring wearers – they had been doomed the moment they lost control – but he could keep them from becoming unrecognizable.

“Time for a change of administration, Mister Garnon,” Candle muttered in the president's face, “though it's too bad I'm not capable of bringing you in alive. Your impeachment would have kept television viewers glued to their sets for weeks. Well, I'm sure the movies about this will be far more exciting than what I am about to do.”

“And what is that?” Garnon grated from within his vivid blue cell.

That startled Candle. He had not thought the ring wearers would be able to hear or see him. “I'm going to allow you to die,” he told the man flatly.

President Garnon laughed mirthlessly at that and Candle, unwilling to torment the man verbally any more than he wanted to physically, released just enough of his hold on the spell to kill the ring wielders instantly. The spell, as he suspected, could only continue so long as they were alive. As soon as they were dead, the remaining energy of the spell started to implode. It was this backlash that had destroyed the casters on Candle's previous two encounters, but this time he had just enough control to reverse the energy flow once more and instead the energy exploded outward with light, heat and wind.

A moment later an unnatural peace descended and Candle finally allowed himself to land on the sidewalk. There were sirens in the distance rapidly growing louder and Oceanvine and Sextant were in the doorway of Blizzard's townhouse.

“Uncle Candle!” Oceanvine called, “are you all right?”

“I'm fine,” Candle replied, “but I probably should have stopped to put on some slippers. It's cold out here.”

“It's snowing,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“Is it?” Candle asked.

“You're standing in about two inches of it, Uncle.”

“I'll get your slippers, sir,” Sextant offered as he ran back into the house.

“The soldiers,” Oceanvine asked as Candle made his way up the ramp to the front door. “They're not dead, are they?” She sounded uneasy at the concept.

“Maybe,” Candle replied. “I haven't had a chance to check. This floor is a lot better than standing in the snow.”

“I would imagine,” Oceanvine commented dryly. “I can understand going out without shoes since you were in a hurry, but considering you were flying around, why did you choose to land in the snow?”

“I had other things on my mind,” Candle admitted. “I didn’t notice it.”

“Then why are we standing here with the door open?” Oceanvine asked.

“I want to keep track of our erstwhile guardsmen,” Candle replied. “They were shooting at me a few minutes ago and I tend to take that sort of thing personally. How are Blizzard and Olanna?”

“Getting dressed,” Sextant replied as he returned with Candle’s slippers.

“As I should,” Oceanvine noted, rushing off to get changed.

The local police were the first to arrive, but they called for ambulances immediately. Eleven of the soldiers had, indeed, been killed by the members of the People’s Party, but the rest were in more immediate danger of frostbite. They were all too willing to arrest the members of the Republican Guards because of a long-standing enmity between the police and the Guards. However no one was certain what to do about President Garnon and the rest of the ring wearers.

“Why not?” Sextant demanded. “No room in the morgue?”

“It’s the president!” a police lieutenant protested. “We’ve never had one die in office before.”

“So give him a state funeral,” Sextant replied callously. “It might be interesting to see who actually shows up when it gets out what he was doing here tonight along with his cronies.”

“They’re all Senators and M.C.s too,” the lieutenant pointed out.

“So are half the supposed Republican Guards,” Blizzard added. “Lieutenant, I would appreciate it if you see to clearing all this from my neighborhood. I haven’t seen this many bodies since the time of the Revolution. I understand that you’re considering the repercussions of having this many important politicians dying all at once, but they brought it on themselves. Fretting about what to do with their remains is not one of the big questions at this point.”

“What is, Madame Blizzard?” the policeman asked.

“The people here represent slightly over half the elected offices controlled by the People’s Party,” Blizzard replied. “Darned foolish of them all to come out like this, but I’m not complaining at the moment. No doubt I scared them more than I thought.”

“They tried to kill you, Madame,” the lieutenant pointed out.

“That’s why I’m not complaining,” Blizzard snapped back. “Oh, here comes General Hervasiv, please excuse me. Well, Gregor?”

“I’m starting to think we need mages in the military,” the general admitted after his deep apologies.

“That’s not your fault,” Blizzard told him. “There are hardly any mages left anywhere these days, and few of them were ever in our military. At least none of your people collaborated with the Peoples’

Party.”

“I would have killed them myself,” Hervasiv replied grimly. “It’s been a long time since any of my men died in other than accidental circumstances, however, and never so many. Everyone of them here deserves medals for valorous service, but that won’t comfort their families one whit.”

“Nor will their pensions nor anything else we can give them,” Blizzard replied, “but we will do what we can.”

“With this lot gone,” Candle asked, as he approached, finally having gotten dressed, “who is left in charge?”

“Nobody really,” Blizzard replied. “Our constitution does not have provisions of direct succession for losing both the President and the First Speaker of the House of Commons at once.”

“So what does that mean?” Oceanvine asked. “Does the government fall?”

“In the parliamentary sense, yes,” Blizzard replied. “But there will be an emergency meeting in the Commons to elect a new First Speaker Pro Tem and the Senate will choose an Acting President, both probably later today, although they may not actually come to a consensus for a few days. Government moves slowly except when making mistakes. I doubt the People’s Party will have much representation in those sessions, though.”

“No, of course not,” Candle agreed. “They’re going to be too busy working on pleas of ‘not-guilty’ for a good long time to come.”

They never did get back to sleep. By the time the bodies had been removed, the journalists had flocked into the area. The military cordon kept them all back at a distance of two blocks. However, at her first opportunity, Blizzard called Senator Davonova to let her know what had happened overnight. “We’ll need another press conference, I fear,” Blizzard concluded.

“Let’s hold off a few hours,” Davonova suggested. “We had a regular session of the Senate scheduled for this morning anyway. We can probably have an acting president before lunch.”

Remembering her own comments about governmental speed, Blizzard asked, “Isn’t that a bit hasty?”

“We’ll need to show determination and decisive action to keep chaos at bay, dear,” Davonova replied. “Besides, there’s a candidate who will win, hands down, in a voice vote.”

“Oh, are you planning to step into the job, Stav?” Blizzard asked.

“Not me, dearie,” Davonova laughed. “You!”

“Me?” Blizzard asked. “I don’t want the job!”

“You may not have a choice,” Davonova told her, “especially how a few days ago you held a press conference announcing you did want it. You may as well start packing your bags, because tonight you’ll be in the Presidential Palace.”

“I always hated that place,” Blizzard grumbled, “and while I’ll establish office hours there, I’ll probably be here at home most nights. I’m not back for long, remember. I’ll serve, fine, but only until the elections



in a few months. After that, I'll be just another retired old lady again."

Quirmlia

One

"I feel like the worst sort of party guest," Oceanvine commented as the plane circled one last time around Rjalkatyp two days later. "We came in and made a mess and now we're leaving without even offering to clean up."

"Not exactly," Sextant reminded her. "We're still on the lookout for those One Maiyim people who left right after things started happening there. That's a sort of clean up."

"I suppose," Oceanvine agreed taking one last look at the city, "but I really hope this doesn't become a habit. We left Silamon just before they started in on the hard work too."

"People have to pick themselves up if they're still capable of it," Candle told them both. "Too much help and they become dependant. In Sutheria, the rebuilding is giving the people a sense of worth. They are learning to stand on their own, just as the king has been encouraging them to for years. Emmine is helping out, of course. It is a royal colony, after all, but we're mostly giving them the materials to build with and letting them rebuild their way.

"On the Isle of Fire, the damage was political rather than physical," Candle continued. "Any help we could give them at this point would be interference and Blizzard understands it."

"But it's our fault she has to act as president again," Oceanvine protested.

"Oh come on!" Candle laughed, "Do you really think she would serve if she really did not want to? Blizzard is an old, dear friend, but I'm not blind to the fact that she's a career politician. This is making her feel young again in spite of her protests. As I recall, she used to complain about the political life even as she served, right from the start when she was shoe-horned into the forefront of the Counter-Revolution. Don't worry, she'll be just fine."

"I wouldn't wish that life on my worst enemy," Oceanvine commented.

"Of course not," Candle laughed. "Who would? But Blizzard's a friend and this is what she does. Even Olanna is coming out of retirement until the next elections. It will be just like old times for them."

"I wish I could do more to help them," Oceanvine told him.

"You saved their lives," Sextant pointed out. "How much more can you do?"

"If I saved their lives, doesn't that make me responsible for them?" Oceanvine countered.

"A very misunderstood concept," Candle commented. "It doesn't mean you have to be there to take care of them for the rest of their lives. It means that should they do right or wrong from that point forward you are at least partially responsible for their actions."

“So either I could take credit or get the blame,” Oceanvine concluded. “Swell!”

“Well, I’ve never really thought much of that philosophy,” Candle admitted. “Okay, let’s say you save the life of someone who a year later goes out, gets drunk and kills someone in an automobile accident. Is that your fault?”

“The victim of the accident wouldn’t have died if I hadn’t saved the life of the driver,” Oceanvine replied.

“Let’s say that same drunk driver also has a son who goes on to become a renowned philanthropist, giving millions of crowns to charities the world over. Can you take the credit for that too?”

“Wouldn’t that balance the score?” Sextant asked.

“Well,” Oceanvine considered, ignoring Sextant’s comment, “it’s not like I was the one to donate the money or even guide the son to do so.”

“So you only take the blame, but none of the credit,” Candle concluded, “but neither circumstance would have arrived had you not saved the first guy’s life. You are still essentially responsible because the life-saving was your action and you are responsible for your own actions. Let’s continue on and assume the person who died in the crash would have had six children had he not died and that each would have done great and wonderful things throughout their lives. Now they’ll never have been born. Is that your fault?”

“How do I know they would have done those things?” Oceanvine demanded.

“I just said so,” Candle replied.

“But there’s no way I’d ever know about them,” Oceanvine protested. “I can’t be responsible for them.”

“Are you responsible for the consequences of your actions or not?” Candle countered.

“Well, yes,” Oceanvine replied, “but if I started worrying about the consequences of the consequences I might as well stay home and never go out.”

“That too would have consequences,” Candle pointed out. Oceanvine looked like she wanted to scream her frustration, so he continued, “And that’s why I don’t hold by the whole concept. You are responsible for your actions. In this case however, the decision was whether or not to save a life. Whether that person lives or dies is your responsibility. But that is where your responsibility ends. This is the life of a person we’re talking about, not a line of dominos. If you tipped over a line of dominos and the last one in line happened to fall on to a plate and broke it, I think you could be blamed for breaking the plate because the dominos are inanimate objects with no volition or choice as to what they might do, but people are different. A person decides for himself what to do thousands of times each and every day, so anything he does after you’ve performed your heroic act of life-saving is his responsibility, not yours.”

“Are you sure?” Oceanvine asked.

“I am. Yes,” Candle nodded. “How about you?”

“I need to think about it some more,” Oceanvine admitted.

“I used to have conversations like that every morning with Serabawa,” Candle told her.

“He was considered one of the greatest thinkers of the last century,” she remarked. “Did you study with him while working on your masters degree in Merinne?”

“No!” Candle laughed. “Silverwind arranged private lessons with him while we were in Merinne for an extended vacation when I was thirteen or fourteen. Come to think of it, it was just before my last visit to the Isle of Fire”

“Serabawa agreed to teach a young teenager?” Sextant asked, putting down the airline magazine he had been reading. “But he was a great philosopher. He must have owed Silverwind a lot to agree to that.”

“I don’t think so,” Candle disagreed. “Oh they knew each other quite well, but I know that Silverwind had only intended to ask Serabawa for the name of a student who might be willing to tutor me. It was during the semester break and Serabawa decided it might be fun for a change from the usual stolid treatises he was expected to produce. I think he may have enjoyed it as much as I did. At least I hope so.”

“And you started every day like this?” Oceanvine asked.

“Well, not on a jet plane,” Candle shrugged, “but we did discuss morals and ethics a lot.”

“And went surfing in the afternoon,” Oceanvine recalled.

“Yes,” Candle agreed. “I’ve often thought I ought to retire to Orent, but it’s been years since I even handled a surfboard. It would probably kill me now.”

“I suppose that depends on what sort of stunts you intend to try,” Oceanvine responded. “Maybe I should ask the king to consider sending aid to Rjalkatyp.”

“I’m sure they don’t need it,” Candle told her, “but he should offer, I suppose. If nothing else you could give him a first-hand account of what happened there, although I’m not certain a direct call by you from the WurraPalace would be interpreted correctly by the Granomish government.”

“Why would I be calling from the palace?” Oceanvine asked.

“You’ll be sleeping there,” Candle replied, “although come to think of it, it might be even more suspicious if you leave the palace before placing such a call. Maybe you should speak to the ambassador from Emmine. He can pass on what you have to say and no one will suspect you of espionage.”

“I would still rather speak to him directly,” Oceanvine remarked. “He keeps asking for my opinions when I’m in Randona. It seems only fair I should offer one, now that I actually have one.”

The flight to Querna, was nearly identical to the one from Mith. Even the meals were precisely the same, Oceanvine noticed. However, even with repetition, she decided it was still better than the food served on the flight from Randona.

The journey was close to the North Pole once more, but was almost entirely in darkness. They did not see much of anything but the lights of the cities on Granom’s northern islands even when the sun rose while on their final approach to Querna.

“It’s very white out there,” Sextant observed as the sky brightened.

“They’re called clouds,” Oceanvine informed him.

“Clouds,” Sextant echoed with mock wonderment. “Yes. I must make a note to remember that. Is it snowing, do you think?”

“Somewhere in the world?” Oceanvine countered. “Could be. Here? Well it is winter, isn’t it?”

“I’m surprised we didn’t suffer a blizzard while in Rjalkatyp,” Sextant noted.

“Six!” Oceanvine protested with exaggerated outrage, “How could you say that? Blizzard is a very nice lady and an exquisite hostess.”

It was snowing at ground level, although it was a light and picturesque sort of snowfall and not the howling storm Sextant had worried about. “Oh sure, you like it now,” Sextant replied when Oceanvine said as much, “but let’s see how nice you think it looks six months from now in Randona.”

“Hah!” she laughed. “I’ll be spending all day in the library by then and won’t have time to enjoy it.”

“You probably won’t be here either,” Candle told her as they continued down the long concourse. “We are here to work after all, although we may have time to get you into the University library. They have some of the best collections in the physical sciences and engineering on Maiyim.”

“I understand they also have an outstanding poetry collection,” Oceanvine told him.

“Do they?” Candle asked. “One of the few holes in my education. Well perhaps I should look into that while we’re here. By the way, are you convinced yet?”

“Convinced about what, Uncle?” Oceanvine asked.

“That planes always arrive at and leave from the furthest gate,” Candle explained.

“Four flights is hardly a representative sample,” Oceanvine told him as they reached the baggage claim area.

Bags in hand, they approached the Customs station, but were intercepted by a Granom in a gray, pin-striped woolen suit. With the characteristic bone-white skin of a Granom, the only real color on the man besides his dark brown hair and eyes, was the bright red and gold striped tie, which Candle recognized as a modern adaptation of the royal livery.

“Marquess Candle,” the man greeted him, “Sir Valdov Balonov, Camelopard Herald. His Royal Majesty asked me to escort you directly to the palace.”

“Well, just let us get our passports stamped and the dainties in our luggage pawed through,” Candle replied lightly after introducing Oceanvine and Sextant, “and we’ll be right with you.”

“Your luggage will not be searched, My Lord,” the herald replied. “You are here by His Majesty’s request and carry the equivalent of diplomatic immunity.”

“Really?” Candle marveled, hefting his suitcase. “Doesn’t feel any heavier.”

Sir Valdos rewarded him with a tight but polite smile and led the way to the supervising Customs officer’s desk, where their passports were stamped without any of the usual questions or inspection. Then the mages were escorted to a large, plain black automobile that looked old-fashioned to Oceanvine’s eyes, but which she later learned was typical of Granomish limousines and taxicabs. While the outside might have looked quaint she appreciated the rich appointments of the car’s interior from the soft leather seats to the gold-plated knobs and ashtrays.

“Something to drink?” Sir Valdos offered, sliding open a door to reveal a small bar.

“Nothing for me,” Candle told him. “Vine? Six?” Both journeymen shook their heads and Candle privately marveled that Oceanvine did not correct his use of her unwanted nickname. *Court manners*, he decided silently. “So why did Ksaveras call for us?” he finally asked the herald.

“His Royal Majesty did not confide in me,” Sir Valdos replied stiffly. Candle recognized it for the rebuke and correction it was, but simply did not care. He had known the royal family far longer than Sir Valdos had.

Sextant and Oceanvine, however, paid little attention to Candle as he baited the herald. They were too busy taking in their first looks at the capital city of the Granom Archipelago. Modern Querna was a city with two faces. About half the buildings were faced in pink granite with impossibly huge blocks of smoky quartz gracing the tops of the tall, graceful spires that reached almost as high as their more modern neighbors. The newer buildings they both found remarkably identical to modern office buildings in Randona. They were tall steel and glass rectangular towers that differed from each other only in their actual dimensions and the colors of their glass.

There was one building, however, that towered over them all. It was built to look like a strange mixture of both the old and new styles of buildings and faced with sheets of pink granite and smoke-colored glass. Unlike the other newer buildings it was not simply a very tall box but a soaring pinnacle that reached one hundred and four stories high from the ground to the tip of its smoky quartz spire. The upper floors, however, were obscured by the clouds and falling snow.

“Is that the Trentov Tower?” Oceanvine asked, her eyes glued to the magnificent building hoping to see the top.

“Yes, my lady,” Sir Valdo replied proudly. “At thirteen hundred thirty-six feet, it is the tallest building on Maiyim and likely to remain so for some time to come. I am told that from the observation deck on the top floor you can see over forty miles on a clear day. Even today it is possible the top floor is currently above the clouds.”

“Not today,” Candle informed him calmly. “I heard the pilot announce these clouds are topping out around five thousand feet. Today’s view is probably just a close up view of the fog.”

“Sometime while we’re here, we should go to the observation deck,” Sextant suggested.

Oceanvine agreed instantly but Candle replied, “I’ve been there. Once is enough, but it is a great view and you should see it for yourselves. Besides, I like the view from the Wurra Palace’s tower. It’s not anywhere near as high, so you can actually see more details of the city. From up there a lot of it looks very much alike.”

A few minutes later their car rolled through the main gates of the WurraPalace . Sextant noted that the heavy iron gates opened for them on cue and closed behind them immediately and he surmised that the driver must have called ahead so they would not have to seek entrance from the guards stationed at the gates.

He had wanted to get a closer look at the guards. They were dressed in uniforms from two hundred years in the past, resplendent in deep red with gold trim and tall furry black hats that looked impractical for anything but the most ceremonial of purposes. He had seen pictures of them, but this was the first time he had the chance to see one in real life. Only Granom practiced this form of traditionalism. The royal guards in Emmine wore modern uniforms, albeit very fancy ones.

Finally the car came to a halt at the doorway of the main keep. From the look of it, the first floor had once been three steps above ground level, but the stone stairs had been replaced with a gentle ramp that they later learned had been installed by King Ksaveras IX for his Queen Petronelle, who, as she grew older, had difficulties negotiating stairs. Oceanvine wondered if all the stairways in the palace had been similarly replaced, but soon discovered that had not been necessary.

“His Majesty would appreciate the honor of meeting with you at your earliest convenience,” Sir Valdos informed them, “but he will understand should you wish to settle in and freshen up a bit first.”

“No need,” Candle told him, echoing a similar scene from his first visit here. “We slept on the plane.”

“Uncle Candle,” Oceanvine protested, “We are hardly dressed appropriately for presentation before the royal court.”

“No need, my lady,” Sir Valdos, informed her. “His Majesty is not in court. He instructed me to escort you to his private office.” He led them to a very modern elevator and a minute later they stepped out onto the top floor of the palace’s tower.

The tower was a tall but blocky-looking vertical projection that until the newer office building had been constructed had been the tallest structure in Granom and, in fact, owing to the peculiar protocol of the Granomish Kingdom , the builders of those newer buildings had to gain the king’s permission before beginning construction. By the time the fifth such was built, Ksaveras IX had rescinded the law prohibiting buildings taller than his palace and replaced it with one that prohibited newer buildings from blocking his view of Querna Harbor .

Ksaveras’ office was the entire top floor of the tower. Having been left as a single large room, there were windows facing in all four directions. The view in two of those directions was entirely taken up by the skyscrapers of the City of Querna , but to the south, between the tall buildings one could see the oddball collection of architecture that was the University and to the north was the unobstructed view of the harbor. At least Oceanvine and Sextant took for granted the harbor could have been seen if not for all the snow.

The room was far from empty, however. Over two dozen Granomen were standing around a desk that faced into the room. They could not see much of the man at the desk through the crowd, save that he was a well-built Granom with dark brown hair and a healthy white skin tone.

“Your Majesty,” Sir Valdos announced as they left the elevator and interrupting any discussion that might have been going on before their arrival. “I have the honor of announcing Wizard Candle, the Marquess of Sentendir, Lord Tamollen and Companion of the Silver Stay, the Lady Oceanvine and Sir Sextant, both Companions of the Star of Emmine.”

Oceanvine had little experience judging the ages of Granomen, but it seemed to her that the king of Granom was roughly the same age as she and Sextant. As he rose from his desk at the far end of the room, Oceanvine noticed he was wearing a cream-colored flannel shirt over Emmine-style blue denim jeans. It was as far from what she would have expected a king to wear as possible, least of all the King of Granom, a kingdom she had always thought of as incredibly formal. In that moment, without ever hearing a word from his lips, she decided she liked this man. And she was even more surprised that she did not feel disloyal to her own king by liking him.

“My Lord Wizard!” Ksaveras exclaimed. “Thank you so much for coming.”

“You’ve been well, lad?” Candle asked. Most of the Granomen in the room were obviously shocked by Candle addressing their monarch as “lad” but the king himself did not seem to mind in the least.

“Until they went and stuck a crown on my head, sir,” he replied, earning a second gasp from the crowd as he hugged the human wizard. The king was supposed to be reserved and dignified and the idea that he would make an exception for a foreigner and most especially a human was unthinkable.

Candle laughed. “Can’t say I never warned you. You could have run away like your Uncle Zak.”

“If I could have found a woman as wonderful as my Aunt Ksana,” Ksaveras admitted, “I might have done that.”

“Your Majesty!” one of the courtiers protested. “Ksana of Northmarket was...” He halted abruptly when he caught a hostile glare from the king.

“Yes?” Ksaveras prompted him.

“Forgive me, Your Majesty,” the man muttered, stepping backward involuntarily. “Princess Ksana was a great woman.”

“She was a former prostitute, my lord,” the king replied. “That, however, does not diminish her or what she accomplished in her life.” Then he turned to face Oceanvine. “Did you choose your mage name or inherit it, my lady?”

“Mage names are never inherited, Your Majesty,” Oceanvine informed the king, “however Doctor Oceanvine was my great grandmother.”

“And Silverwind was your great-grandfather!” Ksaveras concluded. “Of course! How marvelous! You must see my collection!”

“Collection, Your Majesty,” Oceanvine asked, confused.

“Books!” Ksaveras enthused. “I have the complete set. Oh, and please call me Veras. Please?” he almost begged. Several of the people in the room gasped again. “None of this crowd will.”

“It wouldn’t be correct in court like this,” Oceanvine told him.

“Oh this isn’t court,” the king waved at the Granomen in the room. “Just the usual office hours with my advisors, which I think we can suspend for the rest of the day,” he added pointedly. The men and women bowed and quietly started leaving the room.

“Your Majesty,” Sir Valdus bowed, “shall I arrange accommodations for your guests?”

“Good idea,” Ksaveras nodded. “In the Garden Wing, I think. Wizard Oceanvine loved that part of the palace I recall. I’m really sorry I was unable to attend the funeral, however. My advisors convinced me that my visit to Emmine might not be well-received. I don’t know why not, though. She was a hero of Granom, after all. Do you think it would have caused problems had I attended?”

“I don’t know,” Oceanvine admitted. “I don’t think King Hacon Ancel would have been offended, but I don’t know what political ramifications there might have been. But, if you ever do visit Emmine, I promise to take you personally to visit her grave. It’s not where most people think it is.”

“It isn’t, my lady?” Ksaveras asked.

“Oceanvine,” she corrected him. “And this is Sextant, by the way. He’s also related to Silverwind.”

“Somewhat more distantly, Your Majesty,” Sextant added only to have the king exchange nicknames with him as well.

“You both must see my collection then!” Ksaveras told them. “It’s right over here.”

He took Oceanvine’s arm and practically dragged her over to the wall behind his desk, where several bookshelves were filled mostly with leather-bound tomes, but two shelves held nearly sixty small paper-bound books. He pulled one out at random and showed it to them.

“Silverwind and Oceanvine and the Golden Staff by Astil of Randona?” Oceanvine read aloud. “Is that about your staff, Uncle?”

“Not very likely,” Candle laughed. “Well, it may be this staff. I think that one was one of the last ones so it would have been after the quest, but I doubt anything in there ever actually happened.”

“Who is or was Astil of Randona?” Oceanvine asked curiously.

“Silverwind’s first wife,” Candle replied.

“But the name...”

“Is masculine,” he finished for her. “Yes. I’ve noticed. She was really Lady Ysemay of Rallena, but wrote that series under a pen name.”

“Ysemay of Rallena?” Oceanvine repeated. “I know that name. Didn’t she write a series of historical biographies?”

“She did,” Candle nodded, “and did a much better job of it than she ever did on this series.”

Oceanvine opened the cover and started reading somewhere in the middle. “I can see why she used a pen name,” she commented. “No one would have taken her biographies seriously.”

“Actually she wrote those after all of these,” Candle told her. “This is how she got started. I think most of them were an act of contrition. You see, she was married to Silverwind before he faced Arithan for the first time on the Isle of Fire. She had written two or three of them but mostly just to give herself



something to do while Silverwind and Windchime were out saving the world. When Silverwind went into his hermitage phase, however, it looked like he might never associate with people again and she divorced him. I don't think she ever forgave herself for that lapse in judgment. She spent the next twenty years or so writing several of those every year. Later, she met your great-grandmother and started using her name in the books instead of Windchime's. Ysemay was not particularly kind in her depiction of Vine, but that backfired on her when it turned out that the Oceanvine of the books was nearly as popular as Silverwind. So much so that the publisher added Oceanvine's name on the covers."

"So this is what she meant," Oceanvine commented. "When we were on Kern, Jollin told me that all those plaques embarrassed my great-grandmother, but that Oceanvine had always said they weren't the worst things written about her. These books were?"

"Probably what she had in mind," Candle admitted. "We called them nickel novels and penny dreadfuls but they weren't all that bad and don't let her protestations fool you. Vine read every single one of them and believed the early ones were all real adventures until Silverwind convinced her otherwise."

"I've always loved them," Ksaveras insisted.

"Well, I admit I am curious," Oceanvine replied.

"Here," Ksaveras reached for a different volume and presented it to her. "Start with this one. It happened here in Querna and is fairly close to the truth, my grandfather commissioned it himself."

Oceanvine looked at the cover. It had a rather flamboyant cover that featured a fanciful painting of a powerful mage throwing bolts of lightning at a dark and indistinct figure while a scantily clad female with long blond hair cowered in the mage's protective shadow. The scene was set at night on a gaslight-illuminated street and bore the title "Silverwind vs. the Cardiokiller."

"That can't possibly be my great-grandmother," Oceanvine commented.

"It's supposed to be," Candle told her, "but the hair color is about all the artist got right. She was dressed like a prostitute that evening, but it was in the style favored by Granomish hookers and not quite as revealing as that costume."

"What did Granomish prostitutes wear?" Sextant asked, taking a closer look at the book.

"Tight-fitting blouses and dresses mostly printed with Orentan patterns," Candle replied. "Looking like a white-skinned elf was evidently very attractive to Granomish men at the time."

"Uncle Candle!" Oceanvine protested. "Watch your language! Elf is a very rude word."

"True, but it's what a Granom would have called them at the time," Candle informed her.

"And they called us trolls," Ksaveras added. "We get along much better these days. It's too bad it was at the expense of our relations with Emmine."

"So," Candle began after a few minutes, "Maia told me you needed us here desperately. What can we do for you?"

"Maia?" Ksaveras asked. "Is that your secretary's name? A very beautiful name and it suits her voice perfectly. I must say it took a while to convince her I really was who I said I was, though."

“I don’t think she was expecting to get a call from the King of Granom, lad,” Candle told him.

“No? Oh, well, I suppose not. It’s not all that unlikely I should call you though. You not only hold noble rank in Granom but you were like an uncle to me when I was growing up.”

“Maia doesn’t know that yet,” Oceanvine explained. “But really why are we here?”

“Have you been keeping up with the Granomish Space Program, Oceanvine?” Ksaveras asked.

Oceanvine laughed. “With these two around,” she indicated Candle and Sextant, “even if I hadn’t been interested I wouldn’t have been able to ignore it.”

Ksaveras replied, “I think the Gran 4 mission was sabotaged.”

Two

“I’ve been a major supporter of spaceflight ever since Emmine launched the first satellite fifteen years ago,” Ksaveras told them. “More than anything else I wanted to be an ethernaut. Well, that was out of the question. Neither Dad nor Granddad would have allowed it. I can’t blame them, of course. The life of the crown prince – the only direct heir for that matter – could hardly be risked in such a cavalier manner, but that didn’t stop me from wanting to go up and in spite of the sense of it, I was not particularly happy about it.

“But Dad did encourage me to support the program,” the king continued, “and I took the courses an ethernaut would be expected to take while at University in addition to the classes I had in political science. I also went through the training every ethernaut endures and was active in the program on a daily basis right up until two years ago when Dad died and I was forced to become king.

“So I have a very good understanding of the space program and how it operates,” Ksaveras went on. “I understand fully how our spacecraft work and I also know how to be ground crew and part of mission control. That’s why I’m very suspicious about the recent near-disaster in space.”

“What clues did you have to work with?” Candle asked.

“Uh uh!” Ksaveras shook his head. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that I’m not always right. I want you to investigate with as open a mind as possible. If it turns out I’m just being silly, I want to know. If you find you agree with my suspicions, I want to know who did it, how he did it, why he did it and I want to bring him to justice.

“The ethernauts cheerfully risk their lives with every mission,” Ksaveras continued. “Space flight is in its infancy and it’s one of the most dangerous undertakings the people of Maiyim have ever attempted, but I will not tolerate someone intentionally trying to kill our ethernauts. Those men are like brothers to me. If I could define such a crime as a form of treason, I would. I cannot, but I can call it attempted murder and I believe there’s someone out there who is guilty on four counts.

“That’s why I, uh, we asked you here, my lord,” Ksaveras slipped into the royal “we” for the first time since their arrival. Oceanvine had wondered if he ever used it. “That I also got the Lady Oceanvine and Sir Sextant is so much the better. I heard about what happened in the Southern Chain last year so I know

you are all great mages.” He held up a hand to stop any shows of modesty. “Incidentally, thank you for providing that feast in honor of my birthday for the scientists of Petronelle Station. It was very kind of you.”

“It was the least we could do,” Oceanvine replied. “They helped us so much in our own investigation. It would have been nothing short of ingratitude not to give back as much as we could.”

“I thank you anyway and I’m glad you’ll be here for my birthday celebration in two weeks,” Ksaveras told her. “I’m not sure what sort of festivities there will be, but I understand it will be fairly exciting. So what business kept you on the Isle of Fire so long?”

“The same one that would have brought us here eventually,” Candle told him, “although not for the same reasons.” He went on to describe how the People’s Party was actually a front for One Maiyim.

“They were outlawed from these islands decades ago,” Ksaveras noted after Candle was finished. “Are you certain?”

“Absolutely,” Candle nodded.

“I’ll have the Royal Bureau of Investigation examine all known People’s Party members as soon as possible,” the king decided. “I’ll also have them keep a lookout for this missing Senator Hawakamala and the other two Members of Congress who came here with her. I normally welcome visitors from the Isle of Fire most warmly, but Senators and other politicians normally present themselves on arrival in Querna.”

“They may not be in Querna,” Sextant pointed out. “By now they could be in Elisto or Randona or even on Robander’s Island. They left Rjalkatyp a week or more ago.”

“I would rather they were not here,” Ksaveras considered as he returned to his desk, “but we should face the fact that they have a stronghold of allies in Granom. Well, I already knew the two People’s parties were affiliated.” He picked up a telephone just as the elevator opened. He smiled and waved at the young Granomish woman who entered the room with two children and then spoke into the phone for a few minutes.

“Wizard Candle,” the woman greeted him while the king was on the phone. “Welcome back. It’s been far too long.”

“You’re right,” Candle chuckled. “You should have seen the expressions on that sour lot up here when Veras threw his arms around me, Orya.”

Orya laughed and replied, “They’re good people, most of them, but they do have their prejudices.”

“I think they were even more shocked when you called the king, ‘lad,’” Oceanvine opined.

“They probably were at that,” Candle agreed. “May I present the Lady Oceanvine and Sir Sextant, both journeymen mages. Kids, this is Her Royal Majesty, Queen Orezhda.”

“So pleased to meet you both,” Orya greeted them. “These are our children Genovya and Ksaveras.” The children, aged five and three respectively, had already wandered off to a far corner to look out the windows. “We do not have many guests from Emmine these days and those we do have are generally ambassadors. They’re a bit stodgy for my tastes.”

“Theirs is a serious job, Your Majesty,” Oceanvine replied carefully. “I suppose the gravity of it gets to be ingrained after a while.”

“In private, please call me Orya, my lady,” Orya told her. “Both Veras and I have tried to cultivate private personae as different from our public ones.”

“Then I hope you’ll call me Oceanvine,” came the instant reply.

Orya nodded. “In any case, I think you are the first humans I’ve been able to just talk to in years.”

“Well that gets things moving, I think,” the king announced as he hung up the phone. “Hullo, love. Where are the kids? Oh, I see, by the harbor-side window again. Good. Wizard, I’ve let the RBI know you are here and that I want you to head up their investigation of the Gran 4 mission.”

“Are you sure they’re comfortable with that?” Candle asked. “I generally prefer not to step on the toes of those I’m here to help. That sort of thing causes resentments.”

“You’re here to help me,” Ksaveras reminded him. “And I think they’re quite delighted actually, at least Sir Garan is. This is not the sort of thing they normally investigate you see. The Space Agency does its own investigations, but even they admit they are stumped this time and asked the RBI to lend a hand. The RBI, in turn, has one of the finest investigative laboratories in the world, but the people were finding themselves out of their depth because none of them have a background in space exploration although I’m sure they would have gotten results eventually.

“So,” the king continued enthusiastically, “I’ve arranged for you to meet with Sir Garan and his people here tomorrow morning over breakfast. That is the way you like to work, isn’t it?”

“It was more Silverwind’s style,” Candle admitted, “but I’ve done it too from time to time. Will we have any members of the Space Administration here as well?”

“I can arrange that,” Ksaveras assured him. “Oh, I also passed on what you told me about the People’s Party. Sir Garan acted quite surprised by the news, but he promised to put a team on that matter as well.”

“The news from the Isle of Fire hasn’t reached him yet?” Candle asked.

“There has not been a lot of news, Wizard,” Orya told him. “Or more to the point, while we know there have been incidents involving the Congress and Madame Blizzard, there have not been a lot of details filtering out. The Isle of Fire rarely airs its dirty laundry in public.”

“Can’t blame them, but we should have the RBI contact them soon,” Candle decided. “I’ll give Sir Garan a direct line to Blizzard. She’s Acting President again until the elections. So what do we do for the rest of the day?”

“Settle in to our rooms, Uncle,” Oceanvine suggested, “because from the look of the weather out there, I doubt we would be going anywhere.”

Three

Oceanvine's suite overlooked the garden for which the Garden Wing of the Wurra Palace had been named. Having missed her usual morning practice time, she sat by the window of her sitting room and watched the snow fall even as a hex nut continued to circle her head and she also kept Methis' book on cosmology floating in front of her as she read. There was a knock on the door and Sextant stuck his head in the room.

"When are you going to let me have a look at that?" he asked, seeing what she was reading. "You've read it twice already."

"I keep going back to spots I had trouble with," Oceanvine explained.

"You could ask your uncle or me questions, couldn't you?" Sextant pointed out.

"Possibly," Oceanvine admitted. "Okay, here's one. I don't get this whole notion of inflation."

"Inflation?" Sextant asked. "Maybe we call it something else these days."

"Well according to this," Oceanvine explained, "when the universe was very young, it briefly underwent a period of exponential expansion called inflation here." She looked at Sextant expectantly but instead he looked confused. "So by the it was time 10-35seconds old..."

"How old?" Sextant asked.

"10-35seconds," Oceanvine replied calmly. "A very short time, right?"

"Inconceivably short, Vine," Sextant replied.

"Oceanvine," she corrected him absently. "Anyway, by the time the universe was that old it is thought it had expanded from a point to a volume that probably could have fit everything we can see of the universe from here."

"That's impossible," Sextant told her. "You must have misunderstood. Nothing can move faster than light, it's not just a law of physics, it's the foundation on which all our modern knowledge is based."

"The universe did," Oceanvine replied. "Maybe it was a special case."

As I understand this the laws of physics were different at the time. 10-35seconds was the beginning of the Electro-weak Era during which the Electromagnetic and Weak Molecular Forces were pretty much the same thing."

"Yeah, okay, I've heard that theory. I think we've pretty much proven the Universe began as something very hot and dense and in those conditions it would be reasonable to assume different laws," Sextant allowed, "but universal expansion faster than the speed of light? It doesn't make sense."

"If that doesn't makes sense, how do you feel about the fact that the universe is not only expanding, but probably also accelerating as it does so?" she asked.

"You're making that up," Sextant accused.

"Am not," she replied. Then realizing how childish that sounded, she stuck her tongue out for good measure. "Wait until you read about dark matter, vacuum energy and quantum gravity."

“Dark matter?” Sextant asked. “Do you mean Black Holes?”

“No,” she replied, “I don’t think so. Now do you see why I haven’t been asking questions?” There was another knock on the door. “Come in,” Oceanvine called.

Queen Orezhda opened the door and asked, “Would you two like some tea?”

“I wasn’t aware tea time was observed here,” Oceanvine replied curiously.

“Not traditionally,” the queen told her, “although there are tea houses in which tea is served each afternoon in the formal Emmine style, or is that old-fashioned?”

“A little.” Oceanvine admitted, “or rather it’s traditional so a lot of the kids don’t actually drink tea anymore at tea time, but a lot do and I haven’t enjoyed a real tea in months. I’d love to!”

“Oh good!” Orya replied happily and opened the door the rest of the way while a maid rolled a cart into the room. “This is my favorite room in the palace,” she told Oceanvine enthusiastically, peering out the window. “You should see it in the spring when the garden is filled with tulips and irises and lilacs.”

“It’s quite beautiful now,” Oceanvine opined. “The limbs of that maple and the benches and the fountain with the snow on them are lovely in a frigid sort of way. Hmm, I think this is going to be the year without a summer for me. We’ll probably finish up just in time to go home for the fall term. Would you like to play mother?” she asked Orya.

“Play mother?” Orya asked.

“Pour the tea,” Oceanvine explained. “It just means that you’re the hostess, but I can do it if you like.”

“It seems I don’t know all there is to the niceties of an Emmine tea,” Orya commented wryly. “We’re in your room, Oceanvine. Why don’t you take the honors?”

Oceanvine poured tea for everyone, mixing in milk and sugar for Sextant and honey and lemon for the queen and herself. Once everyone was served, she finally felt free to help herself to the cakes that had arrived with the tea. “These are Granomish, aren’t they?” she asked.

“Yes,” Orya replied, “They come from Ahler, or rather the recipe does. They were as close to scones as I could find.”

“They’re very good and not too far from scones; a bit lighter and moister, but very close,” Oceanvine informed her. “I know what would go with the tea even better though. Those tiny pastries from Sahren. The ones less than an inch in diameter.”

“You’ve had them?” Orya asked excitedly. “I didn’t think anyone even knew what they were any more. I grew up on Sahren and there was an old pastry maker in town who still knew how to make them.” She smiled reminiscently, “He used to call me ‘Princess,’ even though I was only an earl’s daughter.”

“Vine is the daughter of an earl too,” Sextant told her.

“Really?” Orya asked.

“Oceanvine!” Oceanvine corrected him.

“Really,” he replied to the queen. “Right,” he told Oceanvine lightly. “Whatever you say.”

Oceanvine ignored him and told Orya, “OlenCounty. It’s a bit isolated from the capital, although not as much as some counties.”

“Oh I know all about living in an isolated county,” Orya assured her, “and snow! If you think this is something, that far north winter lasts five weeks longer on the average. I really don’t know how the folks on Ahler, Marga and Kif can stand it.”

“Isn’t Marga where the best hops come from?” Sextant asked.

“So I’m told,” Orya replied. “I’ve never developed a taste for *alse* of any sort. Veras likes it well enough, though. I prefer a nice white wine. Still I do have respect for the value of those hops. I understand they are one of our major exports. Why is that piece of metal whizzing around your head, Oceanvine?”

“Hmm?” Oceanvine responded. “Oh, the hex nut. When Uncle Candle first started training Six and me, he bought a bag of these nuts in a hardware store and told us to use them to practice telekinesis.”

“Okay,” Orya nodded, “but why are you using it this way now?”

“Practice,” Oceanvine replied. “I improve my mastery by learning to keep it orbiting my head even while doing other things, magical or not. I try to find an hour or two a day to do this and will often do it for hours on end given the opportunity, although I don’t normally do it in public. It attracts too much attention.”

“It’s not ladylike to practice magic openly?” Orya asked playfully.

“It’s not ladylike to flaunt the ability before those who haven’t got the training or ability,” Oceanvine replied primly.”

Orya laughed, “Now there is a bit of etiquette my teachers omitted from my training.”

“I’m sure they just thought it would never come up,” Oceanvine replied.

Oceanvine was doubly grateful for the tea and cakes when it turned out dinner was not served until after eight o’clock in the evening. She and Sextant found their way to the large hall in which the king and queen ate with their court each evening. They were not at all late, but most of the gathering nobles were on their second cocktails by the time the journeymen arrived. Looking around they saw Candle talking to a young Granomish lady of their age.

“What took you so long?” Candle asked.

“We were looking for you, Uncle,” Oceanvine told him tartly.

“I’ve been down here all afternoon. By the way, this is Countess Ksanya. Ksanya, my neice, the Lady Oceanvine and Sir Sextant.” Ksanya was not quite as heavily built as most Granomen and her hair was several shades lighter and finer in texture than the norm, being a medium brown. She wore that hair much longer than most Granomen in what Oceanvine thought of as an Orentan style almost to her waist.

“I’ll never get used to that title,” Sextant commented.

“Why ever not?” the countess asked.

“I’m just the son of a fisherman, my lady,” Sextant told her. “Courtly observances don’t come naturally to me.”

“You’re doing just fine,” she assured him. “Wizard Candle was just telling me what you did to earn your elevation, Sir Sextant. Your title is well earned. If only all knighthoods could be given for such noble reasons.”

“Uh,” Sextant was at a loss for words. “Thank you, my lady.”

She smiled and told him, “Ksanya.”

“Are all Granomish nobles so informal?” Oceanvine asked. It didn’t fit what she’d been told about Granomish etiquette. Immediately after asking she feared she might have been rude, but it turned out Ksanya was not insulted in the least.

“Just the royal family,” Ksanya laughed. “My great-grandfather was Prince Zakhar, the younger brother of Ksaveras IX. I was named for my grandmother, Ksana of Northmarket.” She said that last in a mildly challenging tone. “We’re related, you know.”

“We are?” Oceanvine asked. In the back of her mind she remembered the night after her great-grandmother’s funeral when she confusedly asked Methis if they were related. The goddess had laughed as though Oceanvine was the greatest comedienne on Maiyim.

“First cousins twice removed, I think is the Emmine way of saying it. Here we just say cousins if we can trace the relationship at all,” Ksanya replied.

“I’m sorry,” Oceanvine apologized, “but how?”

“Oh, didn’t you know? Your great-grandmother and mine adopted each other as sisters.”

“I never heard that,” Oceanvine admitted. “Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked Candle.

“It slipped my mind,” Candle admitted. “Sorry about that. It’s true enough, though. Ksana was what they used to call a lady of the evening.”

“She was a hooker,” Ksanya told him bluntly. “She never hid her past so I see no reason I should.”

“Yes,” Candle nodded, “she was a hooker. Literally. When Vine first found her she was a victim of the Hook and her slave master had just cut her string. Vine saved her life and cured her of the Hook using Windchime’s original method. The method, effective enough, was a very intimate process and they got to know each other in some ways that were closer than lovers ever do. When it was over they decided they were sisters and made the relationship official.”

“Well, I must say it’s about time I met one of my human cousins,” Ksanya told Oceanvine. “Do we get to hug?”



Oceanvine laughed and threw her arms around Ksanya. The hall became much quieter almost instantly. Thinking the king and queen had arrived, Oceanvine broke the embrace only to discover most of the nearby Granomen were staring at them. “What? Don’t you people hug family members?” she demanded only to have Ksanya spin her back around for another hug on top of which she added a kiss on the cheek.

The novelty wore off soon after that and Ksanya admitted, “They’re all too used to my eccentricities. Now they probably think it’s my human genes.”

“You don’t have any human genes,” Sextant told her.

“I know that and so do you,” Ksanya chuckled, “but I don’t think they’ve figured it out yet. Most of them are still living in the Age of Faith, if you ask me.”

“Have you ever thought of an ambassadorial post?” Candle asked. “You’d probably fit right into Emmine society.”

“I wish I could,” Ksanya admitted, “but part of that ancient attitude I have to face is that it’s not a woman’s place to be an ambassador even to Bellinen. Heck! Even the Orenta don’t send female ambassadors to Granom. It must have taken an act of the Gods Themselves for women to have the right to vote here. Heh! If you ask that crowd it was an act of Aritos.”

“Could be,” both Oceanvine and Candle replied.

Sextant suppressed a laugh, but Ksanya asked, “Am I missing something?”

“You know the stories,” Candle told her quickly. “I have lunch with Aritos on alternate Thursdays. How else would I be a Granomish Marquess?”

“I had wondered,” Ksanya teased him. A bell rang just then signaling it was time for everyone to find their seats. “Come on, you two,” she told Oceanvine and Sextant. “We’re sitting at the low board.”

“The low board?” Sextant asked.

“My table,” Ksanya giggled. “Veras and Orya sit at the high board. Well, they don’t have a choice. Wherever they eat it’s the high board, but generally it’s that big table at the end of the hall. Well, someone who thinks he’s cleverer than he really is decided that since I was always in so much trouble as a kid that anyplace I sit must be just the opposite. Hence the ‘low board,’ get it? Actually, I generally sit at the second table with the princes and princesses, if we have any in Querna at the moment.”

The low board looked pretty much like any of the other tables. There were chairs for ten people although only one other couple sat there and they were at the far end from Ksanya and the two journeymen. Candle sat at the high board.

“We don’t though,” Ksanya continued, “aside from Their Majesties’ kids, but they’re too young to be up this late. They were fed hours ago and put to bed. My parents are in Elisto at the moment and they’re the only prince and princess who might be here, except my brother. He’s not a prince, although he is third in the line of succession should anything happen to Veras, Methis forbid. Zak is in Querna, but he’s in University so only stays in the Wurra on the holidays, lucky him.”

“If you don’t like the palace,” Oceanvine asked, “why don’t you do something that would take you out

of the City.”

“Like what?” Ksanya asked.

“You could go back to school,” Oceanvine told her. “Or join the diplomatic corps. I know there are female Granomen on ambassadorial staffs.”

“I could,” Ksanya agreed, “but nearly all of those women are the wives of career diplomats. I’m not married. It’s too bad we don’t have a Friendship Corps like Emmine. I’ve always thought that was a good idea to give people, especially people our age a chance to go out and see a part of the world they might not normally go to and do something worthwhile. I even talked to Veras about it, but he’s too stuck on his space program. He tells me to do charity work like the other noble ladies do.

“I’m all for that,” Ksanya continued, “but the Granomish idea of charity work done by ladies involves hosting little parties to raise money. That’s important too, understand, but I want to actually do something. Maybe I should go back to school. Do you think the University at Randona would allow a troll to matriculate?” she asked impishly.

“There are a few Granomen in every class,” Oceanvine informed her, “most of them are from the Isle of Fire or else grew up on Chastigon or Kanu. There are Granomish enclaves there.”

“How many from Granom though?” Ksanya asked pointedly.

“To be honest,” Oceanvine replied, “until last year I never even met a Granom. Judging from the fish tank experience I’m getting here, there are probably as many Granomen in Randona as there are humans in Querna.”

“Darned few then,” Ksanya sighed.

“Hey, be the first!” Oceanvine suggested as the appetizer course, a platter of finger foods with various dipping sauces, was set before them.

“There were a few women scientists working at Petronelle Station on Robander’s Island last summer,” Sextant pointed out. “Have you thought of a career along those lines.”

“I have, and I still might pursue that,” Ksanya admitted, “although the family is against that sort of thing. It was well enough for Veras to study with the ethernauts, but I had to major in liberal arts.”

“Host a series of literary events,” Sextant suggested, “or write something.”

“Both interesting ideas,” Ksanya agreed. “Maybe I will, but I’m still jealous of you two. You get to do things. To go and act, not just encourage others to do so.”

“Ksanya,” Oceanvine told her after swallowing a carrot stick, “you’re a countess, my Dad’s an earl. I wasn’t exactly encouraged to learn magic. As a matter of fact if my grandmother had her way I would have been disowned for it. It was a pretty close thing and my Dad still won’t talk to me except in public and then just to keep up appearances.”

“Why would he mind if you’re a mage?” Ksanya asked. “You’re descended from Silverwind and Oceanvine for the Gods’ sakes! What else should you be?”

“The dutiful daughter,” Oceanvine replied. “Prepared to marry whomever the family decides would be a valuable political ally and spend my life hosting tea socials and bringing up heirs. Sound familiar?”

“Oh Gods, yes!” Ksanya agreed. “Okay, Cousin. You have me convinced. I need to just pick my target, aim and fire. Right?”

“Sounds good to me,” Oceanvine smiled.

Meanwhile Sextant had been trying unsuccessfully to engage the other couple in conversation. After discovering he could get no further than a few words of polite greeting he turned to Ksanya and asked quietly, “Is it something I said?”

“More likely something I said,” Ksanya snickered. “It could be bigotry, though. You may not have noticed but our kingdoms aren’t the closest of friends these days.”

“It doesn’t seem to stop you from being friendly,” Sextant noticed.

“I’m the strange one, remember?” Ksanya countered. She smiled and waved at the couple at the far end of the table. “Actually it’s considered impolite to allow anyone to eat alone, so some of my more distant relatives take turns sitting at the low board with me. I may not have been as lovable a couple years ago when it started as I am now. I recall I resented it fairly vocally, in fact. I’ve gotten over it, but they haven’t yet. Granomish nobles have a very long memory, I’m afraid, and my side of the family has a very long history of strangeness.

“Ah! He appears!” she said suddenly as a Granomish gentleman entered the hall in Emmine-style jeans and a woolen shirt similar to what Ksaveras had been wearing earlier. He bowed hastily toward the high board and then approached Ksanya’s table. “As punctual as ever,” Ksanya observed.

“I love you too, Sis,” the man replied. “Are you going to introduce me to your friends or are we behaving like savages again tonight?”

Ksanya sighed. “Earl Zakhar Arron of the House of Granova, meet Sir Sextant of Emmine and our noble cousin, the Lady Oceanvine, but I suspect you knew that already or else you would have been out carousing.”

“I haven’t had a good carouse in months, Sanna,” Zakhar retorted.

“Please don’t call me that, Zak,” Ksanya told him tiredly. “It’s too early in the day.”

“It’s the middle of the evening,” Zak disagreed.

“It’s still too early,” Ksanya shook her head. “Now be nice, our guests are notables of the finest water.”

“Oh hardly!” both Oceanvine and Sextant replied in unison.

“You wouldn’t want them to get the right idea about us, now would you?” Ksanya continued as though they hadn’t spoken. Then she paused, looked at the two of them and asked, “Are you two...” she wiggled her fingers in a manner that suggested she was searching for just the right word, “together? You know, dating, engaged or something?”

“Us?” Oceanvine and Sextant both asked. They looked at each other for a split second then Oceanvine

continued a little too hastily, “No! No. We’re just friends. Six is my distant cousin on Silverwind’s side, in fact.”

“Too bad,” Ksanya noted. “You look good together.” Sextant looked mildly uncomfortable at that pronouncement and Oceanvine blushed to the roots of her hair.

“And that, my dear sister,” Zak told her, “is why you usually sit by yourself. I’d have thought by now you’d have learned when to keep your mouth politely shut.”

“It wasn’t a rude question,” Oceanvine sprang to Ksanya’s defense. “And how else is she supposed to know if she doesn’t ask?”

“Besides,” Ksanya retorted, “I’ve never seen any evidence that you know when to shut up either.”

“Yes, well, I’m a guy,” Zakhar replied. “It’s more acceptable for me to be outspoken.”

“Not that outspoken,” Ksanya snapped. “Why are you here tonight, anyway?”

“Oh you had the right of it,” he admitted. “I came to meet our guests, especially Cousin Oceanvine. No offense, old man,” he said in an aside to Sextant.

“None taken,” Sextant nodded. “She’s prettier than I am anyway.”

A strange look crossed Zak’s face as though the thought had never occurred to him. “Ah, yes,” he agreed at last. “And she is kin, after all. You know I’ve considered just barging in at the family manor in Olen but decided they might shoot first and ask questions later.”

“No,” Oceanvine shook her head. “They’d be too stunned at the prospect of a Granomish relative to think of doing anything before you had sufficient time to get out of range.” Zakhar laughed and Oceanvine continued, “I still haven’t told my Dad we have close relatives in the blacksmithing business.”

“Well, these days it’s more a machine shop,” Sextant corrected her. “And you probably ought to tell him sometime. Your Mom and brother took it well enough.”

“Mom and Clemen don’t listen to Grandmother as closely as Dad does,” Oceanvine replied. “They don’t mind having common relatives. Dad would be embarrassed, especially if it became known in Parliament.”

“Ah, so we’re all the black sheep of our families, eh?” Ksanya noted.

“Not Six,” Oceanvine replied. “He’s the beloved of his family.”

“It goes with being the youngest,” Sextant told them, although he knew full well that his family would have been proud of him no matter what he had chosen to do with his life.

“Eh! One in every crowd,” Ksanya laughed lightly.

“Lady Oceanvine?” a herald in a formal tabard bearing the arms of the queen approached the table. He handed her a small packet and added, “With Her Majesty’s complements, my lady.”

“Thank you,” Oceanvine told him and bent her head to study the packet. It was a thick manila envelope

that was sealed with bright red wax into which a signet ring had been pressed. There was a large square-shaped lump inside. Oceanvine noted the arms of the seal were the same as worn by the herald. She turned the envelope over and found it was addressed, “The Lady Oceanvine, Journeywoman mage.”

“Well?” Ksanya asked. “Are you going to open it?”

“Now?” Oceanvine asked.

“Of course now,” Ksanya laughed. “Besides Orya’s watching to see your reaction.”

Oceanvine looked up and saw the queen watching her. She smiled and the queen smiled back. Then Oceanvine picked up her table knife and was about to cut the envelope open when she realized she had another option available. Putting down the knife, she created a visible bright red ward and allowed it to slice the envelope with surgical neatness at the top of the flap. She realized she was being show-offish doing it that way. The ward did not need to be visible; she didn’t even need to use a ward. She could have used telekinesis. She might even have used a very tightly controlled fire spell, although she was not certain she had that sort of control just yet. She was just as likely to flash-burn the envelope and at the very least singe the contents.

Opening the envelope, she tilted it and allowed the contents to slide out and onto her hand. Inside had been a small jewelry box and a linen-paper note envelope. Resisting temptation, Oceanvine opened the envelope first and read the note.

“My lady,” the note began. “I very much enjoyed our tea this afternoon and hope we shall be able to get together for tea often while you are here. Please accept this token of my high regard. I hope you will agree it is a more fitting ornament for you than a hex nut. Yours, Orya.”

“What does it say?” Ksanya asked eagerly.

Oceanvine allowed her to read it, while she opened the little box. Inside was a large pearl. It was bluish white in color and almost perfectly spherical – half an inch in diameter. “It’s gorgeous!” Ksanya breathed.

“Too gorgeous to use as a toy,” Oceanvine smiled. She looked back at the queen and gave her a big smile as a way of saying “Thank you.”

Orya smiled back, but also threw back a gesture Oceanvine took to mean, “So, try it on.”

Without needing to gather her concentration, Oceanvine willed the pearl to rise and begin circling her head about an inch above her eyes. “Marvelous!” Ksanya told her enthusiastically. “Did you really do that with a hex nut? Orya’s right. This is more fitting.” Impulsively she hugged Oceanvine again.

The pearl abruptly left its orbit and started to fall to the table until Sextant “caught” it with his mind and handed it back to Oceanvine. “You haven’t lost concentration like that in nearly a year,” he noted.

“I didn’t think I had this time either,” Oceanvine replied. “It happened the moment Ksanya touched me. Let’s try that again.” This time she merely levitated the pearl to a stationary position, then reached out to touch Ksanya’s arm. As she made contact the pearl dropped to the table once more.

“That’s weird,” Oceanvine commented. “Take my hand, Ksanya.” They held hands and Oceanvine tried to levitate the pearl once more. Nothing happened, so she closed her eyes and forced herself to both

relax and concentrate on the pearl. That was the hardest part of any magic; being able to relax and concentrate on what you needed to do. Mere concentration would not achieve any spell. You also had to be relaxed or the energy would not be able to flow. She used the same self-hypnotic technique her great-grandmother had taught her. The when she was ready she mustered all her concentration and tried to lift the pearl one foot off the table.

Slowly, hesitantly, the pearl rose up, but the moment she opened her eyes and tried to maintain the spell, she lost her magical grip on the spheroid and it plummeted back to the table top.

Letting go of Ksanya's arm, she tried again and this time lifted the pearl without any hesitation. Puzzled by what had just happened, she put the pearl back in orbit around her head and thought about it for the rest of the meal.

Four

"What happened?" Oceanvine asked Candle. After dinner while people were lingering over coffee and dessert or port and cigars depending on their preference, she and Ksanya rushed to talk to the wizard. Sextant had joined Zak and some of the other men for cigars at the far end of the hall, but not before making Oceanvine promise to tell him what she learned.

"It's a very rare condition," Candle replied.

"What is?" both Oceanvine and Ksanya asked.

Candle did not answer them directly. Instead he erected a visible ward and asked Oceanvine, "Walk through it, if you can."

"You haven't taught me that trick, Uncle," Oceanvine told him.

"Not all wards are impenetrable," he reminded her. Oceanvine shrugged and walked straight into the ward and bounced off it. "That one is though," Candle admitted. "Your turn, Ksanya."

"Oh, aren't you sweet, Uncle Candle," Ksanya told him tartly.

"Since when do you call me 'Uncle'?" Candle asked.

"If my great-grandmother was Oceanvine's sister," Ksanya reasoned, "and you were Oceanvine's brother, and if this Oceanvine calls you 'Uncle,' then so should I."

"Don't you think an uncle of yours ought to at least be a Granom?" Candle asked her.

"You're a Granomish Marquess, Uncle," she pointed out, "but I don't see why. Oceanvine and Ksana were sisters and they weren't the same species."

"Okay," Candle surrendered. "I seem to have a large collection of nieces these days. If you want to join the club, I won't stop you."

"Oh goodie!" Ksanya exclaimed, clapping her hands together in imitation of a young girl. "A club! Do we have secret passwords?" she asked Oceanvine.

“We don’t even have a club president,” Oceanvine laughed.

“That’s okay, I’ll nominate you,” Ksanya laughed for a moment then got serious again. “But, Uncle Candle, you still haven’t explained what you meant.”

“You still haven’t tried to walk through that ward,” Candle pointed at the gray sheet of energy that still hung in mid-air.

“You want to humiliate your brand-new baby niece?” Ksanya shot back. “Fine! I’m game.” She walked to the ward and rather than walking through, she tried to push on it. However, when she did, she failed to meet the expected resistance and fell right on through it and on to the floor. “You did that on purpose!” she accused Candle.

“Not really,” Candle told her. “This was just the simplest way I could come up with to determine what was happening. You, child, are a magic-null.”

“What’s that?” Ksanya asked as Oceanvine helped her up from the floor.

“An anti-mage of sorts,” Candle explained. “As I said it’s very rare. Only one in a million people can do it. Of course, they can’t practice magic themselves. Your great-grandfather, Prince Zakhar, was unable to use magic. He always said he wasn’t actually magic-null, just not particularly talented that way, but it is possible that magically-impaired people are actually just magic-nulls for whom the nullification effect does not extend beyond their own bodies.”

“I have to actually be touching Oceanvine to stop her,” Ksanya noted. “Even then she was able to levitate the pearl with difficulty.”

“A lot of difficulty,” Oceanvine remarked. “It took everything I had just to get it to move a bit.”

“You’re an amazingly talented mage,” Candle responded, allowing the ward to disappear. “I doubt most mages could have done anything at all. Take a close look at that ward.”

Oceanvine did. “It’s an alternating current ward,” she reported.

“Right,” Candle nodded. “As you pointed out, I haven’t shown you how to phase through any ward yet, but you wouldn’t have been able to phase through this one in any case. I’ve never seen anyone do it.”

“Until now,” Ksanya noted proudly.

“Not even now,” Candle corrected her. “You didn’t phase through it, you interrupted it. That’s fairly impressive in its own right, but not the same thing. When a mage phases through a ward, he literally lets the energy flow of the ward pass right through him without impeding it in any way. What you did was to negate the ward as far as you were concerned. Phasing through does not affect it and vice versa.”

“But does that mean I’m proof against magic?” Ksanya asked.

“When directly applied to you,” Candle replied. “It’s a good thing for you that our mastery of physical medicine has come so far and that very few doctors use magical healing techniques. In the past the life expectancy of a magic-null was considerably shorter than one who was not magic-null. Ten to twenty years shorter, in fact.

“Also,” he continued, “if I were to use magic to throw a rock at you or drop a wall on you, you’d still get hit. And... let’s see...” He concentrated a moment and Ksanya found herself floating several inches off the floor. “That’s what I thought. I can levitate you if I lift you by your clothing, although it is more difficult than it would be to do if you were not magic-null. I’d say the area of your effect could be as much as a quarter of an inch from your body.”

“That’s not very far,” Ksanya commented. “Can it be extended?”

“Why would you want to?” Oceanvine asked.

“I don’t know,” Ksanya admitted, “but it’s a natural ability. There should be some way to exploit it.”

“Well at least you’re immune from being magically seduced,” Candle observed.

“Magic can do that?” Ksanya asked.

“All too easily. I’ve never heard of a way to train a magic-null,” Candle told them. “I’ve never even met one before. They’re that rare and these days you could go through your entire life without realizing it. Good thing light switches are mechanical, though, even if the power source is magical. I’ve heard of cases in which a magic-null’s effect extended several feet. Of course you do realize that such a person would be unable to drive or possibly even ride in an automobile.”

“There is that,” Ksanya admitted, “but if I could train the ability...”

“I was always told it was not something that could be trained,” Candle told her. “It’s a magical talent of a sort, but you can’t actually use magic. Therefore, it’s beyond control. Still, I’m not sure if anyone has ever seriously tried training a magic-null. Not in the last few centuries, anyway. What’s the point? You could try some of the same meditative techniques a beginning mage uses. It might have an effect, but don’t be too disappointed if it doesn’t. It might even have the opposite effect and retract your ability to nullify magic to within your body.”

“That could be useful too,” Ksanya told him. “At least I wouldn’t stop Cousin Oceanvine’s pearl from spinning around her head and making everyone dizzy!”

“That’s useful?” Candle asked, then replied, “Well polite anyway. Not your usual style, Ksanya.”

“I am always polite!” Ksanya objected.

“Mischievous, then,” Candle suggested.

“Well, there is that,” Ksanya laughed. “Zak is worse though, but for some reason he gets away with it.”

“Earl Zakhar is a man,” Candle pointed out. “It’s unfair but men have more leeway. It doesn’t stop the tabloids from trying to catch him and the other royal cousins when they get in trouble.”

“Don’t I know it!” Ksanya admitted. “Their photographers follow us practically everywhere. That’s why I make everyone so nervous, I think. They think because I cut it up while with family that I might do something similarly odd or amusing in public. I don’t. I may like a bit of attention, who doesn’t? But I am not up for becoming an international scandal. Well, not anymore.” She dropped her accent into a theatrical gutter, imitating a lower class woman as she might be portrayed in the cinema. “I’m a good girl,



I am!” Candle and Oceanvine laughed.

“If you want some training in meditation and self-hypnosis,” Oceanvine offered, “you may join me during my morning exercises.” It was an offer she regretted only a few hours later.

“Knock, knock!” Ksanya announced the next morning.

To Oceanvine’s eyes the sun was not only just rising, but seemed to be having as much trouble getting up as she was. Ksanya was chipper and vivacious, but Oceanvine was sitting up in a chair, trying to sip down her first cup of coffee while the pearl moved lazily around her head. It wasn’t following a very steady orbit and occasionally bumped into her hair or forehead. “Aren’t you even dressed yet, Cousin?” Ksanya asked.

“I was up later than normal last night, Cousin,” Oceanvine replied, forcing herself not to be too curt. “I’m used to getting at least four hours of sleep.”

“Ah! Well, last night was unusual,” Ksanya admitted. “I don’t normally stay up past midnight and I often take a nap in the afternoons.”

“Well, I’m still trying to recharge,” Oceanvine told her, then remembered a technique Candle had taught her on Kern. “Hold on a minim,” she told Ksanya. She stretched out her mind and drew energy from the room into herself. She didn’t need very much, she knew, just a bit to get her past the drowsiness she felt this morning. “That’s better!” she decided, not having to force cheerfulness a minute later. And explained what she had just done.

“Nice trick,” Ksanya admitted.

“I should probably get dressed,” Oceanvine decided. “Then we can start your lessons if you like.”

“Will we be at it long?” Ksanya asked.

“Probably just an hour this morning. I have to join Uncle Candle and Sextant at the breakfast meeting,” Oceanvine replied.

“Oh,” Ksanya nodded. “I was thinking of ringing down to the kitchen to have something sent up, but we can eat after too. That’s good.”

Oceanvine noted that Ksanya was wearing a mid-length woolen skirt and a sweater although it wasn’t particularly cool in the suite, so she picked out a similar skirt, but pulled on an Orentan silk blouse. The Brown Granomish wool looked odd with the bold floral pattern of the blouse, but she decided she liked it, but just in case she grabbed a soft woolen sweater and carried it back out to the sitting room.

“Interesting choice,” Ksanya noted. “We don’t usually wear Orentan patterns after the summer is over.”

“I should change then?” Oceanvine asked.

“No! I like it,” Ksanya told her. “Makes me feel a bit warmer just looking at you. Happier too. Winter is such a dull time and that blouse reminds me of summer. Besides, you’re human. No one will expect you to follow Granomish fashion sense and who knows? Maybe you’ll start a trend all by yourself.”

“That’ll be the day,” Oceanvine laughed. Then applied herself to teaching Ksanya the basic

mind-relaxation techniques she had learned just a few years earlier from her great-grandmother. Once Ksanya was at a point to practice on her own, Oceanvine considered the technique of phasing herself through a ward. Candle had mentioned it a lot and described the process roughly on several occasions over the past year, but had never actually shown her how it was done.

She caught the pearl and put it back into its box. She did not want the additional distraction at this point and then cast a simple curtain ward to study. She could see the energy flow and tried to imagine it flowing through her – tried to imagine actually encouraging the energy to flow through her without effect. Then, when she was ready, she stood up and tried to walk through the ward.

She made it through and nothing happened, then realized she had not thought the matter completely through. “That was silly,” she commented aloud.

“What was?” Ksanya asked, opening her eyes.

“Oh, I just tried to phase through a ward,” Oceanvine told her, “but I didn’t have the ward set to do anything if interrupted. It’s just a small and very low power curtain of energy. I can walk through it as much as I want and at most maybe my hair would try to stand on end after several tries.”

“That would be something to see,” Ksanya laughed. “You have very long hair.”

“Yours is longer,” Oceanvine replied, “but I doubt it would do much more than fluff up a bit with accumulated static electricity. I could just as likely get the same affect by pacing around on this carpet. It wouldn’t look like this,” she added, using telekinesis to cause all the hair on her head to stand straight out in every direction.

Ksanya laughed and clapped. Naturally it was just at that moment that Sextant poked his head in the door. “New hair style?” he asked dryly.

“No,” Oceanvine replied with some embarrassment as she smoothed her hair back into place.

“I just stopped in to let you know the meeting will be about thirty minutes later than planned, so you still have an hour,” Sextant told her. “See you there.” Then he closed the door behind him and his footsteps could be heard retreating down the hall.

“You like him,” Ksanya noted.

“Well, yes,” Oceanvine admitted. “Six is a good friend.”

“That too,” Ksanya agreed. “Does he like you too, and I don’t just mean as a friend.”

“I don’t know,” Oceanvine replied after far too long a pause. “I mean, we’ve spent a lot of time together and occasionally walked and held hands and...” She wondered why she was telling this to Ksanya, whom she liked but had really just met.

“And?” Ksanya prompted.

“And that’s it,” Oceanvine told her. “That seems to be as far as we ever get. But, enough of that for now. You should get back to your exercises.”

Ksanya looked at her in a mischievous sort of way, but replied, “Yes, ma’am,” with a wicked little

chuckle and Oceanvine reapplied herself to the matter of phasing through a ward.

This time she set up a ward that was keyed to cause a light spell to activate when interrupted. Experimentally, Oceanvine stuck her hand through the ward and saw a globe of softly glowing white light form. Then she deactivated the ward and light and cast the spell once more. This time she tried to phase through the ward, allowing the energy to flow through her body uninterrupted.

She got about half way through before she opened her eyes to see the light had still not been activated. The surprise interrupted her concentration and the ward instantly dissipated, leaving the globe of light in its place.

“Almost,” Ksanya noted.

“Aren’t you supposed to be meditating?” Oceanvine asked, although she knew it would take several sessions at least before Ksanya showed any real progress.

“This is more interesting,” Ksanya laughed, but closed her eyes once more.

Oceanvine reset the ward and tried again, this time with her eyes wide open, and made it through without setting off the ward. “I did it!” she announced.

“Do it again!” Ksanya told her. “I missed it.”

Oceanvine tried, but was too excited to repeat the performance. However, she gritted her teeth for a moment, then forced herself to relax. She reset the ward and then finally managed the feat while Ksanya watched. Then she repeatedly walked through the ward. “It gets easier each time,” she explained to Ksanya. “All magic does.”

They practiced a little while longer then parted when it was time for Oceanvine to go to the meeting.

Five

Oceanvine entered the room to find Candle and Sextant speaking to a middle-aged Granom in a typical gray business suit. His hair was mostly the dark brown normal for a Granom with some gray showing at his temples. There were two other Granomen, dressed similarly, although obviously younger. Oceanvine guessed they were in their late twenties, but had difficulty telling them apart. She briefly worried if the anti-Granomish prejudices she had grown up with were asserting themselves until she recalled she did not have any trouble telling different Granomen apart the night before or on the Isle of Fire.

“Ah! Here they are now,” Candle announced at the two journeymen entered the room. He handled the introductions, “Vine, Six, this is Sir Geran Margolov, Head of the RBI, his agent Mister Vasso Benerolev and the head of the RBI’s Forensic Lab, Doctor Mauren Haston. Gentlemen, my journeymen, the Lady Oceanvine and Sir Sextant. That leaves just the representatives of the Space Administration who, if my ears are not failing me, may be walking this way now.”

They could hear the footsteps of several people approaching and a moment later Ksanya opened the door, turned back toward someone behind her and reported, “Here they are gentlemen. Please come on in. Uncle, I am pleased to present Sir Markow Barntov and Doctor Jerom Pennson of the Royal Granom Space Agency.” Oceanvine noted that Ksanya had changed into an Orentan blouse during her absence.

Candle checked his notes and determined that Sir Markow actually headed the Agency and that Pennson was the chief scientist in charge of the Gran 4 mission. "Welcome, gentlemen, I understand breakfast will be served very shortly, but I suppose we should get started. Uh... Ksanya?" he asked, noticing the countess had helped herself to a seat beside Oceanvine. "Have you suddenly joined either the RBI or the Space Agency?"

"Neither, Uncle," she replied cheerfully. "I'm part of your team."

"You are?"

Ksanya looked around the room pointedly. "Do you have someone else to take notes present?"

"If you join this team, Ksanya," Candle warned her, "you're in for the duration. This is a very serious undertaking, not some game to keep you amused. Do you understand that?"

"I have many diversions to keep me amused, Uncle," she replied calmly. "It's about time I actually did something with my life, don't you think?"

"There are many things you can do," Candle shot back.

"But I'm the wrong gender to do most of them," Ksanya returned fire. "I didn't think you would have the same problems the rest of my family has that way."

"I don't," Candle admitted. "Gentlemen, it appears we have a recording secretary at the very least. Any objections?"

"Welcome to the team, my lady," Sir Garen told her. "There are female agents in the RBI. Not many, I'll admit, but those we do have serve with distinction."

"And we have women on the mission staff at HonneaSpaceCenter," Pennson added.

"You see?" Ksanya told Candle. "It's just my family who objects."

"Your family rules this kingdom," Candle pointed out, "Very well, let's start with... oh now what? Oh, our breakfast." The door had opened again and several servants wheeled breakfast into the room. Candle noticed they set an extra setting at the end of the table and just as they were leaving King Ksaveras entered the room.

"No, please remain seated," he told them hurriedly and sat down at the remaining place. "I just thought I would join you whenever I could. Hope you don't mind. Ksanya? What are you doing here?"

"I have taken the liberty of hiring your cousin's services as a team associate," Candle told him smoothly. "You don't mind, do you?"

"I don't," Ksaveras shook his head. "Are you going to learn magic next, Ksanya?"

"It appears my talents run counter to that option," she laughed, "but I am pretty good at organization and I'd like to think I'm literate enough to take notes."

Candle sprinkled some pepper on his eggs and began the actual business of the meeting. "Okay. I know

what anyone with television access knows about Gran 4. What don't I know? Sir Markow? Doctor Pennson?"

Sir Markow nodded to Pennson who began, "You heard about the various delays before we launched, didn't you?"

"Due to a combination of technical problems and inclement weather or so I heard," Candle replied.

"Actually none of them were weather related," Pennson admitted. "We told that to the Press because we just didn't want to publicly admit that we didn't know what some of the problems were. We kept getting mysterious shut-downs of key components or, in some cases, our trouble indicators lit up, but when we went to investigate the indicated problem did not exist."

"That sounds like a problem with the telemetry system," Sextant noted.

"Well, yes, but if we reset the ground-based system everything read normal once again," Pennson told him.

"You can't just assume everything's okay and reset the controls once the mission is on," Sextant pointed out.

"It seemed safe enough since the craft's systems read correctly," Pennson told him. "It was just a problem with the systems in mission control."

"I still wouldn't have authorized a launch in that condition," Sextant told him.

"Do you have any idea how complex the telemetry systems are?" Pennson challenged him.

"I have a sneaky suspicion and cause to make an educated guess," Sextant replied. "I know how complex the system is in the Emmine program and I have friends who work as magic technicians in that program. They couldn't tell me everything, but we covered the basics in school. I understand your system depends less on tech magic linkages than the Emmine program does so everything is modularized. It sounded like a better way to build to me, but evidently you get gremlins either way."

"Gremlins may be the right word for it," Pennson agreed.

"We eventually decided to launch before the window closed," Sir Markow continued the story, "and for the first few days of the mission we had no problems, not even the odd ghost issues we had been dealing with before the launch."

"So nothing went wrong until the explosion in space?" Candle asked.

"How did you know it was an explosion?" Pennson asked.

"The craft shook just as the telemetry lights went crazy on board," Candle replied. "Then the craft lost almost all its fuel. I figure something exploded and cracked the fuel tank. Darned lucky the whole thing didn't turn into a ball of fire."

"The hydrazine tank cracked and leaked, but not the nitrogen tetroxide," Pennson told him. "With no oxydizer the hydrazine couldn't burn. Not in space anyway."

“Even luckier then,” Candle opined.

“What’s hydrazine?” Oceanvine asked.

“A compound of nitrogen and hydrogen,” Pennson replied.

“I thought you used liquid hydrogen and oxygen,” Oceanvine remarked.

“Only on launch,” Pennson explained. “They would be too dangerous to carry on board the spacecraft, so instead we burn the hydrazine with nitrogen tetroxide which is the oxidizer. We’re still essentially burning hydrogen with oxygen, but compounding them with nitrogen makes them safer to carry.”

“Why not use them for the launch as well?” Ksanya asked.

“Hydrazine is a high-energy propellant,” Pennson told her, “but it still is not as powerful as liquid hydrogen. We would never reach orbit with hydrazine and burning straight hydrogen is cleaner for the environment too.”

“Any idea what exploded and why?” Candle asked when Pennson had finished explaining.

“Not really,” Pennson admitted. “We have calculated where the center of the explosion must have been and how powerful it was, but we have been unable to determine an exact cause.”

“Has the RBI managed to learn anything yet?” Candle asked.

“We were instructed to wait until you arrived,” Sir Garan informed him.

“Too bad,” Candle sighed. “Well, I’m here now. Where is the Gran 4 command module now? In Honnea?”

“It’s en route to Querna,” Pennson told him.

“For my convenience?” Candle asked.

“Yes,” Pennson replied.

“Well, I suppose it will still be here when I return,” Candle replied.

“Why? Where are we going?” Oceanvine asked.

“To Honnea Space Center,” Candle replied. “I want to take a look at the ground-based telemetry systems that produced so many problems at the beginning of the mission.”

“They were not all telemetry problems,” Pennson replied.

“We’ll look into the other issues as well,” Candle assured him, “but I need to be certain there’s no connection between the pre-launch problems and the near disaster. I’ll also want to speak with the ethernauts. Their personal accounts may be crucial. How soon can we leave?”

“The airport is still closed, but should be open later today,” Ksaveras replied, “and I’ll loan you the royal jet so you won’t have to wait for a flight going your way.”

HonneaSpaceCenter was a large installation on the southeastern shore of Quirmlia, the main island of the Granom Archipelago. Quirmlia was large enough that it stretched from the tropics to deep within the northern temperate zone of Maiyim and while Honnea was almost exactly on the northern tropic line a cold current moderated what might have been a hot climate to a merely warm one. However, after the cold and snow of Querna, Candle and his party found Honnea pleasantly warm and Oceanvine had switched back to her one set of summer clothing or as she jokingly called it, "the school uniform."

"Your great-grandmother ran into trouble wearing clothes like that the first time she came to Granom," Candle told her as they walked toward the launch pad from which Gran 4 had lifted.

"Why?" Ksanya asked before Oceanvine could. Just as she had at the meeting, Ksanya had made herself a part of the party. She was not just a tagalong, however, although Candle had privately worried that she might be. Instead she had instantly become the perfect assistant to each of the mages and filled many of the same functions that Maia did back in Randona.

"Granomen and Orenta were not on the friendly terms they are these days, so the only women in the kingdom who wore Orentan fashions were whores," Candle replied.

"So both our great-grandmothers wore clothing like this?" Ksanya asked interestedly.

"Oceanvine did," Candle replied. "I don't recall Ksana ever wearing anything like that before she and Zak went to Merinne. She was dressed in standard Granomish fashion when Oceanvine found her. Her clothing was cheap and poorly made, but not a foreign style. Once she was on the road to recovery, Prince Zakhar made sure she had better clothing, of course."

"Why?" Ksanya asked. "I mean what was she to my great-grandfather that he took such an interest in her?"

"Two reasons come to mind," Candle told her. "First of all, Zak was there when Oceanvine found her and second of all Zak had a big crush on Oceanvine."

"You're kidding," the younger Oceanvine accused him.

"No, it's true and it was rather obvious to everyone but Vine herself. She was too deeply in love with Silverwind to notice, of course," Candle shrugged.

"He could never have married her," Ksanya commented. "The death penalty is still on the books for anyone who is twentieth in line for the crown or less if they should marry outside their species. The same applies to women whose children would qualify. Has that ever happened?"

"Not that I'm aware of," Candle told her, "but there was a near miss not too long after Humans, Granomen and Orenta started mixing socially. I always wondered why no one thought to write a play about it. It was one of those tragic romances that playwrights seem to love. Maybe if the young lovers had killed themselves or they really were lovers. However, the real reason there are very few interspecies marriages is that physical attraction in such cases is almost impossible."

“But if there was no physical attraction, how did Prince Zakhar fall in love with the first Oceanvine?” Ksanya asked.

“Her mind, lass,” Candle explained. “He was attracted to her mind. The few interspecies romances that do exist are based solely on intellectual attraction, in spite of what some cynics might say about that being impossible.”

“You were in an interspecies romance, weren’t you?” Oceanvine guessed.

“Briefly,” Candle admitted. “There was a Granomish girl whose name was Korrina. She and I and a few others were captured by slavers on my first visit to Querna.”

“Slavers?” Ksanya asked skeptically.

“They were planning to sell us to a workhouse,” Candle replied. “The selling of any sapient being is a form of slavery. They were slavers. Anyway, even as a kid I was pretty good at picking locks and even better when I learned to use telekinesis, so we didn’t stay captured for very long. Our best chance at staying free was to split up, but Korrina stuck around to kiss me before disappearing into the night. That was my first kiss, by the way.” Both Oceanvine and Ksanya smiled at him.

“I didn’t see her again until nine years or so later. I guess my little magical demonstration made an impression, because she managed to work hard and get a scholarship to University and started studying magic. We both had some golden memories of that one winter night in Querna, but try as we might, there was no way to kindle anything but a warm friendship between us.”

“Did you ever see her again?” Ksanya asked.

“Oh yes. She was a regular on the faculty at the Renton School, same as me, and I still hear from her every now and then. She still lives in Querna, in fact, so when I get the chance, I plan to look her up,” Candle told her.

“Why are we starting with the launch pad, sir?” Sextant asked.

“Just a whim,” Candle admitted. “We’ll be spending most of our time here in Mission Control, the computer center and in interviews with various scientists and ethernauts and I imagine we’ll be taking second and third looks at a lot of stuff, but the launch pad is a remote site and if we don’t have to walk all the way out here more than once, that will be all for the best.

“As for why we’re here at all,” Candle continued, “it occurs to me that if the on-board indicators differed with those in Mission Control before the launch, then maybe the fault was here at the launch pad. The telemetry indicators work by direct connection before the launch and only switch to radio links after the ship actually leaves the pad.

“The tech-magic scientists already investigated out here and found nothing out of the ordinary,” Candle admitted, “but we need to have a look for ourselves anyway, so why not get it out of the way from the start?”

“But why did we walk?” Oceanvine asked. “We’re not going to be able to inspect the launch tower until someone comes to let us into the elevator.”

“I didn’t feel like waiting,” Candle replied. “You heard Sir Markow. It will take an hour or so to find



someone to let us in.”

“I noticed Sir Garan’s man, Vasso, chose to wait,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“He is not equipped to look for what we’re here to look for,” Candle told her.

“What are we looking for?” Ksanya asked.

“You?” Candle countered. “I think we’ve pretty much proven you won’t be able to see auras or perform any other act of magic, but you can look for anything you think might be out of the ordinary. Six, Vine, check the aural evidence.”

“Oceanvine,” Oceanvine corrected him automatically.

“Yeah,” he shot back. “You too. Uh, Ksanya, could you keep from standing between us and whatever we’re looking at. I think your practices with Vine are improving your ability as a magic-null. Unfortunately, while that could eventually turn out to be an asset, at the moment it’s just getting in the way.”

“Sorry, Uncle,” Ksanya replied. “I’m not trying to block your view.”

“I know,” Candle nodded, “but your nullification aura appears to have grown a bit anyway.”

“Oh that’s weird,” Oceanvine noted with her eyes closed but facing Ksanya. “It’s like looking at absolute nothingness. You look like a hole in the landscape, sort of, but the area around you keeps trying to fill in the hole you represent so everything is all distorted in your direction. But, Uncle Candle, all I’ve done with Ksanya so far is try to teach her how to meditate.”

“All magic is a matter of mental discipline,” Candle replied. “Evidently that applies to null magic as well. Let’s keep looking, shall we?”

They spent the next two hours inspecting every part of the launch pad area and while they found the vast and complex array of auras that was to be expected in such an advanced tech-magic installation, they found no sign of anything being out of place.

At least we get to ride back to Mission Control,” Sextant observed and they piled into the small bus the RBI man had arrived in with several SpaceCenter technicians.

“You’re spoiled,” Candle told him. “When I was your age only the very rich had automobiles. The rest of us generally walked everywhere.”

“Up hill and hip-deep through the snow both ways, I’ll bet, Uncle,” Oceanvine retorted.

“And this was before the first horse was domesticated, was it?” Ksanya asked archly.

“All right, you’ve made your points,” Candle admitted. “Keep this up and I’ll have to separate you two. You’re obviously bad influences on each other.” Both Oceanvine and Ksanya laughed mercilessly.

All told, they spent a week at HonneaCenter, interviewing ethernauts and scientists, inspecting the various working stations in Mission Control and even enduring a one-day simulated mission in the trainer in an attempt to figure out what might have gone wrong. By the time it was over they all had a clearer

understanding of the spacecraft and how it worked. They even had a clear telemetric record of everything that happened throughout the entire mission. They still did not know why, however.

On their last day at Honnea, they examined photographs the ethernauts had taken of the Gran 4's engine module just after separation as they prepared to re-enter Maiyim's atmosphere. The pictures added a new level of understanding of the explosion in space and its consequences, but as to how it happened, they were still left in the dark.

"It's too bad photography does not capture aural evidence we can use," Candle remarked to everyone who had been involved with the investigation at Honnea Center. Not only were Ksanya and the journeymen present, but so too were Pennson, Agent Vasso Benerolev and a handful of Space Agency officials. "The engine module burned on re-entry I presume?"

"Correct," Pennson confirmed.

"Then the key evidence may well be lost forever," Candle sighed.

"We have not yet seen the thaumagraphs," Pennson pointed out.

"You still use thaumagraphy?" Sextant asked. "Are the ethernauts trained in the technique?"

"Our thaumagraphs are taken by machine," Pennson explained.

"How does that work?" Sextant asked.

"We use a camera very similar to a photography camera. It uses a lens and a light-sensitive medium, but instead of film it is a ribbon of steel charged with a special light-sensitive ward that when activated simulates the act of developing thaumagraphic paper. It does this without conscious thought, but it causes the thaumagraphic paper to react as if it does."

"This is the first I've heard of such a technique," Candle told him. "Is this the same thaumagraphic paper that was once used as a party game?"

"I'm not certain," Pennson admitted. "It could be different. There are probably any number of ways to make a paper coating that can be modified by magic."

"There probably are at that," Candle agreed. "Who manufactures this paper?"

"I can find out," Pennson assured him.

"Please do," Candle requested.

"Is it essential to the investigation?" Pennson asked.

"Probably not," Candle replied, "but we don't know that for certain, so for the time being I think I should look into it. Also it will be interesting to see if the technique picks up spell traces and other forms of aural evidence."

"That can be done, then?" Sextant asked.

"Oh yes, definitely," Candle nodded, "but I don't know if it was done. Thaumagraphs record what you

tell them to record. Depending on the parameters of the spell used in this case there may be aural evidence on the thaumographs.

“Well, I think we’ve learned all we can from here,” Candle decided. “There were three workstations at which we found minor faults, but while they might have been the cause of telemetry differences on the ground and on the ship, they don’t explain the various equipment failures before the launch. Neither do they explain the cause of the debilitating explosion. I do have some preliminary conclusions, but they are preliminary only and I am not at all certain.

“First of all, you found half of a fly in a fuel filter while filling the tanks for the first time about a month and a half before the actual launch,” Candle continued. “I doubt that was sabotage. Anyone wanting to destroy the craft wouldn’t have risked his plot to the vagaries of a fuel filter. Also you never found any trace of the rest of the insect, indicating to me that it probably never made it into the fuel supply. It probably either got sucked up by the engines condensing the liquid hydrogen, someone just got sloppy in cleaning the fuel lines, or, and I think this is more likely, the fly was a particularly unlucky insect and just happened to be flying between the fuel line and the filter while they were being attached and nobody noticed. I doubt I would have. In any case the only harm done was that it delayed the launch until the next window.

“Telemetry,” Candle went on. “Gentlemen, I am truly impressed. I have seen some of the systems used in Emmine and Six here has seen even more. They don’t hold a candle to what you have developed here. I particularly like the double redundancy of the system. And aside from the faulty workstations it works together in a reliable and efficient manner. It’s a shame I cannot ethically pass on what I’ve seen to Emmine magic techs, because I would surely like to praise your designers to the sky. However I understand that I have seen state secrets and as a noble of Granom I would never betray the trust His Majesty has placed in me.

“It may be the extra redundancy that’s giving you the conflicting data. You have two completely discrete systems each of which is backed up by systems that mirror and diagnose their condition by identical systems of spell modules. It’s complex, but how reliable is it? Obviously you’re satisfied and to tell the truth that’s good enough for me, but I do suspect that some of the problems were due to conflicting data between the two spell systems. The problem here is that the two systems don’t know what to do when they conflict other than start flashing various lights at you.”

“It’s a limitation of the technology, Wizard,” Pennson explained. “We still have to rely on people to interpret the actual data, but that’s why we eventually launched anyway. One system said yes, the other said no. We considered what we knew and went with the system that told us to launch.”

“Well, I don’t think we’re going to learn that had anything to do with what happened while en route to Midbar,” Candle shrugged. “I think your gremlins before the launch may well have just been the usual sort of minor systems failures that have a tendency to crop up every now and then. Obviously you need to work on those to make your spacecraft even safer, but I don’t have any concrete suggestions about that. Doctor Pennson, are you returning to Querna with us?”

“I’ll be back in a few days,” Pennson replied. “I have some work to handle here, if that’s all right.”

“Fine by me,” Candle nodded. “We’ll see you on your return.” He stood up, let the golden pen expand once more into a staff and led the way out of the mission room. Sextant was privately sorry he and Oceanvine had been forced to leave their staves on the Isle of Fire, but Candle had convinced them that the airline would have had trouble with them and that there was nothing special about those two wooden poles other than the energy they had charged them with. “You can buy new ones in Querna,” he had told

them.

“You’ve been amazingly quiet this week, Agent Benerolev,” Candle observed as they rode out to the Center’s airstrip where the royal jet had been parked.

“You have been asking all the questions I had, sir,” the RBI man replied a bit stiffly. “And we don’t really know enough to come to solid conclusions as you said.”

“Well, we’re really just getting started,” Candle assured him. “We haven’t even inspected the command module yet.”

Seven

“I don’t like him,” Ksanya grumbled that night at the low table. There were fewer nobles in court because Parliament was not in session for the next three weeks, so Ksanya, Oceanvine and Sextant had the entire table to themselves and they were able to discuss anything without worrying about privacy.

“Agent Benerolev?” Oceanvine asked. “Why not?” She had taken to “wearing” the pearl Orya gave her at dinner as well as during her morning exercises, so the pearl was currently circling her head.

“He’s too stiff and formal,” Ksanya explained. “He’s too reserved. Oh, I know, most Granomen are stiff and reserved compared to humans, but...”

“Not that I’ve noticed,” Oceanvine told her. “My immediate family, except maybe for Mom, is much more emotionally reserved than most Granomen I’ve met.”

“You seem fairly open to me,” Ksanya opined.

“Oh, I keep a lot to myself, but I’ve learned in the last year or so to let a bit of my inner self show through,” Oceanvine admitted. “Certainly helps to make friends that way. I’ve made more friends in the last year than I managed to make in the previous part of my life.”

“I’m glad I met you now then,” Ksanya told her. “Anyway, no matter how you see us, Benerolev doesn’t let anything out. He’s a completely closed book. I don’t trust people like that.”

“It’s part of his job, I think,” Sextant told her. “He’s constantly dealing with national security and state secrets. It’s only natural he should know how to keep his mouth shut.”

“Maybe,” Ksanya admitted, “but I still don’t trust him. It was nice to get out of the palace for a week though.”

“Don’t you ever get away?” Oceanvine asked.

“Only when I was in school,” Ksanya admitted. “The royal family keeps all the heirs on a tight leash. I was surprised Veras was so willing to let me work with you.”

“Maybe it’s because he understands you better than you think,” Oceanvine told her. “He’d have been happy if he could have just been one of the ethernauts. That may be why he’s willing to let you work on this investigation. He loves the space program. He understands familial obligations too, though, but I think

you'll find that as long as you don't try to duck out of those, he'll give you as much slack as you need."

"Well, I got tired of being the wild child of the family ages ago," Ksanya admitted, "but sometimes I get the feeling they're just waiting for my next scandal. That's part of why I still seem so flighty. It's some perverse desire to keep them on their toes without actually stepping over the line."

"You did not seem at all flighty at Honnea Center," Oceanvine pointed out.

"I didn't, did I?" Ksanya recalled. "Maybe it's just the notion of being sequestered in the palace."

"So maybe this is your chance to prove you can behave yourself in public," Sextant told her. "I know His Majesty asked Wizard Candle about your performance at Honnea."

"Oh?" Ksanya asked nervously. "What did Uncle Candle say?"

"Hmm, you've adapted to calling him that pretty quickly," Sextant noted. "Well, don't worry. The wizard is very impressed so far and he isn't impressed easily. You're not a professional stenographer, but on most other counts you might give Maia a run for her money."

"Thank you," Ksanya told him. "Hope I can keep it up. So what do we plan for tomorrow?"

"You should know as well as we do," Oceanvine told her. "We need to stop in at the RBI offices and talk to Sir Garan and see about having a forensic magic lab set up, then we go to inspect the Gran 4 command module."

Oceanvine woke up the next morning to find Ksanya already doing her meditation exercises in the sitting room. Slipping quietly back into her bedroom, Oceanvine quickly changed out of her bed clothes, set the pearl in motion and stepped out to join Ksanya. There was already a tray of coffee and biscuits on the small table so Oceanvine stretched her mind outward to use telekinesis to pour herself a cup and then float it and a biscuit to where she was sitting. The objects faltered a bit on their flight as they came within two feet of Ksanya and Oceanvine noted she was working harder than normal to keep them from falling to the floor, so she caused them to detour around Ksanya's aura. Then she took a sip of coffee and considered what to do first.

The cup klinked as she set it back down and Ksanya opened her eyes. "Oh, you're awake early this morning!"

"So are you," Oceanvine observed, taking a bite of the biscuit. "Good thing you brought the coffee. This is a bit dry."

"You're supposed to eat it with the butter or marmalade," Ksanya told her.

"I'm trying to watch my weight," Oceanvine explained.

"Watch it do what?" Ksanya countered, "I doubt you could be slimmer without suffering from malnutrition."

"Yes, I can," Oceanvine replied. "I think the waistband of my skirt's been getting a bit tighter."

"You've been wearing woolen skirts," Ksanya told her. "They might have shrunk in the wash."

"I'm normally more active in the summer than I have been this year," Oceanvine told her. "Last year we sailed around Emmine on the *Maiyim Bourne*. I got plenty of exercise whenever I was awake. This year, I'm riding almost everywhere so either I need to walk more or eat less."

"Or you could spend some time each morning in the gymnasium," Ksanya suggested.

"Where?"

"The gym," Ksanya told her. "It's a room set aside for exercise."

"I know what a gym is," Oceanvine retorted acidly. "I didn't know the palace had one."

"Oh yes," Ksanya told her. "It's in the far wing beyond the kitchen so you wouldn't have run into it unless you had taken to wandering the halls, which I've noticed you haven't. What's the matter? No curiosity?"

"It didn't seem polite to pry," Oceanvine replied.

"It's a matter of public record," Ksanya explained. "You can buy any of a dozen books that give you a room-by-room tour of the place."

"Well, I can try to do some sit-ups or something while doing my other morning exercises," Oceanvine considered.

"Sure and after that we can get a real breakfast," Ksanya told her as she started to lead the way.

"You're still trying to fatten me up," Oceanvine accused. "Do keep in mind I'm human. We probably all look skinny to you."

"Most of you," Ksanya admitted with a chuckle. "Not your ambassador, though. He's almost twice my weight."

"You're thinner than the average Granom, I've noticed," Oceanvine observed.

"A light bone structure runs in my side of the family," Ksanya explained. "I just look thinner is all."

"Oh, wait a moment," Oceanvine stopped her, "I'm not dressed for a workout."

"Not a problem," Ksanya told her, tugging on her arm. Oceanvine's pearl faltered in its orbit and she had to catch it. "There are changing rooms with fresh sweat suits available at all times. Sorry about that."

"It's okay," Oceanvine sighed, resetting the pearl in its orbit. "In my size?"

"They're sweat suits," Ksanya pointed out. "The waists are elastic. You'll be able to wear something I could have when I was twelve or so."

"It's a bit short on me," Oceanvine observed a few minutes later once she had pulled on one of the red and yellow suits.

"So it is," Ksanya considered. "So your ankles are showing and you have a bare midriff. On you it looks Orentan and that's sort of in at the moment."

“I like the blouses and skirts,” Oceanvine admitted, “but I have trouble wearing one of their bathing suits in public.”

“The topless ones?” Ksanya asked, intrigued.

“Oh, Gods! No,” Oceanvine blushed. “Just the two piece ones. I wore some while on the *Maiyim Bourne* and I thought I was getting used to the way it felt, but every time we got close to another boat, I would blush all over.”

“Some guys think that’s cute,” Ksanya countered.

“I don’t,” Oceanvine parried.

“You’re a prude, cousin,” Ksanya laughed. “Somehow you were brought up in the manner every noble wants their children brought up, but most of us rebel in our late teens and twenties. I know I did. Though I cannot wear a topless suit comfortably either.”

“And you’ve already tired of rebellion,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“Would you believe I’m really a shy person deep down,” Ksanya asked. The way she said it revealed to Oceanvine that her Granomish cousin was telling the truth. Her extroversion was just a disguise to hide behind.

“I do, actually,” Oceanvine nodded. “But we’ll need an archaeologist to excavate before we find that shy person.”

“More likely a backhoe,” Ksanya laughed, in her normal manner. “Let’s exercise. What sort do you like?”

“What have you got?”

“The usual,” Ksanya told her. “Mats, weights, treadmills, wheelless bicycles. Hey, I know! Do you play handball?”

“Never have,” Oceanvine admitted.

“How about lawn tennis?” Ksanya asked.

“You have an indoor tennis court?” Oceanvine wondered.

“No,” Ksanya shook her head. “It’s not too popular here, but handball is sort of like tennis, but in a small room, no racquets and you’re allowed to bounce the ball off any of the walls.”

“Sounds exciting,” Oceanvine opined dryly. “I’ll have trouble doing much magic that way. Then again that’s probably good practice.”

The Gymnasium was actually a small complex of rooms, with a large general purpose room in the center and a host of specialized ones, such as the two handball courts, attached through various doorways. They entered the main gymnasium room to discover Zak and Sextant working out on the exercise bikes.

“Morning, boys!” Ksanya called out as they walked through.

A glint of metal caught Oceanvine’s eye and she noted that Sextant had a hex nut orbiting his head in the same way she was using the pearl. “Copycat,” she laughed, pointing at the nut.

Sextant flushed, but retorted, “We can’t all use pearls, Vine.” Oceanvine felt the urge to correct him automatically, but held back, feeling it was only fair since she started it. “And it seems to work for you. A guy’s got to keep up, you know.”

“Sure,” Zak agreed. “Otherwise she might get away.”

Oceanvine felt herself starting to blush, but Ksanya put an end to that by grabbing her hand. Once again the pearl fell from its orbit. “Oops,” Ksanya muttered, catching the sphere in her hand. “Sorry, Cousin.” She handed the pearl back, then led the way to the handball court.

“That’s a good idea,” they heard Zak say behind them. “Hey, Six! Do you fence, old man?”

“Never tried,” Sextant admitted.

“I’ll teach you,” Zak offered. “It’ll be a lot more fun than riding to nowhere.”

Oceanvine was surprised to find that one of the side walls was made of thick glass, with room behind it for spectators to watch from. Ksanya gave Oceanvine a quick rundown on how the game was played. Oceanvine got the impression that Ksanya was going easy on her and appreciated it since they were playing for the exercise only. However, after the third time they bumped into each other and Oceanvine had to recover the pearl, she decided to put it away until they were done playing. “I’m afraid something might happen to it otherwise.”

“Well, you can try using magic to help you play,” Ksanya suggested.

“Isn’t that cheating?” Oceanvine asked.

“Not if I allow it,” Ksanya told her. “Besides, I’m a magic-null, remember? I’ll be trying to keep you from using magic, won’t I?”

“Not intentionally,” Oceanvine countered.

“Oh won’t I, dear Cousin?” Ksanya draped her arm over Oceanvine’s shoulder. “Try levitating that ball now,” she challenged. Oceanvine concentrated and the ball hesitantly rose up two feet. “Now, I’m impressed,” Ksanya admitted stepping back into a ready position. “Okay, here’s the proviso; you may make the ball come to you, but no fair making it zigzag away from me when it’s my turn.”

“You’re on.”

They played for an hour before noticing Zak and Sextant watching them from beyond the glass wall. “Looks like fun!” Sextant called. “How about an all telekinesis game?”

“Tomorrow maybe,” Oceanvine replied. Right now we need to get showered and changed if we want breakfast before Uncle Candle decides to drag us out into the cold world.”

“It snowed again last night,” Zak added helpfully.



“Oh yeah, thanks,” Oceanvine shook her head. Turning to Ksanya she asked, “Maybe we should hop the next jet to Merinne and check out some of those bathing suits.”

Ksanya looked at her for a moment trying to figure if she was serious or not, then decided it was a joke and replied, “I’m game.”

Eight

“You three ate a lot this morning,” Candle observed as they rode to RBI headquarters.

“Playing handball works up an appetite, Uncle,” Ksanya explained.

“You were playing handball?” Candle asked.

“I was,” Ksanya told him, “Oceanvine wasn’t actually using her hands, so I’m not sure that counts.”

“What are you complaining about?” Oceanvine challenged her. “You still won. Five straight games Six didn’t play, though. He was being the most feared swordsman in all Granom.”

“Uh?” Candle grunted an inquiry.

“Zak gave me a fencing lesson,” Sextant explained. “It was more fun than riding a bike or pressing weights. It occurs to me I don’t get enough exercise, although the hands-free ball game looked like fun. Sound body, sound mind and all that. You owe me a game tomorrow,” he told Oceanvine.

“Right now we have a different sort of game ahead,” Candle told them as they arrived at the RBI offices. He paid for the ride and they went on inside.

Sir Garan was running late that morning, but his secretary referred them to Mauren Haston’s laboratory. The lab filled the entirety of the building complex’s second floor and have been divided into dozens of rooms of varying sizes. They found the Chief of the RBI’s Forensic lab hunched over a microscope in a medium room two doors down from his official office.

“My apologies, Doctor Haston,” Candle told him as they entered the room. “Somehow I got the impression the RBI’s chief scientist would not have the time to do actual lab work.”

Haston looked up from the scope and replied, “Not as much as I would like, but every so often I’m called on to verify someone’s work.”

“What are you looking at there?” Sextant asked curiously.

“I’m comparing hair samples. The local police department in Barmeport have a murder mystery on their hands. They asked us to identify the sample on this slide.” He indicated one of several prepared slips of glass with hair samples. “It seems that a local business man and his daughter have gone missing, but a visitor from Orona was found dead in their office after a fire that occurred on the night they disappeared or as near as they can figure.”

“Doesn’t sound like much of a mystery,” Candle opined.

“Probably not,” Haston admitted. “They’re rarely as complex as the novelists would make them. Sometimes, they’re even more convoluted than any good storyteller would dare, but usually the problem is just finding enough evidence to convict with. In this case they also found those hair samples, somewhat charred, on the Orent’s suit and they want to compare them with some collected in the father and daughter’s home, trying to prove a connection.”

“It won’t help a lot if they don’t find their suspects,” Candle pointed out.

“A lot of murder investigations never come to trial,” Haston shrugged, “although it’s likely those two will turn up again. It will probably take about ten years, but they’ll turn up somewhere. They usually do when we know exactly who they are and what they look like.”

“Sounds like a job for forensic magic,” Candle told him. “A good forensic mage might be able to track the owner of the hair sample, if it’s fresh enough. Of course it ought to be less than a week old.”

“It was months before the Barmeport Police decided to ask for assistance,” Haston admitted.

“Well, I wouldn’t have expected them to even think of a forensic mage these days,” Candle replied. “There aren’t any left.”

“There are a few,” Haston disagreed. “We use them when they are available. There’s one due here any moment if fact, although we had to drag her in out of semi-retirement.”

“Really? Who?” Candle asked, but Haston did not have time to reply.

“Candle?” an elderly female Granom asked from the doorway. “I didn’t know you were in town. Why didn’t you call?”

“I haven’t been in town long enough to know when I could get together with you, Korinna,” Candle replied.

Oceanvine’s and Ksanya’s eyes lit up at the name and they both turned to study the woman. Her hair was light gray and she was of average height for a Granom of her age, standing only five feet tall. Younger generations of Granomen averaged four inches taller due to an improved understanding of nutrition, but she held herself proudly as though she were taller than anyone. This was the young girl whose life Candle had once saved and who subsequently became a mage in her own right.

“No one but you has called me Korinna in decades, Candle,” she replied, smiling fondly at him.

“WizardSouthgate then,” Candle corrected himself.

“Doctor Southgate, dear,” she replied. “I never had the opportunity to go to the Five Demons. You were the last ever offered that particular final exam.”

“Nothing to it,” Candle laughed. “You wouldn’t have had any problem with it. Of course once you knew which island you were on you would have known the answer even without the spell.”

“That’s part of why the exam was discontinued,” Southgate told him, “and you could have passed even before you were a master.”

"I can't deny it since I actually used the spell on Island Arithan," Candle replied, "but you've heard that story before."

"Many times," Southgate laughed.

"Well, here's something you haven't heard then," Candle told her. "May I introduce Journeyman Sextant, Journeywoman Oceanvine and Countess Ksanya."

"Really?" Southgate's eyes began to sparkle as merrily as Oceanvine's and Ksanya's had moments earlier. "Very pleased to meet you Sextant. Candle has written me about you. Oceanvine, I have a lot of questions for you. It will take weeks, I'm sure. Somehow I always have questions for women named Oceanvine." She turned toward Ksanya with an appraising look. "My lady," she finally said to the countess.

"My lady," Ksanya replied, matching Southgate perfectly.

"Watch out for that one," Candle told Southgate. "She's not quite as much of a troublemaker as I am, but she comes close."

"So I've heard," Southgate chuckled. "Did you really flash the Earl of Kenda while on vacation in Avetone last summer?"

"I wasn't even in Avetone last summer," Ksanya replied, shaking her head. "I haven't the foggiest who the woman in that picture was. It may have looked like my face but it certainly wasn't my body. I should know. I'm not that broad and I've never had an appendectomy. I could prove it, but I'd have to flash you and it's just not that warm in here."

"I'll take your word for it, dear," Southgate assured her. "Still, you have to admit your reputation precedes you."

"I'll tell you the only true stories you may have heard about me," Ksanya replied. "I got drunk a couple times in college and got caught on camera. Not even something particularly unusual. Almost everyone gets drunk a time or two in school. Didn't you?"

"Sadly, no," Southgate chuckled. "I fear I wasted my youth on that count."

"Well, everything else you may have heard is tabloid nonsense," Ksanya admitted, "though there are times I wish I really had done some of that stuff. Mostly, I just scandalize people in court and that I usually do with my mouth. And you're not being judgmental, are you?" Ksanya suddenly realized.

"No," Southgate shook her head. "Just curious. I always wondered how any woman could have had the courage to do some of the things attributed to you."

"Me too!" Ksanya told her. "Hope I haven't disappointed you."

"Not too badly," Southgate laughed.

"You still need to watch out for her," Candle repeated. "She's a magic-null and Vine, in her infinite wisdom, has chosen to train her to be an even better one."

"That's Oceanvine," Oceanvine protested.

Southgate stared at her for a moment, and then laughed long and hard. "You sounded just like your great-grandmother. I can't recall how many times I heard her say that, especially to this scoundrel," she added, indicating Candle.

"So what brings you to the RBI?" Candle asked.

"Every so often they remember there's stuff only a mage can do for them and my phone rings," Southgate replied. "I had a class to teach before breakfast and haven't had my morning tea yet. That little breakfast and lunch place is still around the corner. Fancy a cup of coffee? I'll tell you what I'm working on. It's right up your alley."

"Sounds good," Candle laughed. "Come along, kids."

"Yes, Daddy!" Ksanya replied sarcastically.

It was that strange point of the morning in which it was too late for breakfast and too early for lunch, although the small restaurant was obviously timeless in the sense that the owner did not really care what time of day it was. There was a large sign over the counter that proclaimed, "Breakfast served anytime." Having already eaten, however, only Southgate actually ordered food and then only a muffin to go with her tea.

They squeezed into one of the few booths and Southgate began to talk. "We have an old problem surfacing again lately," she explained. "I wouldn't have thought to see it again, there being so few mages left in the world, but it seems the Hook is back. Well, maybe not, but there are reports of a group of glassy-eyed, strange-acting prostitutes working in the Harbor District. From the descriptions, the RBI fears it may be the Hook."

"I'm surprised they still remember what the Hook is," Candle remarked. "I guess the RBI has been keeping better records than its Emmine counterpart."

"The RBI doesn't disdain to use a mage every once in a while rather than relying on some piece of tech-magic anyone can operate," Southgate replied.

"Anyone but me," Ksanya added.

"Your condition was once considered debilitating," Southgate told her. "You certainly wouldn't have been trying to improve your ability to nullify magic. These days, you probably wouldn't even have known it existed if you weren't associating with some of the last mages left on Maiyim."

"There is that," Ksanya agreed. "My ability to nullify isn't absolute, though. Oceanvine can still work magic when I'm touching her."

"Only if I work very hard at it," Oceanvine replied.

"Really?" Southgate asked. She closed her eyes to examine Ksanya's aura and found instead the hole in reality she seemed to form. Sitting next to Oceanvine, it overlapped her natural aura. "Can you do something right now? A ward or levitation, perhaps?"

Oceanvine shrugged and tried to create a small curtain ward on the table between them. Nothing happened, so she closed her eyes and willed herself into a self-hypnotic state then tried again. A faint wall

of blue energy became slightly visible for a few moments but only lasted a second or so after she opened her eyes. “Not very well,” Oceanvine remarked.

“You ought not to be able to at all,” Southgate told her, amazed. “But you seemed to be able to push back Ksanya’s null-magic aura for a few seconds. It was really something to watch and something I’ve never seen before. I’ve had to work with two magic-nulls over the years and could barely cast a spell while they were in the same room. That you can while she is actually touching you is impressive. If I didn’t know who you were I’d be asking Candle where he found you. How many other new feats of magic have you invented other than that new ward you wrote about in your paper?”

“You’ve read it?” Oceanvine asked.

“I told you I was sending a copy to Southgate,” Candle reminded her.

“You did, but I thought it was the name of a college,” Oceanvine replied.

“No, a colleague,” Candle smirked, “but we’re getting off the subject. So you’re here to investigate a new slave ring using the Hook?” he asked Southgate. “Funny coincidence, or maybe not. We just encountered one in Rjalkatyp. If this is anything like that one, you’d better be extra careful.” He went on to describe their adventures on the Isle of Fire.

“The Hook combined with the Bond of Aritos?” Southgate gasped, interrupting the flow of the story. “There’s a perversion even Silverwind would have had trouble with.”

“It wasn’t a day in the park for me either,” Candle replied. “I’d better spend an hour or two showing you what we did there. Better yet, maybe I should lend you two assistants. Vine, Ksanya? Why don’t you work with Southgate for a few days?” They both nodded.

“Thank you, Candle,” Southgate told him. “But I don’t have the Staff of Aritos to do what you did.”

“Staff of Aritos?” Candle laughed, sneaking a peek at the pen-like device in his pocket. “I don’t think it’s ever had a name before. It fits though. I wonder what Aritos will say when I tell him.”

“Probably that its true name is unpronounceable,” Oceanvine laughed.

“Probably,” Candle agreed. “Well, if you discover this is the same spell complex, I’ll be glad to help out anyway I can. It may be,” he added and went on to tell about the missing People’s Party members and their affiliations with One Maiyim.

“They’re in this too?” Southgate asked. “The Ellistans are right. We live in interesting times. So what will you be doing in the meantime?”

“Young Ksaveras asked me to investigate the situation with the Gran 4 mission,” Candle replied.

“I wasn’t aware there was a situation,” Southgate replied.

“Evidently he thinks there is,” Candle shrugged. “Can’t say I’ve seen much evidence of a magic-related problem yet, but so far we’ve only vetted mission control. We’re suppose to look at the command module today, although I have a sneaky suspicion that the real evidence one way or the other burned up on re-entry along with the engine module.”

“There were the odd blips in the telemetry data, sir,” Sextant interrupted, “and the ethernauts were fair magic techs. Their observations seem to indicate a foreign magical influence on the Gran 4 systems.”

“I hate hear-say evidence,” Candle remarked.

“Sometimes that’s all you can find,” Southgate told him. “I wish that was all I had to go by. Those Hook victims. The moment one is arrested, they start to shut down and are dead in minutes.”

“That’s new,” Candle remarked. “They didn’t do that in Rjalkatyp.”

“This isn’t Rjalkatyp, Uncle,” Ksanya told him. “Prostitution is not legal anywhere in Granom.”

“True enough, and I know that better than you,” Candle replied. “You could be right, though, I don’t think any of the victims there were arrested and the Influenza epidemic slowed down the spread of the curse as well.”

“Why didn’t the hospitalized curse victims die quickly too?” Sextant asked.

“They weren’t under arrest,” Oceanvine guessed. “The slave masters didn’t cover that eventuality in the curse.”

“You think this behavior is programmed into the spell?” Candle asked her. “It may be. A slavemaster can cut the string at any time, but it would be difficult to know exactly when a victim is being arrested.”

“The really disturbing thing,” Southgate noted, “is the way the curse spreads disease-like. That also explains why this is spreading as quickly as it is, though. There are men as well as women spreading the curse. We’re going to need your staff once we’re ready to move against it, you know.”

“You’ll have it if you need it,” Candle promised. “I think a judicial use of normal staves will do the job if you aren’t dealing with too many at once, though. Do you want me there today?”

“Not today,” Southgate told him. “I’m still learning what the RBI has on the curse. Maybe Oceanvine can tell me what you learned in Rjalkatyp as well. Then tomorrow we go into the field and see what we can learn there.”

Nine

“So what do you do when you aren’t working for the RBI?” Oceanvine asked Southgate the next afternoon as they made their way by foot to what Southgate promised would be a seedy bar.

“Well, I still teach one course each semester at University,” Southgate replied. “And I try to spend as much time with my grandchildren as I can. You know none of my children were much interested in magic, although I have a grandson about your age who’s always said he wanted to be a wizard. He works as a mechanical engineer, but I taught him some of the old spells while he was growing up. I think he uses a lot of them in his job. I’d introduce you, but he’s working in Methis’ Chain this winter.”

“I’ve wanted to visit the colonies for years,” Ksanya commented. “I understand they’re a bit primitive away from the cities but their societies seem vibrant and young. At least according to what I’ve read.”

"I've been to New Querna," Southgate told her. "It's an interesting city. It's more like Merinne than Querna. That's probably the Orentan influence. The population is almost thirty-five percent Orenta." She had been telling both women about some of the jobs she had taken when she was younger.

"Is there anyplace you haven't been, Southgate?" Oceanvine asked.

"Lots of places, Oceanvine," she replied. "It's a big world. I have not been to Sutheria or any of the Five Demons. I haven't been to Olen either. I don't think your grandmother would have been happy to see me."

"You know her too?" Oceanvine asked.

"I knew her when she was growing up," Southgate replied. "I taught at the Renton School, remember. In some ways as a child she was very much like you."

"Me?" Oceanvine stopped walking in astonishment.

"Not by the time she was your age, of course," Southgate assured her. "Not even by the time she went to University. But as a child she was very much a magical prodigy."

"My grandmother?" Oceanvine asked, in a voice over halfway to a shout. "Myrrha?"

"Yes," Southgate replied calmly. "That's her name. She was quite talented at magic as a child and from the signs she could have had a doctorate in magical sciences at an all-time young age, but by the time she was seventeen she had lost all interest in magic. Typical teen rebellion, I think. "It likely would have passed, but she bought into One Maiyim in her freshman year. She kept it from her mother for two years, but she eventually became the president of the Randona University chapter. When a fellow member contacted her while she was in Renton, Oceanvine overheard the exchange and went what your generation refers to as ballistic. Well, after all she had been through with One Maiyim, first as a wide-eyed idealist member, later disillusioned by the change in the organization, especially their attempt to unseat the government of Bellinen; she and Candle were directly responsible for stopping them there, did you know that?" Oceanvine shook her head. "Well they did, just as Candle and I kept them from assassinating Ksaveras IX and Petronelle. Anyway, with all that on your great-grandmother's mind, it's no wonder she was so angry and hurt by Myrrha becoming a leader in the organization. Myrrha knew exactly how her parents felt, however. That's why she tried to keep it a secret. I don't think she was intentionally spying on them for the movement, but I'm sure the inner circle was using her for that purpose."

"There was an inner circle to One Maiyim even when it was still a legal organization?" Ksanya asked.

"It was only legal in Emmine, Saindo and Wennil by that point," Southgate told them, "and the people of Wennil never accepted them anyway so it wasn't an issue. They weren't outlawed in Emmine until another few years later.

"This is a depressing conversation," Southgate concluded. "What I would like to know is how you invented those wonderful new wards, Oceanvine."

"They just sort of came to me," Oceanvine admitted. "I was trying to filter out the pull of a Bond of Aritos in Sutheria and I kept thinking about those nonstick frying pans. The hard work was figuring out how I really did it so I could write that paper. But it was just an odd trick, I think."

“Not really,” Southgate told her. “I should know. My senior project was a study of the first Oceanvine’s alternating current wards. Yours are almost as revolutionary and might turn out to be of even more practical use. They represent a whole new class of wards. I did wonder why you didn’t explore some of the ramifications of the no-stick field in your paper though.”

“Like what?” Oceanvine asked.

“They can be nonstick against spells as you discovered,” Southgate replied, “but didn’t you realize the technique can be applied to almost anything? Perfectly frictionless bearings was just the first application I thought up. You have patented the technique haven’t you?”

“You can’t patent something that has previously been described in print,” Ksanya put in.

“I forgot that,” Southgate admitted, “However, you can patent a magical bearing, since it wasn’t mentioned in the paper, even if the manufacture of such a bearing is based on the ward you cannot patent. Also you can have a perfectly frictionless surface.”

“I can’t patent them,” Oceanvine protested. “They were your ideas. I just came up with the basic ward.”

“I’m perfectly willing to share the credit,” Southgate laughed. “This is a technology that could very well change the world. We need to work a few bugs out, of course.”

“Like attaching a reliable power source to keep it working indefinitely,” Oceanvine noted. “I’ve noticed it tends to shrug off that sort of connection too.”

“Me too,” Southgate laughed. “But the nice thing is, we can submit patents even without solving that problem. It’s the use of the technology that will count. When we solve the indefinite power problem, we can patent that too. Then once patented we can publish them. Welcome to the academic life. That reminds me, have you read your great-grandmother’s masters thesis on wards?”

“No,” Oceanvine replied. “I can’t find a copy of it anywhere and I understand her only copy was burned decades ago.”

“I’ll have a copy made for you,” Southgate promised. “The University keeps copies of all theses and dissertations successfully submitted and will copy and bind them for a fee.”

“You must let me pay for it,” Oceanvine insisted.

“Nonsense!” Southgate told her. “Think of it as a belated graduation gift. Now, here we are. Seedy enough for you?”

Neither Oceanvine nor Ksanya had ever entered a bar quite like this. The windows looked like they might have last been cleaned during the reign of Ksaveras VIII, possibly just after they had been installed or maybe not even then. The lower halves of the windows were painted brown with the name “Dahv’s Tavern” emblazoned on the upper halves in the same faded color. There were awnings over the windows and the door. However, even though they were folded up, it was obvious to all three women that what little cloth was left, would block neither sun nor rain.

Inside, the tavern room was dark with greasy wooden floors and just barely enough light to allow them to only stumble occasionally while looking for a place to sit. The air of the bar was surprisingly fresh, however, with only a mild aroma of frying fish. They finally settled on a battered-looking table that was



less sticky-feeling than its neighbors. "Wait here, ladies." Southgate told them, "I'll see what I can buy that comes in a bottle."

"Good idea," Ksanya whispered. "I wouldn't trust anything that comes from the tap in here."

"I wouldn't trust the glasses to be clean," Oceanvine whispered back.

"Well, here I am," Ksanya shrugged after a pause, "finally living down to my reputation."

"Look at the bright side," Oceanvine advised. "At least now you'll know what you've been accused of."

"Remind me to hire an assassin to take out the editor of 'The Pre-Dawn Sun,'" Ksanya replied acidly. When she noticed Oceanvine's puzzled expression, she explained, "One of the tabloids that seems to delight in making up stories about Zak and me; especially me."

"The way you make it sound, I'm surprised we don't have dozens of photographers following us around," Oceanvine commented.

"You're right," Ksanya admitted. "I hadn't noticed but we haven't been followed, have we? They may not realize I'm out. There are usually a few watching the palace gates and part of the compound from some of the nearby buildings. Wait until next week's papers come out and we'll see."

Southgate returned just then with several bottles of beer and two women, dressed in poor imitations of Orentan clothing, exposing more skin than was wise at this time of year. "Ladies," Southgate told them. "This is Columbine and Melanda. I've convinced them to answer a few questions."

"Hey, for the right money, we'll do anything," Melanda told them. Ksanya chuckled, but Oceanvine blushed at the woman's blatant innuendo.

However, it gave Oceanvine an excuse to shut her eyes briefly and check on the condition of these women. Having no medical training, she was unable to diagnose their health through an aural study. She suspected they had some minor medical conditions. She was fairly certain she detected numerous small bruises on the women, but she realized that even highly trained medical mages back when Candle was a boy did not rely entirely on aural scans. It did not matter, however; she was more concerned with magical maladies and neither of these two women showed any sign of the Hook or the Bond of Aritos.

"What's the matter, dearie?" Columbine asked. "Having trouble looking at us?"

"Not at all, dearie," Oceanvine snapped back, looking directly into her eyes. "Just checking you for curses."

"Curses!" Columbine laughed. "The things you high-born women think of!"

"Actually, she told you the truth," Southgate replied. "Go ahead, dear. Show them a trick."

At that moment Oceanvine wished she was capable of a feat Candle had performed once, creating a deck of cards from thin air. Creation magic, however, was something Candle had warned her to avoid for another few years. Instead she reached into her purse and pulled out the small jewelry box Queen Orezhda had given her.

"You carry that with you," Ksanya asked.

“You never know when an opportunity to practice might come up,” Oceanvine commented. She opened the box to reveal the pearl. Then realizing her proximity to Ksanya, moved her chair over a few inches before “instructing” the gem to take its usual position in orbit around her head.

“Nice trick,” Melondia admitted. “But I’ve seen performers do that sort of stuff.”

“Have they done this?” Oceanvine asked, levitating the woman and her chair upward until they were well above the table. Melondia panicked and tried to jump out of the chair, but Oceanvine caught her before she could fall on to the table and moved her gently back to the floor, taking the time to reorient her so she landed feet first. Then she finally set the chair down beside her.

“How did you do that?” Columbine asked.

“I’m a journeywoman mage,” Oceanvine replied calmly, the pearl still orbiting her. “It’s the sort of thing I’ve been trained to do.”

“What’s a mage?” Melondia asked.

“A magician, stupid,” Columbine retorted. “Like you see at the circus, ‘cept she’s for real.”

“No such thing!” Melondia denied.

“Yeah?” Columbine countered. “And you were just feeling so good you decided to fly around the room?” Melondia looked like she wanted to say something, but it would not come out. “Are you all magicians?”

“They are,” Ksanya replied easily. “I’m not.”

“Huh!” Columbine grunted. “So what do ya want from us?”

“We’re working for the RBI,” Southgate explained.

“Cops!” Columbine spat. “We ain’t doing nothin’ wrong,” she added as both women got up to leave the table, but Southgate sat them back down telekinetically. “Hey!”

“No, you are not doing anything wrong, and we’re not cops. Even if we were regular agents of the RBI, the RBI does not arrest prostitutes,” Southgate told her. “I’m not even concerned with what you do when you aren’t sitting here answering questions for money. What we’re looking into is another sort of hooker on the streets of Querna.” There were looks of protest from the two women, but Southgate rolled right over them verbally. “Yes, yes. I’ve been around enough to know that the girls who work the bars consider themselves a better class than the ones on the streets. But you’re out there. You see stuff I might not. Now do you mind if I release you and we just talk?”

“Yes’m” Columbine replied meekly. Melondia nodded.

Southgate went on to ask if they had seen women walking the streets, looking glassy eyed and drained of emotion. She described some of the other possible visible signs of the Hook, privately noting that in the dead of winter a lot of the symptoms might be mistaken for a bad cold.

The women were about to answer when a rough-looking Granom in a bright velvet jacket shouted at

them, "What are you two doing? Chatting with your girlfriends?" He went on to heap tons of verbal abuse on the women as they cowered beneath him, in essence telling them that they owed him everything for his protection, their apartments and more, and if they didn't get back to work they would be out on the streets again. The verbiage was not quite that concise, but Oceanvine got the gist and suddenly knew where their bruises had come from. "Back to work, sluts!" the man shouted. A moment later he was flying across the room, screaming as he went until he slammed into the far wall.

The bar was not very full at that time of day, but the other people in it, who up until now had ignored anything going on that was none of their business, including Melondia's impromptu flight, suddenly became very quiet and stopped to look at what was happening.

Oceanvine got out of her chair and walked directly toward the now groggy man, telekinetically pushing chairs and tables out of her way as she stomped across the oily floor. "You!" she growled at the man, "will not harm, or even threaten my friends. You will not bother them. You will not tell them what to do. You do not own them or anyone else. Do you understand me?"

The man spat at her and tried getting up. Oceanvine "caught" the globule of saliva and "threw" it back into his face, and then pushed him forcefully back down to the floor. "If I so much as hear you've done anything to my friends, or any woman for that matter," Oceanvine continued, materializing a ball of fire in her hand and threatening to throw it at the man, "I will be back and solve the problem permanently." She threw the fire ball just above the man's head. It splashed against the wall above him, leaving a burn mark and singeing a little of the man's dark brown hair. "Do you understand?" she asked again. When he just stared at her she let her voice rise, "Do you?"

"Who the hell are you?" he asked. It might have been an attempt at defiance, but there was sheer terror in his eyes.

"My name is Oceanvine," she told him coldly. "Remember it and what I've told you here today. These women..." she looked around and saw at least a dozen women dressed in similar fashion to Melondia and Columbine, so she added, "All these women are under my protection. Forgetting that is suicide. Do you understand?"

"Yes, lady!" the man croaked, looking for an avenue of escape.

"Does everyone understand?" Oceanvine growled at the room. There were murmurs and nods of assent. "And you!" she added to the bartender. "You should clean this place up!"

Then she walked back to the table through the frozen and silent room in which the only movement were pairs of eyes watching her passage.

Ten

"Interestingly played," Southgate told Oceanvine quietly as she sat down.

"My great-grandmother probably would have just turned him into a cinder," Oceanvine sighed.

"I dare say she would have," Southgate chuckled, "or a fairy tale. I recall that was a favorite phrase of hers, turning someone into a fairy tale."

"I heard her say it once," Oceanvine admitted. "So, ladies, I believe you were about to answer Doctor Southgate's questions?"

"There's a street, not too far from here," Columbine began. "The girls there have always been on the sleazy side." Oceanvine forced herself to keep a straight face, reminding herself that nearly everyone wanted to feel superior to someone else at least sometimes. "It's a dangerous place for one of us too, but even they don't work alone. They generally hang out in twos and threes there."

"They work together?" Ksanya asked.

"Sometimes," Columbine replied, "if the money's right. If they can. Different men have different tastes, you know? But generally they just stay together until one of them gets picked up. Anyway, there seem to be more of them working that street recently. It's weird, you know? There's not that much business and it's not like it's a good way to live no matter what the case."

"So where is this street?" Southgate asked.

"Five blocks north of here," Columbine replied, "On Harbor Street for the four blocks between Water Street and Chandlers Lane."

"I should have guessed," Southgate noted. "I suppose we ought to go have a look for ourselves."

"Highborn ladies like yourselves ought not to go to places like that," Melondia protested. "It's not right."

"Highborn?" Southgate laughed. "Not hardly. I was a foundling down in the Southgate district, stealing food when I could and avoiding the slavers who would sell anyone they caught into the workhouses. You don't start out much lower than that."

"Better than what we do, dearie," Columbine retorted.

"Then do something else," Oceanvine advised.

"It's not that easy, hon," Columbine told her. "What else would I do? That is if Billi didn't hunt me down and kill me for leaving him. I don't got no University education like you do."

"Who's Billi?" Ksanya asked. Both Columbine and Melondia looked over toward the scorch mark Oceanvine had left on the wall. "Him? The one Oceanvine bullied?"

"I did not bully..." Oceanvine started protesting. "Well maybe I did, but he had it coming. Look, you two have trouble with that scumbag, you come to me and he won't bother anyone again. And I didn't say it would be easy. It will be the hardest thing you ever did in your life, but if getting out of this work is something you want bad enough, you'll find a way to make it happen. Southgate did. Look. You're on a deadend street and you know it. How much longer can you keep having sex with any man who has enough money?"

"It's not just men, hon," Melondia informed her.

Oceanvine blanched a little at the thought, but fired back, "And that's better? There are always new girls, younger girls coming along. How long will your Billi, assuming he's not too scared to even come near you now, even care if you're still around? The only reason he cares now is that he's all about intimidation. It's all power and money to men like him, mostly power; the ability to dominate.

“How much of what you make does he even let you keep?” Oceanvine continued. “Any of it? And what do you get for all your work? A little temporary safety from him? Although not that much considering the bruises you have.” Both women’s hand went automatically to the areas of the worst bruising, even though those parts were well covered by their clothing.

“How did you know about that?” Columbine asked.

“It was obvious,” Oceanvine retorted, pausing to pointedly watch the pearl still circling her head. “Sounds to me like you have a lousy deal and if you don’t do something about it for yourself, it isn’t going to get better, you know.”

“How did you even know what you were talking about?” Southgate asked her, once they left the bar room and headed toward the area Columbine and Melondia had told them about.

“I may be highborn, but I’m not blind,” Oceanvine replied. “Well, to tell the truth, I was guessing a lot, but given that they thought an enforced workhouse was better than selling their bodies, it wasn’t a hard guess to make.”

“That was a good idea asking them to bring you any news of other activity in the city that looks like the Hook,” Ksanya remarked, “but maybe it would have been better to ask them to report to the RBI instead of coming to see you at the WurraPalace .”

“No, Oceanvine was right,” Southgate corrected Ksanya. “They wouldn’t trust the RBI. You saw their reaction when I mentioned who we were working for. But they’ll report to Oceanvine because she not only showed how powerful she is, but she defended them as well. They’ll trust her, although when you get back tonight you may want to warn the captain of the guards to make sure they are not turned away summarily.”

They arrived at Harbor Street a few minutes later. The buildings, while the same age as the WurraPalace , had not been maintained. There were numerous holes in the stone façade where pigeons had chosen to nest, the woodwork looked like it had not been painted since Southgate had been a street child and the windows made the ones at Dahv’s look positively sparkling. The street had been paved with asphalt over the old granite cobblestones, but there were several potholes in sight through which the cobbles could be seen once more.

“Maybe instead of an idealistically naïve self-improvement lecture,” Oceanvine commented, “I should have simply asked why we shouldn’t come here.”

“Too late,” Ksanya retorted. “I already know why not.”

“Let’s start analyzing the situation,” Southgate suggested. “Ksanya, please keep an eye on the general situation around us. One can lose track of the big picture when looking at the details.”

“I hate clichés,” Ksanya grumbled.

“I meant that literally,” Southgate chuckled. “We’ll be looking at individuals and it’s possible others could sneak up on us. Got it?”

“Got it,” Ksanya agreed.

Southgate and Oceanvine started scanning the people in sight and got a shock. "They're all Hooked," Southgate gasped. "Everyone in sight; men and women alike."

"It's worse than that," Oceanvine told her. "I see evidence of at least six different slave masters and the web of spell strings is even more complex than what we observed in Rjalkatyp. This is a similar spell, but it is not exactly the same."

"How so?" Southgate asked.

"Well, it's still the Hook being powered by the Bond of Gredac," Oceanvine explained. "That's the demon whose main strengths involve the plant world."

"I've heard of him, yes," Southgate reminded her.

"Of course. Sorry," Oceanvine apologized. "But the spell is being applied differently. It's not the word I want to use, but somebody's improved it."

"Not the right word, indeed," Southgate agreed, "but I know what you mean, How is it different?"

"While you can easily make out six families of victims here... is that the right word?" Oceanvine asked.

"As good as any," Southgate told her. "Go on."

"Well, it looks like each slave is a master to anyone they infect," Oceanvine explained.

"That wasn't a feature of the spell on the Isle of Fire?" Southgate asked. "No, I suppose not. Oh, this is all so sick! The mage or mages who set this up set up a recursive power loop within the spell as well."

"A what?" Oceanvine asked.

"It was set up so that if one of the slaves should die, the other slaves to which he or she was master do not die as well, because the survivors are also enslaved directly to the ultimate slave masters," Southgate replied.

"How can you tell that?" Oceanvine asked.

"Many years of experience. Had I gotten my degree two years earlier, I would have been a true wizard, like Candle and your great-grandparents," Southgate told her.

"I think you are a true wizard anyway, Southgate," Oceanvine decided. "It doesn't have anything to do with going to one of the Five Demons. That was just a tradition. You have the training and experience. You are a wizard."

"And I think we may be in trouble, ladies," Ksanya interrupted. "They've noticed us."

"So they have," Southgate agreed, looking around.

"We'd better get to work then," Oceanvine remarked. "I don't have a staff here. I had to leave my first one at Methis' Forge and my second staff was left with Blizzard in Rjalkatyp, but I think I can use the metal pole of this street lamp as though it was a staff. It should work even better than a wooden pole."

“No,” Southgate stopped her. “Too dangerous. We’re going to need Candle and that staff of his. We’re also going to need another dozen mages, but that’s not likely to happen. Let’s just leave for now.”

They turned to leave and even got several paces back up the street before two dozen curse victims came around the corner and blocked their escape route.

Eleven

Candle and Sextant did not get to actually examine the Gran 4 command module until the day Southgate took Oceanvine and Ksanya to Dahv’s Tavern. They left the RBI offices for Space Administration’s lab in Querna where the capsule was being stored and examined by the agency’s tech-magic scientists. Haston was too busy to accompany them and Agent Benerolev had not yet returned from Honnea, but they met with Sir Markow and his people in the Querna lab and spent so much of the afternoon just being introduced around the lab that there was no time left to start their examination of the remains of the space craft.

The next day they went directly to the Space Agency to find Agent Benerolev waiting for them. “Welcome back,” Candle told him. “We’ll be examining the command module today.”

“I doubt I’ll be of much help to you on that,” Benerolev told them, “but I can interview scientists and try to pull what they have learned together for you.”

“All right,” Candle nodded. “Let’s get to work. I’ll tell you a bit of what we learned yesterday, though some of this you probably already know. The Gran 4 mission was monitored from Honnea Space Center, yes, but this installation was the emergency backup monitor site. It was here that the simulator was used to duplicate the mission and then to formulate the rescue plan.

“I had not realized just how critical this center was,” Candle admitted, “but without the men working here the ethernauts would probably never have survived the disaster. The ethernauts had to complete a number of repairs both from inside the space craft and during an extravehicular excursion. They never would have known what to do without the simulator crew working here. They also had to work out a way to manually jettison the engine module and rebuild several controls using only the materials at hand within the craft.”

Candle and Sextant left Benerolev to his own work while they finally got to see the capsule. “Smaller than I expected,” Candle commented.

“It only has to hold four men,” Sextant replied, “and they all sit next to one another,”

“Not a lot of room to stretch out in there, is there?” Candle observed.

“Better than the earlier project crafts,” Sextant replied. “The Methis capsules only held one man each and there was barely any room to move inside them. The Querna crafts were only slightly better, built for two with room to move one’s arms, but to actually get out of the form-fitted seats, the ethernauts had to open the hatch and leave the craft. In comparison, this one is a mansion and with the Midbar excursion module there really is room to move around and stretch, do some isotonic exercises and so forth.”

“Well, you’re the expert,” Candle told him.

“Until I started working for you I’d hoped to get a job in the Emmine space program,” Sextant reminded the wizard.

“The capsule appears to be in pretty good shape for something that hit the atmosphere at hypersonic speeds,” Candle observed.

“Well, I should hope so,” Sextant told him. “Damage to this module probably would have meant dead ethernauts.”

“The only burnt-looking material is on the bottom,” Candle pointed out.

“The heat shield,” Sextant explained. “That’s its job. It’s specially made and enchanted to absorb and deflect the heat of reentry to protect the craft. Yes, it gets badly scorched, but better the shield than the rest of the capsule.”

They walked closer to where Space Agency people were currently working. “Is this all that’s left of the entire craft?” Candle asked them.

“There was no way to save either of the other modules,” a technician informed him. “We got pictures and thaumagraphs of the damage, though.”

“Good. I’ve seen the pictures,” Candle replied. “I suspect they help you more than me, but I haven’t seen the thaumagraphic evidence yet. I’m hoping it will tell me more about what we’re dealing with.”

“What do you need to know?” the magic tech asked.

“I’m looking for aural evidence,” Candle told him, “Spell traces that might tell us exactly what happened up there. It would have been easier had you been able to bring the crafts down in one piece.”

“Actually it’s a good thing they made it in detachable modules, sir,” Sextant told him.

“Eh, Six?” Candle asked. “Why is that?”

“The engines were placed behind the heat shield,” Sextant replied. “They had to be really. Oh I suppose they might have been placed around the edges of the craft, but they still would have had to be jettisoned before reentry. See, the friction of reentering the atmosphere heats everything up.”

“I know that,” Candle told him peevishly, “I was consulted on the design of the Emmine space vehicles when the project first began ten years ago. But I was more in favor of building crafts that were totally reusable. It might have taken longer to do it, but I think it would have been more economical in the long run.”

“Right,” Sextant nodded, “then you do realize what would have happened had the engine module still been attached when they tried to reenter?”

“The metal would have burned and melted heating up the capsule unbearably,” Candle replied easily, “and eventually destroyed the craft itself, yes, but we could have crafted a different sort of heat shield perhaps or built the ships more like airplanes, and put the shield on their bellies. There is no single correct design, Six.”

“Well, of course not,” Sextant agreed. “Our own Midbar-bound ships have only two modules, the main



engines and the command module. The main engines are undocked and left in Midbar orbit, while the rest of the ship descends to the surface. At least that's what it is supposed to do when we send it. Then for return, the Midbar engines act as a launch pad and the rest of the ship docks with the main engines for the flight home. But even we jettison everything but the reentry capsule before returning to Maiyim."

"Yes, very wasteful," Candle commented. "Well, we aren't here to work on design, are we?" He turned back to the technician, who had evidently decided it was his job to help the mages. "Maybe we should start with the thaumagraphs?"

"Good idea, Wizard," the magic tech told him. We have them over here on this table. He led them away from the capsule to a nearby table where many pictures, both photographic and thaumagraphic, had been arranged. The photos merely showed the great gaping hole in the side of the Engine Module, but the thaumagraphs gave them a look at the damage inside the metal skin of the module.

"We're lucky it didn't just blow out both the hydrazine and oxidizer tanks," Sextant whistled when he got a close look. "It must have been a near thing."

"And if this was intentional, as Ksaveras fears," Candle added, "I'm sure that was the plan. Oh hell..."

"What's wrong, sir?" Sextant asked.

"The thaumagraphs don't give us any more aural insight than the photos did," Candle replied. "They might have, but that's not the way their camera was programmed."

"Does anyone study auras manually anymore?" the technician asked.

"I do," Candle told him, "and my students do. Don't discount any form of evidence, no matter how antiquated you think the method of gathering it might be. You magic techs rely too much on your clever devices to do your thinking for you. I'll agree that some of them will see things you can't, but the sapient brain is the most powerful tool of all and can be trained to be a more accurate diagnostic tool than any mere device. I should know. I invented enough of them and help set down the scientific foundation from which others still invent them."

"Yes sir," the technician replied respectfully. "Still these pictures tell us alot along with the telemetric evidence." He pointed to several long sheets of unrolled paper that stretched along the length of the table. "These are the final three seconds of readings we received from the Engine Module. You can see at the start everything appears to be normal. Then toward the end of the first second we started getting anomalous heat readings. The heat and pressure shoots straight off the chart at the end of the second second; we think that was the actual explosion. Then nothing. Our monitors went dead in that module. You can see why in this thaumagraph."

Candle looked at the picture again and saw where the technician was pointing at what was left of some sort of sensor. "Okay, so we know what happened and when, but we don't know what caused it to happen. Is there any possibility this was caused by a short, that somehow set off some traces of fuel inside the module?"

"That's one hypothesis we're working on," the technician replied. "We have always been uneasy as to how leak proof the hydrazine tanks remain during launch. The integrity of our tanks is only as good as the seals and gaskets we use."

"Surely you've tested those to destruction, haven't you?" Sextant asked pointedly.

“Of course we have, but damage does happen,” the technician replied. “Launch is not a particularly smooth process and while we do our best to insure against damage to the craft, we can’t rule out slow leaks in either tank, or in the air tanks for that matter.”

“I wonder if using liquid fuels was the right way to go when we decided on propellants,” Candle mused. “There must be something we can use that would be safer.”

“Like what, sir?” Sextant asked. “The hydrogen/oxygen reaction is powerful and efficient.”

“I don’t know,” Candle admitted. Maybe when we get back I’ll look into it. Right now, though I guess we need to look into the Command Module.” They walked back to the capsule and Candle stuck his head in the open hatch. “What a mess! Is this the condition it was in when it landed or have you been removing everything?”

Inside the Command Module, everything was in disarray, there were panels left open with loose wiring sticking out. Here and there, many of the wires had been crudely stripped of their insulations and twisted together by hand so that it was a wonder none of the obvious jury-rigs had shorted out against one another.

“No, we’ve left everything as it was when this arrived,” the technician assured him.

“We heard the ethernauts had to make repairs and modifications while enroute,” Candle admitted, “but I never thought they were this extensive.”

“It was the only way they could set off the explosive bolts holding the Engine Module in place,” the magic tech told them.

“Any journeyman mage could have done it without all the wires,” Candle replied, “Still, that’s hardly the point. Well, Sextant, time for us to earn our keep. Let’s start scanning the capsule, shall we?”

Sextant closed his eyes, then imagined himself opening them again, while leaving them shut. Oceanvine had told him she simply shut her eyes and the aural vision instantly turned itself on for her, but he had never managed that. However, once he was viewing the aura of an object he knew he was as accurate as she was in his vision.

What he saw was an incredible tangle of spells. “It’s not quite as complex as the *Maiyim Bourne*,” he reported.

“I would be surprised if it was,” Candle laughed, “but you know it isn’t all that far off, is it? Very complex, although I don’t think it was quite like this before the in-flight repairs. See how the controls had to be rerouted and, oh oh. See why?”

“The entire craft should have been destroyed,” Sextant observed. “It’s the Bond of Aritos, isn’t it?”

“Well spotted,” Candle told him. “You don’t seem to be having any trouble resisting it.”

“That’s one of the few things I do better than Vine,” Sextant replied.

“You do quite a few things better than she does,” Candle assured him.

“It’s hard to tell sometimes,” Sextant replied. “Almost everything comes so easy to her.”

“Not really,” Candle disagreed. “She works extremely hard and she practices at every opportunity. You’re as talented as any student I’ve ever had and more industrious than most, but Vine is driven. How often do you see her without something whizzing around her head? Oh she doesn’t do it much in public and, until the queen gave her that pearl, she only did it in her suite at the palace, but while I doubt she gets much additional benefit from that exercise it is symptomatic of just how hard she works at her vocation as a mage. She’s always trying new things, especially combinations of things she already knows how to do.”

“Did you know she’s been trying to learn how to phase through wards?” Sextant asked.

“Is she?” Candle asked. “Any success yet?”

“Maybe,” Sextant told him. “I haven’t asked in the last couple of days. I keep trying to do it first.”

“I can always show you how,” Candle offered.

“Silverwind figured it out for himself,” Sextant replied. “I can too.”

“Silverwind had been a wizard for years and was almost twice your age when he first did it,” Candle pointed out, “but have it your way. If neither of you figures it out within the week though, I’ll make it a required lesson. Now, let’s get back to the Bond. You don’t recognize it, do you?”

“No,” Sextant admitted. “I probably ought to read your thesis.”

“I have a copy back in Randona,” Candle told him. “I’ll bring it into the office. Well, let’s make a bit of a lesson of this. Describe what you see and compare it to applications of the Bond you do recognize.”

“Well, I’ve only actually seen the Bonds of Gredac and Xenlabit,” Sextant considered. “This has the same basic overall shape that they do. I would expect that. Otherwise it wouldn’t be the Bond of Aritos, right?” Candle nodded but said nothing. “It doesn’t have most of the little extra details, the twists and turned and interweaving within the basic shape of the sign. Instead it looks thicker. It’s almost like someone was practicing the Bond without having learned all the subtleties of the spell. Is that why it didn’t destroy the craft?”

“No,” Candle replied, “This is the way this variant always looks. It’s a bit simpler but far more powerful. This is Pohn, or his sign anyway.”

“So why didn’t it work?” Sextant asked, “And why aren’t we taking care of this as quickly as possible. Is this one somehow safe?”

“The Bond is never safe,” Candle told him seriously, “but this one is on hold. It is waiting for a command to activate that will never come. Whoever cast this spell either didn’t know what he was doing or got careless. I’m not sure which scares me more; this power in the hands of a klutz or someone truly inept. Whatever the case, this Bond was supposed to be connected to another spell that would act as its trigger; probably the one in the engine module. In turn this one was connected to another. My guess is it was in the Midbar Excursion Module. I know I talk about constructing spells modularly, but this is not the way.”

“I don’t think the mage who did this had a choice,” Sextant decided.

“How do you figure that?” Candle asked.

“The modules of the Gran 4 were assembled on the launch pad and once they were in place the only ones who entered it were the ethernauts in the various flight attempts. I doubt anyone could have cursed the craft as a whole on the pad without being observed, so it must have been done before it was assembled. I’ll bet that’s why he failed to make a successful linkage. My guess is the strings that were supposed to connect between the Engine and Command Modules were clumsily bonded to different space craft systems so they never made a connection. *That’s* sloppy. I wonder if the mage knew much about the Gran spacecraft.”

“He certainly didn’t know much about the Bond of Aritos,” Candle told him.”

“Oh? How can you tell that?” Sextant asked.

“He used it,” Candle replied flatly. “You’ll have heard me say this before and I’ll probably repeat it a lot, but anyone who uses the Bond does so at the risk of his life and soul. You might use it once or twice or even a dozen times safely, but sooner or later the Bond will consume you. You might think the riskiest time is the first time you try and it is dangerous since if you get it wrong, you die, but each use leeches a bit more of your soul away until finally the spell devours you.”

“The ethernauts were darned lucky,” Sextant noted. “Every system in the ship was supposed to fail.”

“You noticed that?” Candle asked.

“It was obvious, wasn’t it?” Sextant asked. “The whole thing should have gone up.”

“No. Worse than that,” Candle told him. “Every system was supposed to fail, but not in an explosion. The intention of the spell was to shut down everything causing the ethernauts to die slowly of asphyxiation or hypothermia. I’m not sure which would have gotten to them first. They used the MEM as a life raft all the way home, but that was supposed to have shut down too. I don’t think there was supposed to be an explosion, but the spell module in the engines must have been the initiating part of the spell. Unable to make contact with the other two segments of the spaceship, it simply blew up. It may have been a programmed alternative in case something went wrong, though. It’s hard to say for certain since we don’t have the other two parts to examine, but that seems to make sense based on what I’m seeing here. Oh... that’s just too funny!” Candle started laughing.

“What is it, sir?” Sextant asked.

“I just realized what’s really wrong with this picture. This spell may have been doomed from the start and may actually only have worked poorly if at all, because the mage who cast it did make a mistake. Look at the Bond. It’s relatively simple, but very large and powerful, right?”

“Yeah, right,” Sextant agreed in a noncommittal tone.

“What did the mage try to do with it? He tried to carefully turn off each and every system in the ship. I’ll bet he was subtle and cruel enough to set it up to turn each one off, one at a time so that it would take hours or days to turn everything off. Right?”

“If you say so, sir,” Sextant agreed. “You know more about diagnostics than I do.”

“We need to work on that next term,” Candle told him. “But I was just trying to imagine the expression on Pohn’s face when someone used his Bond this way. He’s the largest, most powerful of the demons, but he also only has the reasoning ability of your average lizard, maybe less.”

Candle laughed some more, “I can just see him frozen into immobility for a century trying to figure out what the mage wanted him to do. On the other hand, he probably would have just grunted and eaten the darned fool. Well, enough talk. Time to dispel this. You can see where some of the repairs came close to setting it off anyway. I wouldn’t want the cleanup crew to kill themselves.”

He had dealt with the Bond of Pohn before but not directly. It had been Silverwind who had defeated Pohn sixty-nine years earlier and Pohn represented direct and ferocious power. His weakness was that power could be used against him subtly and he didn’t have the intelligence to counter it.

Candle decided to deal with the Bond of Pohn in the same way he had that of Gredac in Rjalkatyp - by draining its power. He raised the golden staff and started siphoning power into it from the Bond. However Pohn’s Bond behaved differently and every time he attempted to draw energy out of it, it threatened to come apart explosively.

Candle was forcibly reminded of the time Silverwind had tried the same thing with the Bond of Pohn in Northport. He had tried to safely defuse the sign, but while he was able to hold it, when it started to come apart it was a losing battle and he had been forced to allow the trap to be sprung. At the time Candle had assumed it was because that particular Bond of Aritos was a hybrid form, combining attributes of both Pohn and Arithan, but now it became apparent that the explosiveness was a feature of Pohn.

“I should have known better,” Candle groaned. Pohn could be defeated by subtlety, but he could also be overpowered and so too could his Bond. So Candle changed tactics. When he was not able to hold it together by the sheer force of his own will, he invoked the Seal of Aritos and tried to use its power to counter the Bond of Pohn. That worked, but whenever he attempted to use the Seal to drain power from the Bond, it tried to unravel explosively again. *Funny, it worked against the Bond of Gredac*, Candle mused.

He tried to drain power at least a dozen times at varying rates and in different ways but none of them worked. Finally he used the true Seal of Aritos to encapsulate the power of the Bond, and willed the entire magical construct to translocate one thousand miles straight upward. “Well that takes care of that,” he gasped, suddenly realizing he’d been holding his breath.

“What did you do, sir?” Sextant asked. Candle explained and Sextant thought about it for a full minute before commenting. “I didn’t know you could translocate energy.”

“Neither did I for certain,” Candle admitted. “I suppose I should have known it would work. After all, matter and energy are supposed to be interchangeable. Besides the theory is that translocation works by converting matter to energy and then back again.”

“So could you have just converted all that energy into matter of some sort?” Sextant asked.

“I could have,” Candle remarked. “But I’d have hesitated to try it. The Bond might have kept its pattern and even if it didn’t, any matter I created from its energy might well have been highly radioactive. This way the most we have to worry about is an explosion in space. I figure that’s safe enough.”

By the time they left some hours later, the light from that magical explosion was still visible in the

afternoon sky.

Twelve

Southgate threw a large dome-shaped ward all around them as the Bond-Hook slaves closed in around them. "Don't want to hurt them, but we do have to get out of here," she explained to Oceanvine and Ksanya.

The first few curse victims bumped into the protective ward and were thrown gently back, but after a few attempts, several phased directly through the ward. "I hate that," Oceanvine remarked, casting an alternating current ward to replace Southgate's. This ward was not as large as the other because she had to place it within the first one, leaving the cursed outside. "I can't even do that trick yet," she continued once they were protected again. "I doubt this lot even knows what they're doing."

"No," Ksanya replied. "They are very aware of what is happening. That's part of the curse. They just cannot do anything about it. Oh!"

The Bond-Hook slaves, mostly women, but with many men among them, had stopped trying to pass through the ward and started shoving at the ward, knocking it and the women inside around violently. Oceanvine managed to keep her concentration, but Ksanya was already too close to the edge and when her arm poked through the sparkling wall, three women grabbed her and pulled her away.

"Ksanya!" Oceanvine screamed.

"We'll get her," Southgate promised, "but first we need to get ourselves up and out of reach."

"Can you fly, like Uncle Candle?" Oceanvine asked.

"Not I," Southgate admitted, "but I can levitate and I imagine you can too. If we join together, I imagine we ought to be able to float up to one of those rooftops and, from there, save Ksanya."

Off to their right, Oceanvine could hear Ksanya's snarls and shouts as she attempted to fend off the curse victims. "Uncle Candle warned us against cooperative magic with someone new without careful planning," she fretted.

"Good advice," Southgate agreed. "The plan is up." She took Oceanvine's hand and then quickly joined their will and power.

Oceanvine was surprised to find that it was not entirely unlike some of the exercises she had over the previous academic year with Candle. Her uncle had warned her that each mage would "push" or "pull" at her in different ways when a joining was attempted and that getting shoved off-balance in this manner was where the danger was, and yet Southgate's manner was almost identical to Candle's.

Just as Oceanvine had experienced in her lessons, spells cast cooperatively were more efficient and they did not just float gently away from the street, but shot up to roof level like a pair of joined arrows. "Whoa, careful there, child," Southgate warned her with a chuckle. "We aren't trying to get to Midbar tonight." They landed gently on a roof and Oceanvine looked back downward trying to find Ksanya.

"There she is," Oceanvine reported a few seconds later. Ksanya had been dragged away from the

crowd that had formed around Oceanvine's ward and was being held forcibly against a nearby wall by two women, while a third tried to kiss her. Ksanya kept kicking at them and knocking one or two away, but the cursed ones were persistent and several others were already rushing in to help.

Southgate reached out with her mind and pushed the Bond-Hook victims away from Ksanya, but was unable to lift her out of danger. "I forgot," Southgate told Oceanvine, hastily erecting a ward around Ksanya to keep the cursed away. Oceanvine absently noted it was both alternating current and non-stick, an ideal blend of her great-grandmother's and her own ward techniques. "She's magic-null. We can't just lift her out of there."

"I can," Oceanvine replied, "but I'll need a minute to prepare. Keep her safe." Oceanvine sat down on the edge of the roof, ignoring the way the wind kept blowing her long, dark hair across her face. It wouldn't matter since she would have to close her eyes and go into a trance to pull this off. Thankful that her early training had been on the *Maiyim Bourne* where she was never free of distractions, she rapidly willed herself into the state from which she would be most effective.

With her eyes firmly shut, the world came alive in a surreal collage of auras, but Oceanvine was looking for the one point where there was nothing. Finding it, she was able to force her vision to reveal Ksanya or rather the outer limits of her null magic field. Oceanvine was surprised it had grown so much in just a few days and privately wondered if that was actually a good thing. Then she concentrated extra hard and started lifting her Granomish cousin off the pavement. She had her almost five feet up when she suddenly realized there was an easier way. She did not have to fight the null magic field, she could lift something that merely had Ksanya standing on it.

She levitated a large section of sidewalk wider than Ksanya's null aura and brought it up under Ksanya's feet. From there it was relatively simple to lift her the rest of the way to the roof.

"Very well done," Southgate commended her. "Using the sidewalk was an excellent idea, but how did you manage to raise her up without it?"

"We've been spending a lot of time together lately so I've had a lot of practice lately working with my dear cousin nearby," Oceanvine explained. "It's a lot harder to do even simple stuff that way, but it's amazing how everything seems so much easier when I get to work in more normal conditions. Are you okay?" she asked Ksanya.

"A little bruised and battered," Ksanya replied. Oceanvine noted the Granomish woman's clothing was ripped in a couple of places. "And I really need to rinse my mouth out. Feh! I don't think that one had brushed her teeth in years! But I'm okay. We need to get out of here, though. They're already in the building and on their way up, you know."

"We can travel along the rooftops," Southgate suggested. "The buildings are close enough to jump from one to the next on this block."

They only got a few buildings away, however, before seeing more curse victims waiting for them on the next roof. They tried turning back only to find they were once again surrounded, but the roofs were not completely empty. Here and there were boards, pipes and even worn out pieces of furniture. Even in the slums, Oceanvine reminded herself, some people like to sit out on the roof in the summer.

She saw a long length of pipe and levitated it toward her. "Grab hold of this," she told Southgate and Ksanya. When they did, she lifted them about thirty feet above the roof, while Southgate "pushed" them along and away from the scene.

Finally, when they were back near Dahv's Tavern, Oceanvine gently brought them back to street level. "Want to stop to rinse out your mouth?" she offered to Ksanya.

"With what they sell in there?" Ksanya countered. "I'll wait until we reach that coffee shop outside the RBI building. What's that up there?"

"It looks like a star," Southgate replied, "but the sun won't set for another hour."

"I'll worry about it later then," Ksanya shrugged.

They were on their second cups of coffee, when Candle and Sextant joined them. "Your student here," Southgate told Candle, indicating Oceanvine, "impressed me today. Did you realize she was capable of doing magic within a null magic field?"

"I've had a few hints," Candle admitted. "How did you find that out?" Together the women explained what had happened that afternoon. "You took a big chance going down there," Candle told them, "but I would have done the same thing. How did you even think to try lifting Ksanya by herself?" he asked Oceanvine.

"I did it once before, although only a little bit," Oceanvine told him. "She challenged me to work magic while she was touching me. Although then we were playing handball and it was the ball I levitated, not her. Should that have made a difference?"

"I should think so," Candle told her. "Well, you're obviously tapping into something we'll have to explore a bit deeper once we have a bit of time. Right now, we have other problems to consider." He and Sextant told them about their adventures at the Space Agency that afternoon.

"So that's what that new star is all about," Ksanya laughed when they were done. "How long will it last?"

"Not much longer, I hope," Candle replied. "The Bond and my counter to it are feeding off each other. They should exhaust their power supplies soon and the light will fade."

"Has any mortal ever created a star before, Uncle?" Oceanvine asked.

"No, nor has anyone now," Candle replied. "What you see is a massive release of energy being expressed as light, but there is no fusion going on up there nor is there any mass being converted. Now that I think of it, I know how to create a star, or at least how I might try, though to tell the truth I doubt I could actually manage it. I would have to amass quintillions of tons of hydrogen just for starters. Maybe more, I'd have to check the current estimated mass of the sun. I doubt I'd live long enough to collect that much, and even if I did, do you have any notion where I might store that while I'm waiting? I sure don't."

"Just keep it in the nearest proto-solar system," Sextant advised. "Of course if you do that you'll have a new star sooner or later whether you try or not."

"What would I do with a star anyway?" Candle asked. "We already have one. Any more and this world would be too hot for life as we know it. You three have been a bit distracted. Have you heard the news from the Saindo Archipelago?"

"Have they rediscovered the wheel yet?" Southgate asked.



“Better,” Candle told her. “Last month Ksaveras announced Granom would be building an airport on Moruna just outside Saindo City ...”

“Or what little is left of it,” Ksanya interrupted.

“Or what little is left of it,” Candle continued.

“I don’t know why Veras decided to do that,” Ksanya told them.

“Good-hearted generosity, perhaps?” Oceanvine suggested.

“Maneuvering in the international political arena, more likely,” Candle retorted, “although there was a strong element of generosity in the gesture as well. Anyway, Hacon Ancel has announced that he too will be building an airport on Morona; this one to service Mati. I really don’t know who either of them are fooling. There aren’t many airplanes in Saindo and the three or four there are seaplanes, they don’t need an airport. Also Saindo is not exactly a big tourist magnet. The only planes landing in either port will be military flights.”

“We’re not sending troops to Saindo,” Ksanya corrected him.

“No?” Candle asked.

“Well, just a few to operate the airport,” Ksanya explained. “We’re not trying to establish a large military presence there.”

“The people of Saindo could use a large military presence,” Candle remarked. “They have no central government. That works well in Wennil where the people believe in taking care of their own business and giving others the space to do likewise. Saindo is controlled by dozens, maybe hundreds, of warlords and tribal chieftains. It’s a shame because a century ago they really looked like they were going to do fairly well for themselves, but people got greedy and what was once a fine example of a libertarian economy, similar to Wennil, fell apart into so many pieces I doubt anyone is going to bring them together. Oh, Emmine isn’t just building an airport, but increasing the size of her Friendship Corps mission.”

“Now there’s an idea I wish we would emulate,” Ksanya commented. “I’ve had my eye on Emmine’s Friendship Corps since it was initiated eight years ago. I was rather cynical about it at first, but it seems like the corps members are really out helping people by helping build towns, bridges, water treatment facilities and more and not just acting as spies.”

“No, Hacon Ancel has expressly forbidden any of his security and investigative agencies from using the Friendship Corps or its volunteers to mask or in any other manner aid their own activities,” Oceanvine told her. “To do otherwise is technically treason, so very few would even be tempted to try. I was considering joining the Friendship Corps after graduation, in fact.”

“Why didn’t you?” Ksanya asked.

“Uncle Candle started teaching me magic and so far we’ve sort of been our own Friendship Corps. Joining the official one would not only be redundant, but would get in the way of my training,” Oceanvine concluded.

“It’s getting late,” Candle noted, “we’d better be getting back to the palace if you want to have time to

dress for dinner.”

“I’d normally say to heck with that,” Ksanya retorted, “but these clothes are a bit too radical even for me, don’t you think?”

They were able to flag a taxi just seconds after leaving the coffee shop that served as a hang-out for the RBI. Oceanvine was amazed and wondered if Candle had use some form of magic to assist him. Cabs, in her experience, were never so obliging in Randona. The cabbies were more polite and accommodating as well and Oceanvine decided that the Granomish cab drivers just appreciated their jobs and their passengers more than their Emmine counterparts.

After dropping Southgate off at her home, they rushed back to the palace and arrived in time to see two women arguing with the gate guards. “Tell me another one,” one of the guards jeered.

“No,” one replied, “Lady Oceanvine really told us to report to her. Ask her if you want. We’ll wait.”

“No need,” Oceanvine called as she approached. “Columbine? Melondia? I’m sorry. I just got back here and haven’t had a chance to let the guards know you were to be allowed to see me.”

“Lady? Are you sure?” the captain of the guards asked.

“I invited them here, Captain. They are assisting me in an investigation on behalf of the RBI,” Oceanvine explained.

“If you say so, my lady,” the captain told her uncertainly.

“Would you like to come inside?” Oceanvine asked the two women.

“No thank you, my lady,” Columbine told her. “I’m not sure it would be proper.”

Oceanvine was tempted to laugh, but managed to keep a straight face. Behind Columbine and Melondia, she could see Ksanya smirking, but Oceanvine reminded herself that everyone deserves respect. Oceanvine, however, did not agree with their reasoning. “Nonsense, it’s too cold out here,” she told them. “Let’s at least sit down someplace we’ll be safe from frostbite.”

“No need, my lady,” Melondia told her. “We just wanted to tell you we heard about another street where the girls are acting funny.” They quickly told them where it was then headed back out into the night.

“That was fast,” Ksanya commented. “I wonder why they didn’t come inside. I’d have thought they be curious.”

“They might be,” Oceanvine told her, “but you heard them. They thought it wouldn’t be proper. Even prostitutes have a sense of propriety.”

“I guess,” Ksanya agreed uncertainly.

“I can’t say I liked the news they brought,” Candle added.

“Better than having to discover it on our own, Uncle,” Oceanvine replied.

“True but I don’t like the idea of having to deal with this problem in dozens of seedy neighborhoods all over Querna,” Candle remarked, “It’s another change that’s going to make it harder for us than on the Isle of Fire.”

“Well, I suppose we could try asking our friends in One Maiyim to stop changing the way they do things just so we can wipe them off the face of the world,” Oceanvine retorted, “but somehow I don’t see them doing us any favors.”

Thirteen

Oceanvine woke up in the middle of the night for no apparent reason she could discern, but after trying to go back to sleep, she decided to wake up and read for a bit. Before she could find her book, however, she suddenly got an idea of how to be able to phase herself through wards. It was a problem that had been bothering her for days, but with Ksanya’s early arrivals each morning, she had not had time to experiment.

She cast a sheet ward in front of her and studied it for a moment. It was a simple old-fashioned construct; a transparent white membrane of energy, keyed only to turn red if she touched it. Being a sheet, the energy flow was fairly simple as well, flowing horizontally to the left and then back to the right. She could see the waves within the ward as they canceled and magnified each other. Although the scale was very much smaller, it reminded her strongly of the wave tank she and Sextant had experimented with at the navy base in Silamon.

Then she steeled herself to make an attempt to walk through the ward without setting it off and immediately stopped. That was the problem. She kept tensing up as she tried this. This was just another form of magic and all magic required relaxation. The energy had to flow through her. In normal spell-casting energy flowed with slight amounts of impedance through which a mage directed the spell to do what he or she wanted. In this case it had to flow without any additional impedance at all as Oceanvine stepped through the ward construct.

She stepped back a moment and closed her eyes to help relax. Then she chastised herself for resorting to that crutch and opened her eyes again and after a few seconds felt herself calming down. Instead, she reached for the pearl Orya had given her and let it start circling her head again. Finally, when she felt ready she stepped through the ward and turned around to find it was still white.

She did it again several more times and with different and more complexly shaped wards and each time she was able to slip through them. She was even able to phase through one of her special non-stick wards although, as she expected, the alternating current ward stopped her. *-The current doesn’t really alternate,* Oceanvine thought to herself. *It’s more like it exists in several phases at once. If I could duplicate all those phases, I could walk through one of those too .*

She decided to ask Candle about it later that day and decided that she felt too excited to simply sit down with a textbook and she had not been able to read more than the first two chapters of the Silverwind penny dreadful the king had loaned her. Then she spotted her notebook and decided she ought to spend some time writing down how she managed to phase through wards. Uncle Candle always assigned her papers to write when she made a break-through and while he had not done so since graduation, she decided it was not a bad idea to keep a log as she went along. She also wanted to write down her thoughts about the alternating current/multiphase wards. She had not read her great-grandmother’s thesis yet and perhaps her insights were not very original, but she decided to write

them down anyway in case it slipped her mind to ask this morning.

“I’m hungry,” she said aloud. It was still quite dark outside, but Oceanvine decided she was too hungry to wait until breakfast was served, so she picked up her notebook and went to find the kitchens.

As she hoped, the kitchen staff was in full swing even that early in the morning. Oceanvine stood back in the doorway to admire the controlled chaos that produced food for Ksaveras and his court every day. She savored the aromas of the kitchen and then finally stepped inside and approached a counter near a large coffee urn.

“My I help you, my lady,” a young woman, a few years younger than Oceanvine, asked.

“I was hoping for a cup of coffee, please,” Oceanvine requested.

“Of course, my lady. Do you want to have it here or are you planning to take it elsewhere?”

“Would I be in the way here?” Oceanvine asked, looking around at all the activity. On the far side of the kitchen a delivery was being received. “Is that a whole ox?”

“Two of them actually, my lady,” the woman replied. “They’re for the king’s birthday this weekend. Chef needs to season them before we start roasting tomorrow morning. It takes a long time to roast a whole ox, you know.”

“I forgot his birthday was so soon,” Oceanvine admitted. “I ought to find a gift of some sort, but what? Oh, sorry, so is it all right for me to stay?”

“Of course, my lady,” the woman told her. “It’s not uncommon for residents and guests to eat an informal breakfast here in the kitchen and you’re certainly welcome so long as you don’t mind eating with the servants.”

“Doesn’t bother me in the least,” Oceanvine laughed.

“I’ll bring you something right away then, my lady,” she told her. “There are tables right over there.”

The woman arrived a minute later with an insulated pitcher of black coffee, sugar, cream and a plate of croissants. “Chef says I’m due for a break, my lady,” she told Oceanvine. “Do you mind if I join you. I’m Lindy, by the way.”

“Pleased to meet you, Lindy,” Oceanvine replied, “I’m Oceanvine.”

“Really?” Lindy asked, pausing as she poured the coffee. “I had heard you were here, but... Are you really the granddaughter of the first Oceanvine?”

“Great-granddaughter actually,” Oceanvine replied.

“It’s just coincidence, I’m sure, but the older members of the staff say she used to sit right there in that chair whenever she came down to breakfast and that she ate here more often than in the dining hall,” Lindy told her.

They continued to chat for a few minutes while Lindy hastily gulped down her coffee and croissant. Then finally Lindy excused herself to go back to work and Oceanvine opened her notebook and started

writing.

Unaware of the passage of time, Oceanvine was still writing her notes on multiphase wards, delving into possible implications when a voice interrupted her. “You’re up early this morning, My Lady Oceanvine.”

“Your Majesty!” Oceanvine replied, scrambling clumsily out of her chair.

“No, no,” Queen Orezhda stopped her. “Please sit. I’ll join you, in fact, and I thought I asked you to call me Orya?”

“Well, you started it, with the ‘My Lady’,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“So I did!” Orya laughed. “The pearl looks good around you, by the way. I hoped it would.” As she sat, Lindy brought her a cup and a small plate. “Thank you,” the queen told her as the woman filled the cup from the insulated pitcher. Then she curtsied and went back to work elsewhere. “You know,” she continued to Oceanvine, “they say the first Oceanvine used to visit this kitchen frequently while she was here.”

“Lindy says I’m sitting in her chair,” Oceanvine replied.

“Which one is Lindy?” Orya asked quietly.

“The woman who brought you the cup and plate,” Oceanvine informed her.

“Ah, yes,” Orya smiled. “I should keep an eye on that one. She’s always very attentive when I’m here. Lindy. Yes and thank you, Oceanvine. I also want to thank you for taking Ksanya in hand these past two weeks.”

“I didn’t so much take her in hand as she assigned herself as our assistant,” Oceanvine remarked. “But I like her. She’s a good friend and I don’t make friends easily.”

“It’s more than that,” Orya replied. “Ksanya was a typical Granomish young woman when she was in University. We all have one or two silly nights growing up; times we get drunk and a little out of control. Maybe a lot out of control sometimes. Most of us learn from that and don’t make a habit of it, but Ksanya had the misfortune to get caught on film while she was being silly, not once but twice and the tabloids had a field day with her. It turned out most of their readers wanted to hear how the royal family was misbehaving and they started sending their photographers to get frequent and, hopefully, embarrassing photos of any of us, especially Ksanya.”

“Why her?” Oceanvine asked.

“They expect her to be the bad girl,” Orya replied. “Her father was a known womanizer and her great-grandmother... well, I suppose Ksanya told you about her?”

“My great aunt, sort of,” Oceanvine replied. “Yes, I know she was a hooker and also that she married Prince Zakhar. I doubt it would have been allowed in Emmine, but this isn’t Emmine and from what I’ve heard she was as fine a lady as any in the court.”

“She was a character,” Orya snickered. “Gentle, loving, but very outspoken. The people loved her in spite of her origins, though, or maybe because of them. I don’t know, but between her and her grandson, Ksanya and Zak found themselves with reputations to live down.”

“Zak seems to have come through all right,” Oceanvine observed.

“Zak figured out very quickly that all he had to do was ignore the paper and the pictures and he kept his head down,” Orya replied. “Also, I don’t think he really cares what strangers think about him. Ksanya really does care, though. Also Ksanya wants to do things that are traditionally a man’s job.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Oceanvine asked.

“In Emmine? Nothing,” Orya replied. “Actually if she was queen instead of me, there wouldn’t be any problem. The queen has always been an exception to most rules, many of my responsibilities are things traditional Granomen would consider man’s work, but it’s the rare woman who can be taken seriously by Granomish men when she attempts to step into their world as an equal. Ksanya feels she can be such a woman, and frankly I do too, but her past is a major handicap and Veras is not sure she is really serious or whether this too is just a pose.”

“Too?” Oceanvine asked.

“Part of Ksanya’s reaction to the controversy surrounding her was to resort to humor, especially here in the palace where, for a while she would constantly parody the popular image of herself. The problem is, most of the courtiers don’t have much of a sense of humor. They didn’t get the joke, and I’m afraid Veras isn’t certain if this new seriousness she’s attempting is just a façade or the real Ksanya showing through.”

“No that’s for real, I think,” Oceanvine told her. “She says she’s gotten really tired of the act, but even when she tries, no one takes her seriously.”

“Granomen are rather stubborn at times,” Orya replied. “Once they get a notion in their heads, it’s tough to change their minds. That’s why I think it’s so wonderful you’ve been friends with Ksanya. You met her without any preconceived notions and got to see her as she is. Also, even though there is some prejudice against Emmine and humans here in court, although not among the royal family, I assure you, you are also a celebrity and since you accept Ksanya, I’m hoping they will as well.”

“There you are!” Ksanya called from the doorway just then. “You should have left a note for me in your room. Hi, Orya!”

“G’morning, Ksanya,” Orya replied warmly.

“Did you forget we had a handball game against the guys this morning?” Ksanya asked Oceanvine.

“Yeah,” Oceanvine replied. “I guess I did. I’ve been up for hours.”

“Excuse us?” Ksanya half-bowed toward Orya.

“Have fun, ladies,” the queen replied.

“Come on!” Ksanya grabbed Oceanvine’s hand. “Hey! The pearl stayed in orbit. It didn’t even falter.”

“I was ready for you this time,” Oceanvine chuckled, “but I’d better put it away for now.” She reached up and caught the pearl and put it in her pocket. “Maybe I ought to get a little pouch for it and wear it on my belt.”

“Why not just keep it in your purse like you have been?” Ksanya asked.

“You may have noticed I left my purse in the room,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“Your choice,” Ksanya shrugged. “I’ve been meaning to ask, though. My null-magic aura has been growing, hasn’t it?”

“Very much so,” Oceanvine replied. “I think it’s starting to annoy Uncle Candle in fact. He was so certain you’d have no control over it at all.”

“Well, I don’t know if I want it to expand much more if I can’t retract it as well,” Ksanya replied. “I mean what if we were to get in some really big trouble and I kept you or another mage from being able to save me. That was a close call yesterday.” She shivered at the memory.

“It was,” Oceanvine agreed, “and I might not have been able to get you out of it if I had to lift an even larger chunk of the pavement up with you on it. But so far you’ve been concentrating on expanding your null-magic effect, right?”

“Well, yes,” Ksanya agreed. “Do you think I should now concentrate on shrinking it?”

“It’s worth a try,” Oceanvine told her. “It could be real useful if you can manage it.”

“I’ll try, but if my field of effect gets much larger I’m going to be living a fairly primitive life. I already have trouble turning on the lights in my rooms,” Ksanya admitted. “I have a yard stick I’ve taken to flipping the switch with and I have to sit at least three feet from any lamp if I want to read.”

“How long has that been going on?” Oceanvine asked.

“I just started noticing it yesterday morning,” Ksanya admitted as they arrived at the gym.

“I’ll work with you on that this evening if you like,” Oceanvine offered.

“Thanks,” Ksanya told her. “I really don’t want this getting out of hand, you know?”

The game was both tiring and relaxing. Zak and Sextant arrived, ready to play just after Oceanvine and Ksanya had changed into their work-out clothes and they played for a little over an hour until Candle poked his head in the handball court door and told them, “Time to go to work, kids! Hello, Zak. Don’t you have classes?”

“We’re on break this month, Uncle,” Zak replied as the others went to change.

“You too?” Candle asked sourly.

“If you’re Ksanya’s uncle, you must be mine as well,” Zak laughed.

“I suppose I must. Strangely, no one who calls me ‘Uncle’ is a blood relative,” Candle mused. “It’s a very strange family.” Zak laughed and went off to shower and change. “At least he hasn’t decided to join the crew,” Candle said to himself.

“Where are we going today?” Oceanvine asked Candle as they headed for the gate where she knew a

taxi was waiting for them.

“We’ll meet Southgate at RBI headquarters,” Candle replied, “Then I think we should check out that neighborhood your friends told us about last night.”

“Oh, they’re Oceanvine’s girls,” They heard one of the guards saying from just ahead. “We’re to let them in.”

“Yeah!” Columbine replied, a sparkle of delight in her eyes. “That’s us. Oceanvine’s girls! Hoy! Lady Oceanvine!” she called.

Oceanvine looked ahead to see Columbine, Melondia and several other women waving at her as she approached. “More news?” Oceanvine asked.

“We found another street of the strange ones,” Melondia reported, “but they’re on the move now.”

“We recruited some other girls,” Columbine told Oceanvine unnecessarily, “and we’ve been keeping an eye on the groups of strange ones.”

“I hope you’re keeping your distances,” Candle warned them.

“Oh, we are,” Melondia replied.

“So where are they all headed?” Sextant asked.

Columbine answered, but she faced Oceanvine as she did. “Sinid SquareMarket. It’s about a mile from here about half way between the palace and the university.”

“I know where that is,” Candle confirmed. “All right ladies, it sounds like something big is about to happen. You all had better find a safe place to take cover. Captain,” he turned toward the captain of the guard, “Please call the RBI offices and ask for Doctor Southgate. If she’s not in yet, talk to Sir Garan directly. Tell them what these ladies have told us.” The captain flinched visibly at Candle’s description of the prostitutes as ladies, but Oceanvine noticed that several of them stood a little straighter and taller after he had said it. “Tell them I think we’re going to need every ambulance and medic we can round up and tell them to put the city’s hospitals on standby.”

Candle hurried on with Oceanvine, Sextant and Ksanya in his wake. “What about us?” Melondia asked.

“Stay here, in case the captain needs more information. Then like I said before. Find a safe place! Come on kids.” They piled into the cab and met Southgate a few minutes later.

“Sir Garan already knew some of what was going on and the Chief of Police sent a helicopter ahead to scout out Sinid Square,” she told them. “There are over one thousand people there. They’ve evidently been converging on the square all morning, but according to the latest report, anyone headed there has already arrived. The police are cordoning off the area.”

“I hope they’re staying back far enough,” Candle replied. “If that crowd wants to go through them they will and spread the curse at the same time. Do we have the medics on the way?”

“We do,” Southgate replied. “Sir Garan is loaning us a car and a driver to get there, though I think we ought to send him home after he drops us off.”



Uh, Uncle?" Ksanya spoke up. "Maybe I should get back to the Palace."

"I know you aren't frightened of this," Candle replied.

"Well, maybe a little," Ksanya admitted, "but that's not what I meant. My null magic effect has been growing lately. It caused us some trouble yesterday and it was only Oceanvine's ability to counter it that saved me from the curse."

"You're safe from the curse," Candle told her. "Curses don't work on a magic-null. But I can't deny you might unintentionally hinder us. Besides I do have a job for you; go back and let Ksaveras know what's happening. Then I want you to set up a communications center in the palace. Keep in touch with the police, the hospitals and the RBI and relay reports to everyone you can. We'll check in when we can too."

"Right!" Ksanya replied and raced back to the cab that was still waiting for a fare outside the building.

"Should have thought of that earlier," Candle commented. "I must be getting old. All right, then let's go find out just what's going on in Sinid Square."

Fourteen

Sinid Square was a large area set aside in the center of Querna to memorialize the end of the last Granom-Bellenin war that was concluded by the Treaty of Carlifa. At the center of the square stood a large bronze monument into which the likenesses of several famous Orenta and Granomen had been cast. At the center of the monument was a single tall bronze pillar at the top of which stood a statue of the Wizard Crossreed who had single-handedly forced the warring factions to put aside their arms and make peace.

Most such squares in Querna were surrounded by shops, but there were only shops on one side of Sinid Square. The other three sides were bordered by buildings of the Royal National Museum of Granom, an institution not entirely unlike The Museum of the Emmine Royal Institute of History in which Oceanvine had once nearly tried to jump on board what later turned out to merely be a copy of the *Maiyim Bourne*.

The mages took up point on the peaked roof of the museum's main building which gave them a view of the entire square. The scene that greeted them was eerie. As Southgate had described there were over one thousand people in the square. For an area that size it was not a large group but they were mostly concentrated on the north side of the square just below the building the mages stood watching them from. As the mages watched, however, more people were leaving the surrounding buildings and joining the crowd outside.

"I was afraid of that," Candle commented. "They're actively recruiting. Before, they were waiting for victims to come to them. This is obviously the beginning of a new phase. Time to bring it to an end. Here's my plan. I want you three to set up wards that will keep any of these people from leaving the square until we've countered the curse."

"We better make them multi-phase wards," Oceanvine suggested.

"What?" Candle asked. "Is this something new?"

“Something old, Uncle,” Oceanvine replied. “I’d planned to discuss it with you today, but I think the reason those supposedly alternating current wards work differently isn’t because of the current flow, but because that current is working in several different phases at once.”

“Well, yes, I suppose that’s true,” Candle nodded. “Though I never thought of it that way before. Let’s get back to the matter at hand. We want that sort of ward encircling the square and I think it will be best if you erect it around the outsides of the perimeter buildings, rather than the sides facing the square. There are people in those buildings and I don’t want them getting away.”

Once the wards were set, Candle went to work with the golden staff. He quickly examined the curse he was trying to defuse and saw it had not changed noticeably from what Oceanvine and Southgate had described the day before. And while the web of connections was more complex than what they had seen on the Isle of Fire, he did not believe he would have appreciably more difficulty taking the spell apart. Just as in Rjalkatyp, the Bond of Aritos used was the Gredac variant, so Candle did not expect many surprises.

Just as he had in Rjalkatyp, Candle invoked the Seal of Aritos and began draining power from the Bond segment of the curse on the people below. Oceanvine, although monitoring the ward that held everyone within the square, noted that he did not simply insert one spell string into the mass of people as he had on the previous occasion, but instead had sent out hundreds of strings. Turning around she also saw what she had not taken the opportunity to see on the Isle of Fire and in Sutheria. Above Candle’s head, like a highly ornate halo, floated the Seal of Aritos. He did not just imagine the sign, but brought it into being as a magical energy construct in much the same way one could see the Bond at work in the curse below. The spell strings Candle spun out into the crowd did not come directly from him, but from his invocation of the Seal.

Candle kept attaching strings until everyone below was connected to the spell he was casting. Then, once he was satisfied, he started sending out modifying “commands” to the Bond-Hook curse, to change its nature. Changing the nature of someone else’s spell was both difficult and dangerous, but his initial modifications were actually quite small and not entirely contrary to the original nature of the curse. His first change was to simplify the web of connections so that no one in the crowd was both master and slave. While he worked he made a mental note to tell Sextant and Oceanvine later that he thought of the complex system of spell strings as a spell web. It was a good and obvious metaphor, he thought, and might go far to help them understand other spell complexes.

Paring down the spell web took a long time and, when he was about halfway through, he began to sense resistance to his activity. He soon realized that the resistance was coming from the original slave masters, who were doing their best to stop him. However they had reacted too late. Candle had removed enough of the web to be able to easily tell them from the strings that went back to the slave masters, especially when those slave masters were actively fighting him via those master strings.

Just as Silverwind had first done in Tarnsa, Candle reversed the energy flow in the master strings, effectively reversing the roles of slaves and masters. Once he had control of the spell that way he realized that there were only two actual mages controlling all these slaves, not the six Southgate and Oceanvine had thought they detected. He shrugged that off, decided that they had counted the number of spell webs they could tell apart and there was no reason the mages who cast the spell could not have cast it on six original victims, rather than on one each.

Then, with the two slave masters unable to release themselves or even to fight back, he finished simplifying the spell web. Even though there were still victims out of sight in the buildings, he could see

their strings and affect them as though they were in the square. At this point the spell was still as potent as ever, and he needed to drain the energy out of it. It was another long slow process, but using the staff, he was able to send the power of the spell harmlessly into the highest reaches of Maiyim's upper atmosphere. Finally, just before the power was totally drained from the Bond-Hook spell construct, Candle stopped sending it into space and instead sent it as a massive surge up the spell strings to the erstwhile masters, killing them instantly wherever they were.

With nothing to power it, the spell simply collapsed and released all the victims who fell unconscious to the ground. "Okay, we can let the wards down now," Candle told the others, "and let the medics do their jobs."

As the wards came down, Candle floated them down to where the ambulances were waiting, but they had no sooner sent the medics into the square when an eerie moaning siren filled the air of the City of Querna .

"What is that?" Oceanvine and Sextant both asked.

"Air raid signal," Southgate informed them. "But who is attacking us?"

Fourteen

Finding a ride with the siren telling people to take cover was difficult, but after clearing away from the mad scramble of medical personnel into Sinid Square , the mages found several local policemen. "What's going on?" Southgate asked the closest one. "What's with the air raid siren?"

"The city's gone mad, my lady!" the cop told her. "There's rioting everywhere. I think they sounded the siren because they had no other general alarm signal that might be recognized,"

"It might get people off the streets anyway," Candle commented. "We need to get back to RBI headquarters. Any chance of hitching a lift?"

"Hitching a lift, my lord?" the cop asked, confused.

"Sorry," Candle apologized, recalling that a lift was what Granomen most often called an elevator. "It's Emmine slang. We need a ride to the RBI building."

"Yes, my lord," another police officer told him. "I'll take you there myself. Follow me."

"I don't like the sound of this," Candle muttered as they followed the man to his car. "It's just too much coincidence that the city should suddenly go from calm and business as usual to chaos just as we were working here."

"Do you think Sinid Square was a diversion?" Sextant asked as they started piling into the vehicle.

"Could be," Candle considered. "Or maybe the riots were supposed to be a diversion to keep us from the square and the timing was off. Either way, we have a really big mess on our hands."

The policeman drove rapidly through the city streets with his siren adding to the cacophony. Several times they saw crowds of people a few blocks ahead and he turned to detour around them. When they

got to the RBI's building, however the view was bleak. The doors were wide open and several windows on the upper floors had been broken.

"Is there anyone home?" Oceanvine wondered.

"I can't tell," Candle replied a moment later. "They may not need it any longer, but most of this building was shielded against aural scans. We'll have to look for ourselves. Office r, will you wait out here?"

"I'll come in with you, if you like, my lord," he replied.

"No," Candle shook his head. "The rioters have been here and may return. This will allow us to call for help if we need it."

The mages went inside, but the building turned out to be as deserted as it had appeared from outside. They returned to the police car to learn, "The palace is under siege, my lord, but the Chief of Police is holding a helicopter for you from which to survey the situation."

They climbed back into the car. "The Wurra was not really built with defense in mind," Candle noted as the car sped off once more. "The best they can do is close the gates and hope to either push back or shoot any besiegers. Is there a helipad at the palace?"

"I don't believe so, my lord," the policeman replied. "When His Majesty has to leave, he generally rides to the airport."

"Well, we'll worry about that when the time comes," Candle decided.

They arrived at the main police station in just a few minutes to discover five hundred determined men in uniform preparing to march out into the city in riot gear. The Chief of Police, Sir Feodor Thannov had just finished giving them orders. Candle told him. "If the situation is as bad as I fear, I'm going to get the royal family out of Querna."

"Good idea," Sir Feodor agreed, beckoning them to follow him. "Reports from the Wurra are grim. It's not just a riot, though. It's a revolution. The members of the People's Party are attempting to overthrow the government. They just broadcast a call to arms on the local radio and television stations."

"Damn One Maiyim!" Candle cursed.

"Are they mad?" Southgate asked. "What about the military? How does a mere political party expect to withstand an attack by any of our armed forces?"

"That's the problem, Lady Southgate," Sir Feodor replied. "They have the local army base under their control and it looks as if they may have enough supporters throughout the nation to hold the entire army. The Navy and Air Force appear to be mostly loyal to His Majesty although there are enough high-level officers in the People's Party to keep them squabbling among themselves for the time being."

"What about the Marines?" Oceanvine asked.

"They are part of the Navy in Granom," Southgate explained, "not a separate service as they are in Bellinen and Emmine. This isn't good. If the People's party captures the royal family, they'll kill them. Then the armed forces will probably just cave in and start working for the new government, whatever it turns out to be."

“Or worse,” Candle added as they came within site of the police helipad. “This will be the start of an all-out civil war as several factions vie for control of the nation.”

“We won’t be able to land at the palace,” Sir Feodor warned them as they entered the waiting helicopter.

“We can always jump out,” Candle told him. “Being mages means we don’t need parachutes.”

The flying machine rose up into the air and spun around until they were facing the palace two miles away, then with a sudden forward tilt and a surge of speed they headed toward the Wurra Palace. As the craft drew nearer to the palace, they could make out the thousands of people attempting to invade the palace grounds. So far the iron gates were holding, but only because the royal guardsmen were firing their weapons into the crowd.

Several fire trucks with long ladders had been driven up to various places around the palace perimeter and people were attempting to use them as scaling ladders. Sextant saw that and quickly cast projectile wards that broke the ladders and rendered them useless.

“Good thinking,” Candle commended him. “Vine, how about you cast a protective ward beneath us in case one of those guards mistakes us for the bad guys?”

“That’s Oceanvine,” she corrected him, although not before placing a plate-like circular, impenetrable ward under the belly of the helicopter.

“All those people are cursed,” Southgate noted, “but it’s not quite the same.”

Candle looked down. “No it isn’t. It’s still the Bond of Aritos coupled with the Hook, but this is the Kerawlat variant. I hate to say it quite like this, but this is probably an improvement over the Gredac-bonded variant.”

“No master strings, though,” Sextant observed.

“I was wondering if they would think of this the moment I discovered they were using the Bond,” Candle admitted. “Kerawlat is the demon whose greatest strength is related to the animal kingdom. His Bond is ideally suited to this sort of application on at least two levels. First, it will have a greater effect on living creatures than any of the others, and second it will make the curse behave more like a living creature itself.

“The Gredac variant was bad enough, because it made the curse behave like one of those tropical vines that grows several feet a day, but plants have roots which I suspect is the metaphor the spell was crafted with. This one has no root, the cursed people are all linked together, but they are acting on orders that were given earlier and now the strings to the master or masters no longer exist. The Bond keeps the curse self-contained so the victims neither die nor are they released. I suppose the masters can give additional or modifying orders later, by re-establishing the master string. It removes a lot of flexibility; you can’t change plans quickly, but it also means we cannot trace the masters through the spell. It also means we may have to remove the curse from each victim individually.

“There’s another implication I really don’t like,” Candle continued. “Even if I killed the mages who used the Bonds of Gredac and Pohn, there’s still at least one more out there.”

“Why?” Oceanvine asked, shouting to be heard over the chopping noise of the helicopter. “Can’t it all be the same person? Since this curse is self-contained, he could even be dead by now. You said yourself you don’t need to have cast the spell to be a slave master.”

“You need to be a mage to be a slave master of this spell,” Sextant reminded her.

“Yes, but you still don’t need to cast the spell yourself,” Oceanvine insisted. “Ownership of a slave can be transferred, remember?”

“Yes, but in this case I doubt it,” Candle told her. “It takes too much to learn how to use any variant of the Bond and each one has its specific challenges, at least according to the literature. You’ll forgive me if I never actually tried it for myself, although there is a text kept under lock and key in the University library at Merinne that I was allowed to read while working on my master’s thesis. If I hadn’t been a protégé of Silverwind, I doubt I would have been allowed, but it was written by a mage who really had learned how to use the Arithan variant of the Bond. He evidently used it a few times and when it nearly blew up in his face, it scared him so much he wrote the book to warn others from trying it. It didn’t do a lot of good as at least two other mages used it as their own attempts to harness the demons. That’s why the University keeps it locked up.”

“Why didn’t they just destroy the filthy thing?” Southgate asked.

“Can you really see the Orenta actually destroying a book?”

Candle countered. “They don’t even burn worn-out books, they first make sure there are copies of the text preserved, and then they carefully recycle everything. It’s not a reverence for the book itself but for knowledge in general, so even if the book was worn out, they would never destroy the knowledge. Anyway, there are no known instances in which a mage attempted to master more than one variant of the Bond.”

“You could if you wanted to, couldn’t you, Uncle?” Oceanvine asked.

“I don’t know,” Candle admitted. “I’m too smart to try even one.”

He leaned out the door. Below them the Wurra Palace was coming up fast.

“How close to the ground can we get, pilot?” Candle asked.

“Not very, my lord,” the pilot replied. “The central courtyard of the palace is too cluttered. Our vanes would hit a tree or a statue if I tried it. I could hover over a wall while you jumped down, but it’s rather dangerous there. The only flat area large enough is the roof of the keep tower.”

“That will do,” Candle told him. “Put us down there, please.”

“I won’t be able to come completely to rest,” the pilot warned him. “I’ve no idea if the roof can take the weight of this machine, so there’s going to be a lot of rotor blade wash out there. It will be best to drop flat to the roof as soon as you can until I lift up and away. Are you sure there’s a way in from there?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Candle told him. “We can levitate down to a window. We could jump out, but this is safer, I think.”

“Anyway you want it, my lord,” the pilot agreed. “We’re coming up on the roof now.” There was a light bang as the vehicle’s legs touched the roof. “We’re here. Everybody out!”

“Right,” Candle nodded and waited until the others were out of the helicopter. “Get yourself out of here, pilot! Godspeed!”

Candle dropped out the door and was immediately buffeted by the strong winds being chopped up by the machine’s rotor blades. He quickly flattened himself out against the roof top between Sextant and Southgate just as the wind got even stronger and the helicopter lifted away.

They stayed down an additional few seconds until the sound of the flying machine began to fade away. “Is there a way down?” Southgate asked Candle, “Aside from levitation, that is?”

“Well, we’ll still need to levitate, but there is an emergency hatch over there. I suppose someone has to maintain this roof from time to time,” Candle remarked.

“It’s locked,” Oceanvine reported.

“Haven’t I ever taught you how to pick a lock?” Candle asked.

“No,” Oceanvine replied. “As a matter of fact you promised to do so last year on our way back from Silamon, but I got too busy writing that paper and you kept putting it off.”

“Oh,” Candle sighed. “Well you can probably figure it out if you know how one works. For now I’ll handle it.” He concentrated for a bit, letting his magical senses reach through the hatch to the bolt and lock that were holding it shut. There was a simple four tumbler key lock which he opened with ease then caused to slip out of the hole it rested in. Distantly he heard it hit the floor below. Then he slid the bolt back telekinetically and opened the hatch.

Candle stuck his head through the hatchway to see King Ksaveras aiming a long, large bore hunting rifle at him. “Hi, honey!” Candle quipped. “I’m home!”

Fifteen

“Thank the Gods it’s you, Wizard,” Ksaveras swore reverently.

“We’d have gotten here sooner,” Candle replied as he levitated himself down to the floor, “but we had to take a shortcut.” As he came to rest on the floor and the other mages joined him, the rest of the members of the royal family came out of hiding from the corners of the tower room. “We have to find a way to get you and your family out of the WurraPalace .”

“The family, yes,” Ksaveras agreed, “but I’ll be staying here. I will not desert my kingdom.”

“It might be a ship of state, but you’re not going down with it, Veras,” Candle told him firmly. I won’t allow it.”

“Just who do you think is king here?” Ksaveras demanded.

“You are, lad,” Candle told him evenly, “and if you intend to remain king, you need to learn just when to exercise the better part of valor. Your son is too young to inherit so the crown would pass to Ksanya’s and Zak’s father, Duke Xander. I believe he’s currently serving as the ambassador to Bellinen. That’s not

a problem, but considering who his grandmother was, there could be a problem with the succession of anyone in his entire family.”

“Our laws only specifically prohibited Prince Zakhar from ascending to the throne,” Ksaveras replied. “They do not prohibit his descendants.”

“That custom has never actually been tested and we both know it,” Candle told him. “I believe you, or rather Duke Xander, would have an incredibly hard time being accepted by the current Parliament, especially with the People’s Party being as strong as it is.”

“You’ve already told me that’s a front for One Maiyim and One Maiyim is an illegal organization,” Ksaveras replied. “I’ll proclaim the People’s Party illegal too.”

“If they kill you tonight,” Candle countered, “I doubt anything you put on paper this afternoon is going to be taken very seriously. Anyway, if Duke Xander and Earl Zakhar are eliminated from the succession, who is next in line?”

“Why that would be…” Ksaveras paused, trying to remember which of his cousins would be next in line for the throne. “Uh, the Dukes of Barme, Khordel and Palsondir all have fair claims after Earl Zakhar.”

“Uh huh,” Candle replied. “The kingdom could very well have a civil war on its hands, assuming we manage to win the current civil war that is. No, it will be far better for the realm if you don’t die at this time.”

“He’s right, dear,” Orya told him as she led her children to the center of the room. “We need to get all of us to safety. Once that’s been taken care of you can consolidate your forces and return with a vengeance. I don’t believe I just said that.”

“You’ve been watching too much television,” Candle laughed as the lift door opened. “I don’t suppose this palace has a back door, does it? A secret passage to a safe haven?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” Ksaveras replied.

“That’s because you were always too well behaved, Veras,” Ksanya told him as she stepped out of the elevator. “Yes, Uncle, there’s a passage. Zak and I used to use it occasionally to sneak out for concerts and parties.”

“Where does it lead?” Candle asked. “If it is only just outside the gates, it won’t be very useful to us.”

“Oh. It’s much better than that,” Ksanya laughed. “It leads directly into the Wurra Street subway station.”

“You’re kidding?”

“No, not at all!” Ksanya shook her head. “There’s this rather nondescript metal door on the train platform, so we don’t even need to buy a ticket. Just wait for the right train and you’re off.”

“How did you get back in without getting caught?” Oceanvine asked.

“The door locks from this side only,” Ksanya replied. “When we went out, we left the door unlocked and then locked it again when we came back in. However, are the trains still running?”



“If not, we can walk along the tracks until we’re far enough away,” Candle told her. “I’m going to go see if I can assist your guards, but you should get ready to go. Ksanya, show me where that passage is and then come back and lead everyone else to that passage.”

“What about the others in the palace?” Ksaveras asked.

“How many are here?” Candle asked.

“Nearly all the servants,” Orya replied before her husband could answer, “and a handful of cousins.”

“Then who are all those people at dinner every night?” Oceanvine asked.

“Still more nobles,” Orya explained. “Most of them have houses here in town or stay in hotels or with family. Very few stay in the palace itself and while many arrive at all times of day, most had not come before the attack began.”

“We’ll try to get out as many people as we can,” Candle decided. “Don’t bother packing, just grab warm coats and we’ll be off.”

“Where are we going?” Ksaveras asked. “Where is there safety in Querna?”

“The University, Your Majesty,” Southgate answered. “There are air raid shelters in the basements of most buildings and they are stocked with food and water. Not very good food, but it won’t kill us.”

“The servants have homes in town,” Orya pointed out. “They’ll probably be able to go home fairly soon. The rest of us will have to find someplace even safer, but the University will be a good place for tonight.”

The elevator was tightly packed as they went down, but it was a short trip and they stopped at the residence level so that only Ksanya and Candle continued on to the ground floor. Ksanya quickly showed Candle where the doorway to the secret passage was; a panel in a small storage room in the basement. She opened it and showed him where the control to close it again was hidden. “I’ll leave the door open for you, but you obviously want to close it if you’re the last one through.”

She rushed back for her coat while Candle made his way toward the gate. “My lord,” the captain of the guards tried to stop him. “It’s too dangerous out here.”

“No kidding,” Candle snapped peevishly. “We’ll be evacuating the palace in a few minutes. I’m here to help where I can. How are your men doing?”

The captain looked like he was about to tell Candle to get back inside, but at the last moment he obviously changed his mind and answered. “It’s bad, my lord. We didn’t start to shoot at them until they started shooting at us, but now we need to shoot at anyone who gets too close to the gates or any of the walls.”

“How many men in your command, Captain?”

“Three hundred,” he replied. “We’re badly outnumbered, but the Royal Navy promises to drop as many marines in as they can.”

“When?” Candle asked.

“They should have been here by now, my lord.”

“They should have been here within minutes of the initial attack,” Candle told him. The captain just nodded his head. “I’m going up to the top of the gatehouse, and see if I can do something to defuse the situation.”

Without waiting for the captain to respond, Candle flew directly to the top of the gatehouse. From there, from behind a transparent, but otherwise impermeable, ward, he had a good view of the attackers. They were milling about at the far side of the broad avenue that led past the Wurra Palace. This was the only area where he had seen them when he flew over in the helicopter and while they were now further from the gate, they did not seem to have spread out too much.

That made a certain amount of sense, Candle thought, since the iron gates, as imposing as they appeared, were probably the weakest part of the palace’s defenses. He examined the curse on the victims, but all he saw was the same complex spell net he had seen from the air earlier. There were also dozens of bodies on the ground just outside the gate and along the wall of the Wurra. The fire trucks, whose ladders Sextant had disabled, sat disabled where Candle had last seen them.

“Time to go to work,” Candle told himself aloud. Previously he had always attempted to combat the Bond-Hook spell with only the staff to aid him. He only invoked the Seal of Aritos when he was not able to handle the diffusion of the energies of this lethally dangerous spell without it. This time he started with the Seal.

He remembered Silverwind dispelling the Bond of Kerawlat on Elisto by draining the power out of it in the same way he had handled the other cases of the Bond-Hook. He immediately started doing the same this time. It was a mistake. A moment after energy started flowing into the staff and then shooting upward, dozens of spell strings came shooting toward Candle. They splashed across his protective ward, but then started whipping around and found the edge. He stopped siphoning energy and increased the size of the ward. He tried again and even more spell strings came toward him.

He tried one last time, encased by a protective ward, with a hole just large enough to allow his own spell string to get out and for the energy to flow out of the staff. Even then, however, spell strings from all over came at him. He allowed the energy to continue draining until one of the attacking threads found its way through the hole in the ward and started toward him. Candle stopped immediately and closed all the holes in his ward, stopping the thread.

He was about to try again, when a loud explosion to his left blew him off his perch. He stopped himself from falling and turned to see what had happened. A truck had been driven along Wurra Street. He had not paid much attention to it. In spite of the inherent stupidity of driving around the city while an air raid alert was still technically in effect, there had been quite a few vehicles on the streets. Now, however, one of them had been a rolling bomb.

Candle, it turned out, had been partially shielded by one of the fire trucks and his ward had cushioned him against the blast still more, although he was now hovering over one hundred feet from the gatehouse.

Candle grimaced and added the life of the truck’s driver to the toll One Maiyim would eventually have to pay. But across the street the Bond-Hook slaves were starting to run toward the gaping hole in the palace’s walls.

Candle swooped down toward the captain of the guards and shouted, “Sound the retreat, Captain. The

door to the keep is more defensible now and we need to cover Their Majesties' escape." That wasn't Candle's plan, however, and as soon as the remaining guards were inside the main building of the Palace, he cast an impenetrable ward across the doorway. "They can't get in until this ward comes down," he informed the captain. "Time to get you out of here."

"But the defense of the palace?" the captain protested.

"The Palace is lost, Captain," Candle informed him. "By now most everyone is out of here too. You won't do His Majesty any good by throwing your life away at this point."

"If you could keep those people out of the keep," the captain demanded, "why couldn't you have shielded the entire palace?"

"I'm not a god, Captain," Candle replied. "I have to sleep sometime. Any ward can be overcome by superior force and while I might be able to counter any attack, I have to be awake to do it. Don't worry. We'll return here soon."

The captain thought about that before nodding his reluctant agreement. Candle led the guards down to the entrance to the passage where Ksaveras was waiting for them. "I thought I told you to get out of the Wurra," Candle greeted him.

"Kings aren't very good at taking orders," Ksaveras replied.

"Yeah, I've noticed," Candle muttered. "Captain, please take your men through first."

"Shouldn't we be covering the king's retreat?" the captain asked.

"I don't know for certain that it is safe at the other end of this tunnel," Candle admitted. "I'd rather your men went ahead. I'll protect our rear."

The guards trooped into the tunnel, followed by Ksaveras and Candle. Once they were all inside, Candle shut the secret panel behind them and then placed an impenetrable ward up just inside it for good measure. There were ways to keep a spell working even after a mage stopped actively maintaining it and Candle put enough power into it to keep this one going for two or three months. A good mage would be able to deactivate it, but they would have to find it first.

The subway station at the far end of the tunnel was mostly deserted by the time they got there. There were a few castle servants waiting for a train to arrive along with Oceanvine and Ksanya.

"We couldn't all fit on the same train," Oceanvine explained when Candle asked.

"We still won't," Candle replied, looking over at the remaining Royal Guardsmen.

"We won't be going with you, Wizard," the captain informed him. "We'll be staying in the city and working toward the expulsion of the People's Party by His Majesty's command."

Candle looked to Ksaveras for confirmation and got it. "Very well," Candle told him. "I'll be in touch."

"Where are you taking the royal family?" the captain asked.

"Better you don't know," Candle replied, casting a quick tracer spell on the man. He would be able to

use it to track the captain down later. The captain nodded as a train pulled into the station and Ksaveras followed Oceanvine's party on to the train. Once he was on board, Candle joined him. "Good man," Candle commented grimly as the door closed and the train started rolling away.

"One of the best," Ksaveras replied. "Why didn't you tell him we would be staying in Querna?"

"Two reasons," Candle replied. "First, the fewer people who know the better. Part of the danger of the Hook is that if anyone who knows where you are becomes a victim, they'll tell their master where you are, although only if asked. I suspect that's going to be a very common question shortly. Second, you aren't staying in the city."

"The Hell I'm not!" Ksaveras replied angrily.

"The Hell, you are not!" Candle growled back at him. "Tonight, after dark, I'm taking you and your family to a place that is absolutely safe. Later, once I have a handle on how to turn this back around in our favor, then I'll allow you to reenter Querna City and you'll be able to come in as the fierce warrior king if you so desire."

Sixteen

"I wasn't expecting you," Methis told Candle the next day when he stepped out of the bus they had commandeered to get the royal family out of Querna. "I especially wasn't expecting you to bring company."

"So much for seeing the future," Candle whispered to Her.

"In order to see the future, you need to be facing in the right direction, dear," Methis whispered back. "Now be nice and introduce me to the king and his kin. They might not be surprised to be recognized, but it will at least give them a name to call me by, hmm?"

Candle introduced Her as his "old friend, Fireiron" and also mentioned she was married to a mage named Artifice. "You honor us, Lady Fireiron," Ksaveras told her, "and your hospitality and sanctuary will be well rewarded."

"I seek nothing, Your Majesty," Methis replied, "but the eventual restoration of your throne. As a loyal Granom it is my duty to do what I can to achieve that end. Oh, you probably don't want to hear this in these circumstances, but happy birthday, Your Majesty."

Ksaveras forced himself to smile; it was a particularly grim smile. "Thank you Lady Fireiron. I would that you were able to say that in happier times."

"Perhaps next year," Methis told him. "Now please make yourselves at home, while I prepare rooms for you. Oceanvine, dear, will you assist me?"

"Of course," Oceanvine agreed and followed Methis up the stairs to where the bedrooms were. "Looks a bit bigger than last time," she noted quietly.

"Yes," Methis nodded, "The house has always been bigger on the inside than the outside, I just hope this isn't so much larger that our guests notice the difference."

“If I didn’t know better,” Oceanvine commented as they entered a room halfway down the hall, “I’d assume the rooms extend out and over the playroom and garage.”

“Good,” Methis replied, closing the door.

“You really didn’t need my help up here,” Oceanvine told Her, noticing the room was already prepared for occupation.

“Yes and no, dear,” Methis smiled. “I’m expected to be preparing rooms and that normally takes a bit of time. For two of us it will take half as much time and it will give us a chance to catch up.”

The door suddenly opened and Ksanya stuck her head in the room, “Oh here you are! I came upstairs to help, but it looks like everything’s ready. How did you do it so quickly?”

“Magic, of course, dear,” Methis replied with a troubled tone in her voice. “How did you come up the stairs without me noticing?”

“I walk quietly,” Ksanya commented quickly. “Magic? I doubt even Uncle Candle could work that fast. It would take one of the…” Ksanya’s eyes widened and she sank quickly to her knees. “Holy Methis!” she said reverently, head bowed.

Methis sighed. “Every rare once in a while someone guesses right off,” she commented to Oceanvine. “Please don’t bow, Ksanya. I’ve never demanded that sort of devotion. Since you know, however, you may as well have a seat and join us. Now why is it I couldn’t detect your approach? Oh, I see. Yes, there always has been a line of mild magic-nulls within the royal family. It only comes out every few generations, but you appear to have the trait far stronger than most.”

“I’ve been training with Cousin Oceanvine,” Ksanya replied as she sat on the bed next to Oceanvine. “I don’t know if I should continue, though. What if I extend my null magic field so far that I may as well be living in the Stone Age?”

“The concept of a magic-null has always been highly misunderstood,” Methis told her. “Most people see magic-nulls as a sort of anti-mage. The confusion is understandable, I suppose, but the truth is you are no less a mage than Oceanvine, it’s just that you are what in the past was referred to as a one-trick pony. But it’s a very good trick.”

“Is it trainable?” Ksanya asked. “Can I learn to turn it on and off? To extend the field or retract it?”

“Not turn it on and off,” Methis replied, “but you could learn to pull it back so that the null magic effect does not extend beyond your own skin and extend it outward should you have the need.”

“How far?” Ksanya asked.

“That depends on you, of course,” Methis replied, “and your surroundings. You should be able to extend it further through air than through stone for example.”

“How do I learn to do that?” Ksanya asked.

“We’ve sort of been stumbling through it,” Oceanvine admitted.

“You’ve made a good start,” Methis assured her, but also noted something was troubling the young woman as well. To Ksanya she replied, “If you like I can help you during your stay here if you’ll promise to not reveal my identity to the others.”

“Sure,” Ksanya nodded. “Just one thing, though. If you’re Methis, who is this Artifice you’re married to?”

Methis smiled, “Who else would the last single Goddess marry but the remaining single God?”

“Wow!” Ksanya breathed as she figured it out. “They never taught us that one in religious school!”

“Well, maybe we’re just living in sin,” Methis chuckled. “Now, Oceanvine, what’s troubling you, child?”

Oceanvine looked into Methis’ eyes and for a few moments was able to just shrug and smile. Then her worries came crashing down on her. “Oh, Methis! This is even worse than in Silamon. There we came in and the riots began. So many people died in the fires and in the backlash of destructive spells. In Rjalkatyp it happened again and we toppled the government there to boot. Now look what’s happening in Querna. People are dying again, the royal family is in exile and... and...” She started sobbing.

“What?” Ksanya asked. “You think this is your fault, cousin? You’ve been doing everything you could to stop it. These things don’t happen because you’re here. You’re here because they happen.

“It’s not my idea of a summer vacation, I’ll admit, though,” Ksanya continued. “Next time you want something like that, let me know. I’ll meet you in Merinne and we’ll see if we can scandalize the Orenta.”

Oceanvine looked up and while tears still streaked her face, she was able to give Ksanya a slight smile.

“She’s right, dear,” Methis added. “You’re here because Ksaveras asked you here.”

“He asked us to look into the Gran 4 space mission problems,” Oceanvine replied.

“It’s all related,” Methis told her.

“It is?”

“Oh yes,” Methis nodded. “So why don’t you tell me everything that happened since you left. You’ll feel better when you’re through. I guarantee it.”

“Don’t you know what’s happened?” Ksanya asked.

“Yes, most of it, but hearing it from Oceanvine’s perspective will tell me even more than the bare facts,” Methis replied. “I’m not omniscient, I have to learn things just like you do.”

Oceanvine told her all about what happened on the Isle of Fire and then what happened in Querna. “Uncle Candle had more trouble than he expected with the variant of the Bond just before we ran for it. He didn’t want to talk about it on the way here. Probably he did not want to upset the king and his family any more than they already were, but I got the impression he wanted to talk to Aritos about how to use His Seal on it.”

“The hook combined with the Bond of Kerawlat?” Methis mused. “There are so many ways in which that might go, but I do believe he might have had better luck using My sign. I’ve been meaning to show it

to him for years now.”

“What does it look like?” Oceanvine asked curiously.

Methis considered the request, “Yes, I think it would do no harm to show it to you. You could not invoke it unless I granted permission and you may have dire need of it one day.” She held out her hand and a complex golden symbol appeared just above it. As Oceanvine looked at the flower-like sign, each “petal” intricately marked with complex and unique designs, she noticed it was moving. The sign of Methis was made of several concentric rings of the flower-like petals and each ring was slowly moving either clockwise or counter-clockwise. The center of the sign was a plain disk, mirror-polished in which Oceanvine could see herself.

“Wow! It’s gorgeous!” Oceanvine breathed.

“It’s a clockwork flower,” Ksanya commented, equally entranced.

“But it’s so complex,” Oceanvine commented. “How will Uncle Candle ever memorize it?”

Methis closed Her hand. “I’ll give him something like one of these,” She replied, opening Her hand again to reveal a pair of crystal pendants. Within each one was the Seal of Methis. “These are for you two. Study it, Oceanvine. Someday you may need to have it memorized. Ksanya, sadly you’ll never be able to invoke My sign even with permission, but at least with this you’ll always have this piece of magic that will work for you.

“Oceanvine,” She continued, “I cannot give you permission to invoke My sign at this time. It would be as dangerous to you at this stage of your education as if you were attempting to use the Bond of Aritos. Someday, though. Keep this in mind, it was only last year that Aritos gave Candle permission to invoke His sign. Now I think we’ve been up here long enough, let’s let the others settle in.”

They arrived downstairs and found everyone glued to the television set. On it, a well-known news anchorman was speaking, “This afternoon, Baron Kaspar Wallono, leader of the People’s Party entered the WurraPalace and declared the end of the monarchy. He has leveled a multitude of criminal charges on His Majesty Ksaveras XI and various other members of his family, palace staff and known political supporters.”

The television cut to the picture of a scar-faced Granom who looked like he could have been the better part of a stone wall. “I am offering a reward of one million Crowns for information leading to the arrest of Former King Ksaveras,” the Granom who was ostensibly Baron Kaspar announced. “A similar reward for the one-time Queen Orezhda and various other commensurate amounts for any other members of the former royal family and their personal servants. All members of any party who have not sworn allegiance to the new Commonwealth of Granom are reminded that the penalty for failure to do so is death. So say I, Kaspar Wallono, Lord President of the Commonwealth of Granom.”

“Nice to be wanted, isn’t it Veras?” Ksanya laughed darkly. His response, however caused Orya to hold her hands over three year old Prince Ksaveras’ ears.

Much later, sometime after midnight, Candle wandered downstairs to find Methis curled up in her favorite reading chair. “What are you reading?” he asked curiously. She held up the book. It was a typical trashy romance. “I hope that’s better than what You were reading the first time I caught You here,” Candle chuckled.

“Not really,” Methis replied. “Lady Ysemay was not really a bad writer, you know. Her treatments of the Silverwind stories were somewhat superficial but they had all the necessary elements of a decent story and her histories were actually very well written.”

“Why is it I always catch you reading the trash?” Candle wondered.

“Just lucky?” Methis countered. “Actually I read everything and there’s a lot more trash than there is good literature, so the odds are you’ll catch Me reading the poorly written stuff. Did I ever tell you how much I enjoyed your stories?”

“I don’t recall it ever coming up,” Candle replied, “but thank you.”

“So what’s keeping you awake this time?” Methis asked.

“Nothing,” Candle replied. “Everything. I’m not sure. I think this has to be the biggest mess I’ve ever had to deal with.”

“Could be,” Methis agreed. “It’s certainly the most complex. I think you’re up to it and now that you’re armed with both My sign and Aritos’ you’re more than prepared to handle it.”

“I hope so. Aritos showed me a few new tricks with the staff,” Candle told her. “I think that’s what’s really bothering me. He never does something like that unless I’m really in trouble.”

“Perhaps, but once He does, you’re not in anywhere near as much trouble afterward, are you?” Methis pointed out.

“I suppose not. Are You sure it was safe to show Oceanvine Your sign?” Candle asked.

“Perfectly certain, yes.” Methis responded calmly.

“She’s so young,” Candle told Her.

“She’s about the same age you were when Aritos showed you His sign,” Methis countered.

“She doesn’t have the training I had at the time,” Candle objected.

“Not yet,” Methis smiled, “but she will.”

Seventeen

Candle, Oceanvine and Sextant arrived back in Querna three days after the coup to find no sign of Southgate either at the University or her apartment. “I wish she thought to leave us a note,” Candle commented.

“Which could have been read by anyone,” Sextant told him. “We should have arranged a place to meet.”

“You’re right,” Candle admitted. “She must have had to go underground.” He looked around her apartment some more.



“So does this mean we should go back to the University campus?” Oceanvine asked.

“Maybe, but not right away,” Candle told her. “The fact that the university looks relatively unscathed could mean there is some sympathy with the People’s Party on campus.”

“Most of the city looks unscathed, sir,” Sextant replied. “There are broken windows in the business district and in some neighborhoods, although not very many, but I haven’t seen any signs of fire. But if Doctor Southgate is in hiding, how are we going to find her?”

“I doubt we can, not directly anyway, but we can find whatever is passing for the Resistance,” Candle replied.

“Are you sure there is one, sir?” Sextant asked.

“Reasonably,” Candle nodded. “It’s only been three days and neither One Maiyim nor the Resistance has had time to get organized. If we can strike back hard and fast, we can drive them out of the palace and off the archipelago altogether. And fortunately, I do have a way to find the core of the Resistance.”

“How did you arrange that, Uncle?” Oceanvine asked.

“Tracking spell,” Candle told then smugly. “I tagged the captain of the guard just before we left the train station yesterday. He’s about a mile off to the south.”

“So is the University,” Sextant noted.

“Maybe they are there after all,” Candle shrugged.

It was early evening, but there were very few people out on the cold sidewalks of Querna. After the first few minutes, it started snowing. “Why are the streets so empty?” Oceanvine wondered.

“Curfew,” Candle told her. “It was one of the first things the so-called Lord President did. He passed a law making it illegal to be out on the streets after dark.”

“Then why are we out?” Oceanvine pressed.

“Strangely enough, One Maiyim doesn’t really have the hang of conquest. This is the closest they’ve ever come and they’re still learning, I think. That’s good for us too. Have you seen any police or military vehicles on the streets?”

“No,” both Oceanvine and Sextant shook their heads.

“Stupid of them,” Candle commented. “Not that I’m complaining. It makes it that much easier for us. They’ve declared a curfew, but haven’t set up any way in which to enforce it. Rather silly of them, although for the most part it seems to be working. It wouldn’t in Emmine, I don’t think, but Granomen are naturally law abiding so if a government, even an illegitimate one like this, passes a law, most of them will obey.”

They were just passing the doorway to a run-down apartment building when they heard, “Lady Oceanvine! What are you doing here?”

“Melondia?” Oceanvine recognized the woman. Both were instinctively speaking softly.

“We thought you had made it to safety,” Melondia told her.

“I did,” Oceanvine told her, “and now I’m back.”

“You shouldn’t be,” Melondia told her. “Don’t you know there’s a price on your head? One thousand crowns.”

“I’m not sure if I’m flattered or insulted,” Oceanvine replied. “Uncle, is that a good price for a journeywoman mage?”

“Depends,” Candle chuckled. “I’m sure they would not normally offer more than one hundred, but you were the one who stopped Adamant in Silamon.”

“How would they know that?” Oceanvine asked.

“They probably don’t,” Candle admitted, “although they’ll know you were there. Also, don’t forget you’re running around in your great-grandmother’s name. It’s possible they’re confusing you with her, in which case they’re hardly offering enough.”

“My great-grandmother’s name,” Oceanvine repeated. “Did I choose wrongly then?”

“I doubt it,” Candle told her. “It’s definitely your name now. It may take a while for some others to realize it, but you have definitely made it your own. We need to find that captain of the guards. Wish I’d thought to ask his name now.”

“Captain Narton,” Melondia supplied. “We’ve been working with him since you left the palace yesterday.”

“We?” Candle asked.

“Oceanvine’s girls,” Melondia told him proudly. “C’mon, I’ll take you to him.”

“And you worried it wasn’t truly your name?” Sextant laughed. “Looks like you’re spreading it around.” Oceanvine returned his laugh and they continued on.

“We’ve been acting as scouts,” Melondia told them. “Nobody really expects a street girl to worry about curfews. And if they were to arrest us... Well, I’ve spent the night in jail before. It’s not a big deal.”

“I thought you didn’t work the streets,” Oceanvine commented.

“You don’t think the men in charge can tell the difference, do you?” Melondia replied. “Okay, we have to be careful here.” She looked over her shoulder then beckoned them into a dark alley. “This is the dangerous part. We’re down in that subway station tonight, but Captain Narton has ordered us not to approach in groups of more than two and there’s a password too, so I’ll go ahead with Oceanvine, then you two guys. I’ll let them know you’re coming.”

“What’s the password?” Candle asked.

“Uh, uh,” Melondia told him. “We aren’t to even speak it out here. Don’t worry. I’ll get you in. Just wait

a minute before following us.”

Melondia led Oceanvine into the subway station. It was one of the larger such stations in Querna with administrative offices above street level although they were only accessible from the subterranean lobby. Halfway down the stairs, she whistled a short musical passage. Oceanvine did not recognize it, but thought it sounded like a folk tune. Then they went the rest of the way down the stairs. When they reached the lobby it was empty and Melondia whistled the tune again before turning to the left where the ticket offices stood. There were two Granomish women in the ticket office wearing the uniforms of the subway service. One of them looked vaguely familiar to Oceanvine and that one nodded her head respectfully at the young mage.

“Not much business tonight,” the other woman said by way of greeting.

“I have two more coming in behind me,” Melondia told them. “I’ll wait for them if that’s okay. They don’t know the password.”

“You vouch for them?”

“Wizard Candle and his student,” Melondia replied.

“Journeyman Sextant,” Oceanvine supplied.

“Good!” the woman behind the ticket gate replied. “Come on through. I’ll let them in.”

Melondia led the way around to the security door that was the entrance to the rest of the office area. They entered an elevator and she pressed the button for the top floor. “We were lucky that most of the subway service is loyal to His Majesty,” Melondia commented to Oceanvine. “Baron Kaspar wants the trains to continue running so he did not look too closely at the people who were running them. Captain Narton thinks we’re fairly secure in here.”

It’s only been a little over three days,” Oceanvine remarked as they reached the top and the elevator doors opened.. “He may decide to take a better look once he feels he’s consolidated his power.”

“We plan to strike back before then, my lady,” Captain Narton told her. “Welcome to the underground.”

“Nice view from down here,” Oceanvine remarked, looking out a window. The building, several stories taller than its neighbors afforded them a clear view of the city.

“No one ever said an underground movement had to meet in a cave,” the captain retorted.

“Of course not,” Oceanvine replied. “Do you know where Southgate is?”

“She’s on reconnaissance,” Narton replied. “We expect her back shortly.”

“And you’re in charge?” Oceanvine asked, keeping her tone polite.

“Only of this location, my lady,” he replied. “The Royal Navy is loyal to the King as is most of the Air Force, although, several generals there are keeping them from getting involved. Admiral Hasparov and Marine General Vintov are our two highest ranking officers and they’ve already neutralized the People’s Party sympathizers under their commands.”

“Good news,” Candle told him, as he left the elevator. “What about the Army?”

“Solidly behind the Lord President, I’m afraid, sir,” Narton replied bitterly.

“I suspect a lot of them were victims of the Hook early on,” Candle told him. “The same could be true in the Air Force. The Navy and Marines, however, don’t have large bases here in Querna, so they’ll tend to be uncorrupted. It could be a lot worse, though. Do we have a large military presence in Querna yet?”

“Not yet. Two carriers and their support ships are on their way as is every marine unit that can be scraped up, but they won’t start arriving until tomorrow,” Narton explained. “The *HMS Quartzvein* is the closest carrier and group to the city. She’s due here tomorrow night sometime, but we’ll probably have her hold off until the *HMS Palsondir* arrives. We’re hoping she gets here while the Air force is still neutralized. Admiral Hasparov is worried they might swing toward the Commonwealth.”

“They could, if there are upper-level officers who have been Hooked,” Candle replied. “One Maiyim is using a particularly dirty variant of the nastiest spell ever devised. Not only does it enslave its victims, but it also spreads to anyone the victims come in contact with for more than a minute or two. It’s why they were using prostitutes to help spread it and why the Army fell to it so easily, and although I suspect the generals and colonels may have been People’s Party sympathizers without it, the lower ranks would have been ‘converted’ while on leave in town. I’m sure the Lord President is disappointed he didn’t get the Air Force as solidly.”

“I believe he was forced to move before he was entirely ready, sir,” Narton told him. “You stirred up a hornets’ nest the other day.”

“Southgate and Oceanvine did, actually,” Candle admitted. “I was busy looking at the Gran 4 capsule. Still we can be thankful he panicked and set all this into motion when he did. If he had a chance to wait a bit longer he might have had the Air Force under his thumb as well and that would have been bad for those aircraft carriers coming in.”

Candle looked around and saw Oceanvine sitting in a far corner, surrounded by the women who were proudly calling themselves “Oceanvine’s Girls.” “It should be interesting,” he commented to the captain, “when her family learns that ‘Oceanvine’s Girl’ is another name for prostitute. It may well have a permanent change on your own society for that matter.”

“What do you mean?” Captain Narton asked.

“These women are heroic, aren’t they?” Candle asked in return.

“They’re every bit as much heroes as my men are,” Narton replied.

“Right,” Candle nodded. “These women are heroes. Little girls all over the kingdom will read about them in their history books and grow up wanting to be just like ‘Oceanvine’s Girls.’ It’s going to change the way the entire society sees prostitutes in the future, isn’t it?”

Captain Narton’s chalk-white face went the slightly transparent shade that passed for flushing among Granomen. “Maybe the history books will gloss over that detail,” he suggested at last.

“Probably,” Candle shrugged, “but people will know anyway.”

The door of the elevator opened and a Granomish woman entered. She looked at Candle and called out a greeting. Candle, not recognizing her, waved his hand noncommittally until her features seemed to melt for a bit and her hair lightened to gray, revealing her to be Southgate .

“Nice disguise!” Oceanvine commended her a moment later. “How do you do that?”

“It’s a simple illusion spell. It’s just that you cast it around yourself,” Southgate told her. “I’m sure you can do it if you try.”

“I’m going to have to,” Oceanvine told her seriously. I can’t walk around looking like a human, can I? I’ll be too easy to spot. I wonder why Uncle Candle didn’t have us use disguises before.”

“I didn’t think of it,” Candle admitted as he approached. “It’s a good idea, though. Why don’t you and Sextant work on it while I hear what Southgate has to report?”

Oceanvine thought about it, then concentrated and changed her appearance so that she looked somewhat like one of the women who continued to surround her. They were delighted and started offering suggestions on how to make the disguise even better. When they were satisfied with her, they started in on Sextant.

“Better give these disguises a bit of permanence,” Sextant advised her. “We don’t want to be suddenly revealed if we lose concentration.”

Oceanvine admitted he was right and concentrated on giving the disguise spell a power source from which to maintain itself. She caught a look at herself in the mirror and thought she looked like Ksanya’s sister although with darker hair and slightly finer features. “Funny, I don’t feel any different,” she commented.

“Well you didn’t actually change, did you?” Sextant pointed out. “It’s just a disguise ... that you put enough energy into for about a month, I think.”

“I plan to start sleeping in it,” Oceanvine told him. “I need to get used to seeing myself like this, otherwise it might distract me at the wrong moment.”

“You probably ought to stop playing with that pearl for a while too,” Sextant told her. In an attempt to calm her nerves, Oceanvine had placed it back around her head almost as soon as she had entered the office.

“I don’t wear it in public very often,” Oceanvine retorted, “and right now it helps.”

“All right, but you have a bad habit of forgetting it’s there,” Sextant shrugged.

“Then I’ll have to rely on you to remind me,” she told him. “In the meantime I plan to do anything I can to improve my abilities.”

“We need to start harassing the revolutionaries,” Candle told the Resistance leadership that evening when he finally got a chance to meet with them face-to-face. “We can’t let them have the chance to consolidate their position. Also His Majesty isn’t going to stay safely in hiding for very long either. He didn’t want to leave the city in the first place and only did so because I promised him it wouldn’t be for very long.”

“That sounds like him,” Admiral Hasparov, an aging Granom, commented. “He was never a patient man.”

“His Majesty is young and has only been on the throne for two years,” General Vintov replied. “His father only ruled a few years because his grandfather had an unusually long life. Ksaveras IX learned patience as he aged and I’m sure that Ksaveras XI will do likewise, but right now he feels the need to be involved. Can’t say I blame him. Frankly, I’ll welcome his presence among us. His willingness to join us speaks well of him. It has been centuries since we had a king willing to lead in battle.”

“How soon can he join us, Wizard?” the admiral asked.

“I guess it is safe to say he’s a bit over fifteen hours away by automobile,” Candle told them. “How soon do you need him?”

“Give us two days to prepare for an assault on the palace,” General Vintov replied.

“All right,” Candle agreed. “I’ll send Sir Sextant and Lady Oceanvine to pick him up tonight.”

“No, I believe we need Lady Oceanvine here in Querna,” Admiral Hasparov told him. “The women who call themselves ‘Oceanvine’s Girls’ look up to her and see her as their protector. They’re probably our best on-the-street observers but there have been reports that some of the lads see them as camp followers and available to anyone who asks. They aren’t particularly pleased to be told, ‘No.’”

“Life is full of little disappointments,” Candle replied. “So what happens when the women give them a price?”

“That’s just it,” Admiral Hasparov explained. “Oceanvine’s Girls aren’t saying ‘yes,’ for any price. They’re out of the sex business for the duration, possibly for good. Most of our men accept that, but there are always a few who cannot. We’ve had to discipline several sailors and marines today alone. It isn’t good for morale, but the Girls are too valuable as spies. I’d like to put them directly under Lady Oceanvine’s command. They’ll already do anything she asks and I’m hoping that by making them an actual Resistance unit, the men will come to respect them.”

“All right,” Candle shrugged, “Just call her Captain Oceanvine.”

“It may be closer to Colonel Oceanvine,” General Vintov chuckled, “unless you’re using a navy rank. We suspect that as the word gets out, we’ll have a lot of recruits among the local prostitutes.”

“Whatever you say,” Candle laughed. “But tonight I want both her and Southgate to back me up. I have a few new tricks up my sleeve and this is probably a good time to try them. It will be best if I try them out on a few of the Bond-Hook slaves at first and they won’t be expecting much trouble after midnight.”

“Not tonight,” the admiral nodded, “but we’ll be making trouble for them then too.”

“I’ll try to keep out of your way.”

Eighteen

“So what else did I miss while I was out?” Candle asked Southgate. They were standing on the roof of a

building that overlooked the Southgate Market from which Southgate had taken her name. Oceanvine was sitting several yards away with her legs over the edge of the roof looking out over the city.

It was well past midnight and down below two of Oceanvine's Girls were walking slowly around the deserted market. It was their job to act as bait, to draw out any Bond-Hook victims who might be lurking just out of sight. Candle and Southgate had chosen this area because Southgate had observed a concentration of victims here earlier in the evening.

"As soon as you were off with the royal family," Southgate replied, "I went back to find Captain Narton. Fortunately he was still in the subway station we had left him in. He was using it as a temporary base of command while seeking out the Navy. It was on my suggestion we moved into the main station the next evening."

"How did Vine's girls find you?" Candle asked.

"Oceanvine," Southgate corrected him.

"You too?" Candle chuckled.

"Any of them will correct you on that," Southgate replied. "It's a part of their identity now and they are very proud of it. Most of them have never really had anything to be proud of before. Anyway, Columbine, one of the original two, recognized me as the old lady who had been with Oceanvine that day in the bar. You'll note it was Oceanvine whose name they remembered; not me, not Countess Ksanya. She's the one who roughed up the pimp who was threatening them. She's the one who told him they were under her personal protection. I doubt Oceanvine really understood the full implications of that when she did it. She just wanted to get the bully off their backs, but Columbine and Melndia saw it as something very much more, so they took it on themselves to go out looking for Hook victims and went to the Palace to find and tell her what they had found. Do you have any idea what it took to get them to go to the Palace? Candle, it's been a lifetime since you were a runaway orphan in Tarnsa so maybe you don't remember what it is like for a dirt-poor commoner to even think of walking up to the Palace gates and demanding to speak to someone inside."

"I remember," Candle told her quietly. "I was a very lucky boy when Silverwind adopted me. I remember how shocked I was to learn who Lord Jason, later the Duke of North Horalia, was. I was equally surprised to discover that Silverwind was a noble as well, though he was not born to his title. In North Horalia, Jason's sister, the Lady Galiena gave me two sets of clothing to replace the rags Silverwind had found me in. They were hand-me-downs from one of Jason's younger brothers, but to me it was as though I was dressed like a lord. Heh. I guess I was, not that Vine gave me much time to enjoy it. Anyway, yes, I do remember what it was like. It took a lot of nerve and determination for those women to go to the Palace. It is taking even more not to just run and hide and wait for the excitement to blow over."

"Well, don't forget it, Ange," Southgate told him gently.

"I won't, Korinna," he promised.

"Uncle Candle?" Oceanvine spoke up as she approached. "Have you taken a close look at the Wurra Palace?"

"I thought you were keeping an eye on your girls below," Candle responded.

“I am, Uncle,” Oceanvine replied. “I have a proximity tracer on both of them.”

“A what?” Candle asked curiously.

“Well,” Oceanvine replied, “It’s the tracer spell you taught me, but I thought it might be better if I knew when they were being approached as well as where they were, so I added a low power ward around them that will tell me if anyone else gets within ten feet of them.”

“That’s very clever,” Southgate commended her.

“Thank you,” Oceanvine replied. “It just seemed like a natural extension of the tracer spell. Anyway, I took a look at the Palace. Have you? There’s this big ward all around and over it.”

Candle and Southgate looked north. The Wurra Palace was still illuminated just as it had been while the royal family was still in residence. “Lord Whathisname is going out of his way to make it seem as though nothing unusual has happened,” Candle commented. “Big ward though. Someone’s got a lot of power to burn.”

“That’s bad, isn’t it?” Oceanvine asked.

“I’d rather One Maiyim had no mages at their disposal,” Candle replied, “but in spite of their public policy, they don’t seem to have any shortage of mages. Clever buggers they’ve proven themselves to be too. Well, we’ll worry about that ward when we come to it.”

“Oh!” Oceanvine gasped. “There are three people near Columbine over on the east side of the market.”

“I see them,” Candle confirmed. “Be prepared to cover me.” He raised a ward similar to the one he had used at the Palace several days earlier then he took a closer look at the two men and a woman who were now just a few feet away from Columbine.. All three were Bond-Hook victims and he quickly invoked the Seal of Aritos and attempted to drain the power off their curses. The people stopped in their tracks, turned, and started approaching the building the mages were sitting on. Just as quickly three spell strings snaked their way toward the top of the building. Candle stopped trying to drain the curse and tightened his defenses. The strings whipped at his ward for a few more seconds then retracted. Candle lowered his ward and commented. “Couldn’t help trying it that way one more time,” he commented to Southgate and Oceanvine. “Now I’ll try the way Aritos suggested.”

This time he invoked the Seal once more and started draining the curse, but as the three spell strings tried to attack once more, he sent out three strings of his own from the staff and attached them to the attacking strings. He started draining power out through those strings and three more came toward him. Once again, he sent forward three strings of his own to intercept them. Once more it happened and then, finally the Bond of Aritos dissolved. All that was left was the Hook, now, which Candle easily tapped into and deactivated.

As if that was a signal, they heard gunfire coming from the harbor, which was shortly echoed from other parts of town. “It’s getting too exciting out now,” Candle told the others. “Let’s go collect Oceanvine’s Girls and call it a night. I know how to handle the curse now. We’ll try a larger sample of victims after a few hours sleep.”

The next morning, however, the Admiral had another idea. “We have been searching for several Royal Army and Air Force generals for days. We’ve found six of our targets and if they are enslaved by the curse you’ve told us about, perhaps you can release them.”



“Even if that does not put the Army or Air Force on our side,” General Vintov added, “it could stalemate their actions.”

“It is worth a try,” Candle agreed. I’m the only one with the necessary tools to neutralize the curse, but I want Southgate to study the current Palace defenses. She knows more about wards than I ever will. And I imagine Oceanvine will be working with the Girls?”

“The Girls were mostly responsible for finding our targets,” Admiral Hasparov told him, “and keeping them under surveillance. So yes, she will continue to coordinate the Women’s Auxiliary.”

“They’ll never accept that as a name, you know,” Southgate told him confidently.

“Perhaps not,” Hasparov agreed, “but in a proper military organization...”

“They’re not military, Admiral,” Southgate reminded him. “They’re Oceanvine’s Girls. What they’re doing, they’re doing out of loyalty and honor to her, not to your command, not even for His Majesty when you get right down to it. Oceanvine is here to preserve the monarchy so they are too. These are women who have been cast aside and forgotten by respectable society, but Oceanvine is the one noble lady who has treated them like they were worth anything. She commands their hearts and I think they’d follow her to Hell itself if she were to ask it of them. That’s pretty much what they’re doing now.”

“Good Gods!” Vintov swore, instantly understanding the implications of what Southgate was saying. “Does that young lady have any idea of the power she wields?”

“Not consciously,” Southgate replied. “At least I don’t think so. She’s just doing what she thinks is right. Of course that makes her one of the most dangerous people you’ll ever meet.”

“You’re right,” Vintov agreed. “Do something to cross her and her Girls will take you apart.”

“Only if Vine doesn’t do it herself first,” Candle laughed. “Fortunately, young Oceanvine still has a sweet personality. She’s a nice person and she has never yet shown any tendency to take her power for granted. But keep this in mind. Even without her Girls, Oceanvine is a very powerful young woman. She and Sextant are the most promising students I have ever had the honor to teach. They started their training late, but they’re catching up fast and the more they learn, the more they’ll be able to do.

“There was a magazine article written about me a few years ago,” Candle continued. “The man who wrote it called me the Last Wizard. I predict that someday his colleagues will be calling those two the first of the new wizards. And you, gentlemen, will be able to say you knew them almost from the start.”

“Did Oceanvine, the elder one that is, know just how talented her great-granddaughter was?” Southgate asked in the hush that fell after Candle’s prophecy.

“I think she might have suspected,” Candle replied. “They only knew each other for two years. Vine taught her the necessary basic relaxation techniques and got her to cast a few basic spells, including a simple curtain ward and that was impressive, I’ll admit. But young Oceanvine taught herself how to use levitation, or telekinesis as we call it these days. Her father caught her at it when she was a young girl and disciplined her severely for it, so she did not try any magic again until Vine persuaded her. Even then she only did it, I think, to please the old woman to whom she was a companion. I practically had to force her to learn her first real lessons. Gods! Was that really only last year? Amazing. Now look at her.”

“As I recall,” Southgate reminded him, “you were doing some amazing things yourself after less than one year of study.”

“I suppose I was,” Candle agreed, “but I was just a kid when we met. She’s a grown woman and she has the education of one too. Trust me, she can do a lot more than I could at this stage.”

“All that power in the hands of a young woman,” Admiral Hasparov mused.

“Do you have a problem with that, Admiral?” Southgate asked tartly.

“Uh, no, Lady Southgate,” Admiral Hasparov replied safely. “I’m just glad she’s on our side.”

Nineteen

“This one is clean,” Oceanvine noted to Melondia and two other Girls. “Or maybe that’s the wrong term. He’s a part of the revolution of his own free will.”

They were hiding in an empty apartment across the street from one of the targets, General Grabomov, who they knew was considered the second in command of the Commonwealth of Granom Army .

“That’s dirty,” Melondia remarked, “though in a different way. So what do we do now? We can’t just leave him alive can we?”

“I don’t like killing,” Oceanvine replied with an involuntary shiver. “I’ve done it once before and... well I suppose I would if I had to, but there should be an alternative.”

“We’ll kill him for you,” Melondia offered.

“No!” Oceanvine replied a little too loudly. “No,” she repeated in a normal voice. That wouldn’t be any better and you will probably get killed trying to do it. He has guards all around him.”

“We need to stop him before he goes to work today, don’t we?” Melondia asked.

“Yes,” Oceanvine agreed. “The question is what can I do another mage can’t just as quickly undo?”

“Kill him,” Melondia told her instantly. “No coming back from that.”

“Have you ever killed a man?” Oceanvine asked her.

“I’ve tried to,” Melondia replied. “I wanted to.”

“It’s not the same thing as actually doing it and having to live with the knowledge that you did it,” Oceanvine told her. “I want this man to stand trial for his crimes.”

“That might be crueler than simply killing him,” Melondia told her.

“But it would be just,” Oceanvine told her. “This man has rebelled against his king. He has plotted the death of his king and the entire royal family for that matter. He is responsible for the deaths of several royal cousins who were unable to get out of Querna when the revolution began. I want him to realize the

full weight of his crimes. If His Majesty's courts sentence him to death, and I'm sure they will, it will be justice in action. If I kill him now, it will just be murder." She paused a moment, took a few deep breaths, then did what she had to. "There," she told the Girls. "Now we can move on to our next target."

"What did you do?" Melondia asked.

"Gave him a concussion," Oceanvine replied, "and broke all his limbs and ribs. He'll survive, but he'll be in the hospital a good long time."

Melondia shuddered, "I didn't know you could do that."

"But you knew I could kill him," Oceanvine countered.

"I just thought you could stop his heart or throw him out the window," Melondia replied.

"If I can do that, I can certainly do this as well," Oceanvine told her. "There are many ways to kill someone," she realized, "but no way to bring one back to life."

Candle was pleased by Oceanvine's actions even if they confused Melondia. "I wish I had thought of that. I'm not happy that only one of the generals was coerced, however. That was General Levon of the Air Force. I cured him and the Bond-Hook slaves who were set to guarding him, although there were two others who were there freely as watchdogs for the Commonwealth. I had to kill them; didn't want them reporting back, though that might have been a good idea."

"Don't worry, Uncle," Oceanvine told him fiercely, "We've already given One Maiyim more than enough warning. Besides with five of their military leaders suddenly crippled or killed and a sixth one released from his curse, they ought to know we're on to them. If not, well, none of us are offering them a fair fight, now are we?"

"But considering they can still cast the Bond of Aritos, a fair fight may be the best we can get," Candle replied.

As the day went on, Oceanvine's Girls found several other military and political leaders of the Commonwealth. Candle and Oceanvine spent the rest of the day and deep into the evening taking them out of action either by crippling or curing. None of them were top echelon, but Candle suspected the true leaders were ensconced in the WurraPalace. "It will make them easier to find," he remarked.

Around midnight, however, the unknown mages of the People's Commonwealth of Granom, as they were now calling themselves, did something that both surprised and shocked Candle, Southgate and Oceanvine.

Several of Oceanvine's Girls came in reporting the sounds of agonized screams from all over the city of Querna. The mages rushed out to investigate and at first found nothing but the sound of wind as it rushed between the buildings of the business district. As they investigated further, however, they started coming across an increasing number of bodies. There were around twenty in a breezeway that led between two major streets.

Former slaves," Candle diagnosed after looking at them for a few minutes. "You can still see the Bond and traces of the Hook. Now why the heck would One Maiyim do this? You would have thought they'd want these people to serve as their army for a while longer at least."

“No idea,” Southgate admitted. “You’re taking this well, dear,” she told Oceanvine.

“It’s just like the poor people in Silamon,” she replied sadly. For a moment she thought she would start crying again, but the sadness was replaced by another, harder emotion. “One Maiyim must be stopped. Uncle Candle, maybe you were right. Anyone who would do this is a monster and should be put away.”

“They will be,” Candle told her grimly, “but the ones you took care of will live just long enough to understand why. I wonder how many of them even knew about this though.”

“All their mages,” Oceanvine told him. “That Senator Hawakamala from Rjalkatyp too. I wonder where she is right now.”

“Can’t say,” Candle shrugged, “but at least we can dispel the Bond of Aritos on these victims. It’s not safe to leave them cursed anyway.” He went to work with the staff, not bothering with using the Seal. The spell, so far as he knew was no longer active, he could afford to take his time and study what was left in case he could find an easier way to clean up this mess next time he encountered it. He had only just started, however, when Oceanvine let out a short scream.

“Uncle, look out!” she warned him. She immediately threw a protective ward in front of him. Looking up, he saw the bodies of the victims moving. As one they started to get to their feet and step toward him.

He invoked the Seal of Aritos and instead of setting it against the Bond, he immobilized the moving corpses in front of him, while trying to figure out what was happening now. The bond was not deactivated, nor was the Hook entirely gone from these people. “They’re dead,” he reported, “every last one of them, but the Bond continues to animate them and the Hook controls them. I’ll bet there are thousands like these all over the city. Just lying in the back alleys waiting for further instructions and all primed to come back to life... no, a parody of life, should any of us tamper with them. This is unforgiveable. These people deserve respect in death, not this sort of molestation.”

He turned back to the victims and tried dispelling the curse once more, but it was slow going. “It’s behaving differently this time,” he reported. “I’m making headway, but it’s resisting me. The Bond is actually working at disengaging itself from my spell strings.”

“Try the Seal of Methis,” Oceanvine suggested.

“I don’t have it sufficiently memorized yet,” Candle replied. “The motions within motions in Her seal are extremely complex and exacting. Getting it wrong could be lethal.”

“Here!” Oceanvine removed the pendant Methis had given her and put it in Candle’s hand.

“Where did you get this?” he asked.

“There was just the cutest shop just down the street today,” Oceanvine retorted sarcastically. “Where do you think?”

“Oh, yeah,” Candle replied sheepishly. “It was an automatic response. I left my copy back in the subway office.”

“Is that particularly safe?” Oceanvine asked.

“Well, I suppose there’s a chance it could get stolen,” Candle admitted, “but it wouldn’t do the thief any

good.”

“Or you when Methis found out,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“A point,” Candle sighed. “I’ll keep it with me from now on.”

While still holding the victims immobile, he took a few moments to study Methis’ sign. The energy flow within it was even more intricate and subtle than within the Seal of Aritos. Idly, he wondered if that was more because of Methis’ different character or because she was one of the Younger Gods, while Aritos was an Elder. He shelved that question aside and invoked the Seal of Methis.

Candle had been surprised at how reactive Aritos’ sign was; how ready it was to go to work almost before he knew what to do with it. Methis’ sign was even more so and was making suggestions even as it came to life within his mind. He reached out and let it do what it wanted.

Instantly the Seal of Methis surged forward with hundreds of spell strings, each of which drained prodigious amounts of power from the Bond and into Candle’s golden staff. The staff began to get warm and it vibrated slightly until Candle allowed it to spew the excess power up into the sky. It was over in less than a minute, although the auroras sparked by the power he sent upward lasted until dawn.

Twenty

They returned to Resistance headquarters to find Sextant had returned with King Ksaveras and one other who refused to be left behind. “Ksanya?” Oceanvine demanded. “What are you doing here?”

“I couldn’t just sit back and let you have all the fun, cousin,” Ksanya laughed. “I’m jealous, though, You’re prettier than I am as a Granom. No fair!”

They hugged even as Oceanvine replied, “Some of the Girls helped out with my disguise. Actually, I thought I looked like your sister. Although, now that we’ve hugged, I’ll probably have to reapply my ‘makeup.’”

“Nope,” Ksanya shook her head. “I’ve learned how to control myself. Hmm, I guess we do look like sisters, but you’re still the prettier one. Wouldn’t the tabloids have a field day with that?”

“Let’s not give them a chance,” Oceanvine suggested. “My family already has reservations about my chosen career. Being a source of entertainment for prurient Granomen would be too much.”

“How would they know?” Ksanya countered. “We can call you something like Blossom.”

“No thanks,” Oceanvine replied primly.

“Prude,” Ksanya accused her laughingly.

“Too right!” Oceanvine returned. “So what’s been happening back at Methis’ Forge?”

“Well, it turns out that learning to control my null-magic effect is pretty easy once you know how,” Ksanya replied. “I wonder why no one ever figured it out before. I do have you to thank though.”

“Me?”

“You started me on the basic exercises I needed. I do need to concentrate on control or my field will naturally expand two to three feet around me now, but at least I won’t have to have servants to turn the lights on for me and silly stuff like that. M... uh... Lady Fireiron says with practice I should be able to extend my field several times its current size. I’m not sure what good that might do, other than teasing you, but She tells me that it will be good for me in the long run. She ought to know, huh?”

“I suppose,” Oceanvine admitted.

“Anyway, She’s also been teaching the prince and princess,” Ksanya continued.

“Teaching? They’re three and five years old,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“She’s teaching Genovya how to read,” Ksanya told her. “She keeps giving these interesting little puzzles to young Ksaveras. Probably sharpening up his problem-solving ability. And she’s been helping Orya write a book. I didn’t even know Orya wanted to write. Histories. Can you believe it? Veras and Zak, though, they’ve been living on reports from the telly and news that Artifice brings home. Zak wanted to come back to the city too, but Veras wouldn’t let him. If something happens to Dad, Zak would be next in line for the throne if he wants it. I don’t think Zak would be very happy as king. It’s just as likely he would act as regent until young Ksaveras grows up a bit.

“We haven’t been able to contact Dad either since our first night at the Forge,” Ksanya continued. “He’s supposed to be in Merinne and we think he’s gone into hiding in one of the other embassies, but naturally none of them will admit he’s there. Meanwhile a whole set of new ambassadors have been sent all over the world although they have not yet been recognized. Even Emmine is not disposed toward a regime change in Granom. Certainly not this quickly anyway.”

“I suppose Saindo might recognize the Commonwealth,” Oceanvine commented.

“Who sends ambassadors to Saindo?” Ksanya countered. “There’s no centralized government. There’s not even a Council of Representatives as there is in Wennil. What’s been happening here?”

“There you are,” Sextant said as he stumbled across the two women. He was holding two long pieces of wood that Oceanvine recognized as the staves they had learned with on their first visit to Methis’ Forge. “I was afraid I wouldn’t recognize you like that,” he told Oceanvine.

“I put the pearl away,” Oceanvine replied, getting to her feet to greet him. “Maybe I should ‘wear’ it all the time in this station.” She flung her arms around him and gave him a warm hug.

“Yeah, I missed you too,” he confessed softly before breaking the hold. He passed one of the staves to her and she felt the wood warm under her hand as though it too was glad to see her. “Now, I want to know what I missed here as well.”

Oceanvine brought them up to date, concluding with “As soon as the aircraft carriers are in Querna Bay, we plan to go into action. That’s supposed to be today. I suppose we ought to get some sleep while we can. Let me just let Columbine and Melondia know where we’ll be if any of the Girls come back with reports for me.”

“The Girls?” Ksanya asked.

Oceanvine blushed. "Oceanvine's Girls in long," she explained, "although Admiral Hasparov and General Vintov just refer to them as the Girls most of the time. They're the women who Columbine and Melondia recruited to the loyalist cause. Uncle Candle and the other leaders have put me in charge of them for some reason, so whenever there's an important report, they bring it to me first, then I have them bring it to one of the others. I don't know why they couldn't go directly to Southgate or Uncle Candle."

"Because they're 'Oceanvine's Girls,' silly," Ksanya told her, laughing. "But you look even more tired than I feel. Where can we sleep?"

They were only given two hours to sleep, however, and Melondia woke them up by entering the office they slept in with coffee and pastry for their breakfast. Oceanvine thanked her and invited her to join them, but Melondia begged off, saying she had other chores to attend to. "You have an important meeting in half an hour, my lady. His Majesty wants you all there."

"Please let him know we're on our way," Oceanvine replied.

"Me?" Melondia squeaked.

"Why not?" Oceanvine asked.

"He's the king," Melondia protested, "and I'm just a..."

"Loyal subject," Oceanvine interrupted. "Go ahead, please. I promise he won't bite."

"Yes, my lady," Melondia replied, nervously leaving the room.

"I hope she remembers to breathe when she relays your message to Veras," Ksanya yawned. "If she passes out from lack of air, we'll be there before he knows we're coming."

"I just startled her," Oceanvine shrugged, standing up and pouring a cup of the coffee for each of them. "Melondia is adaptable. She'll talk to him bold as brass and then marvel about what she did for the rest of the day, I'll bet." There was no cream or sugar available and Oceanvine shuddered at the caffeine jolt as she started sipping.

"The rest of her life, I'll bet," Sextant told her as he sat up.

Oceanvine handed him a cup then passed the third to Ksanya. "Maybe," she shrugged. "Eew, this is the third day in a row I've worn the same clothing. I must reek."

"A bit," Ksanya laughed. "but we aren't likely to find showers in a subway station, are we. Hey, maybe we'll take back the palace today. Then we can sleep on real beds and not couches tonight."

"From your lips to the Gods' ears," Sextant remarked. "I hope you're right, but we won't accomplish it by sitting here. Let's finish up here and get to the meeting."

The meeting was brief and in it, Ksaveras outlined the battle plan as he had worked it out with the leaders of the Resistance the night before. "As we speak, I have planes from the *Quartzvein* and *Palsondir* tearing up the landing strips at the two nearest Air Force bases. The Air Force is still neutralized and we want to keep them that way. We certainly don't want them mistaking this for an invasion from Emmine. Now, with that hopefully accomplished, we need to secure several key locations before we attempt the palace. We are sending in our Marine units in four groups and I want a mage to

accompany each of them. Sir Sextant, I want you to work with the group securing the Financial District. Lady Southgate you'll be helping to secure the University, and My Lord Candle you'll be working with the unit we expect to see the most action in the Harbor. Lady Oceanvine, we fear we must hand you two duties at once. You will be with the marines who secure the Parliament Buildings, but I also want your Oceanvine's Girls to coordinate communications. They've been doing an excellent job of reconnaissance since this began and with radios, we believe they will be even more effective. General Vintov, do you have anything to add?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," Vintov replied. He turned to the assembled officers and their mages. "After the air fields have been neutralized, we'll be depending on air cover from the Navy's fighters. Because of the reconnaissance reports by Lady Oceanvine's women, we are not expecting much resistance until we reach the palace, but don't hesitate to call for support if you need it." He continued on with a long list of instructions and plans until Ksaveras told them all it was time to go.

Oceanvine hugged Candle, Sextant and Southgate as they parted but was surprised to find Ksanya joining her. "You can't talk on the radio to the Girls and cast spells at the same time," Ksanya told her. "Also I think you can drop the disguise now. Any woman casting spells with a staff is bound to attract attention even if she does look like my sister."

"You're probably right," Oceanvine admitted, "but I'll maintain the spell until we're in place."

"Lady Oceanvine?" a Granomish Marine sergeant asked. "We have a vehicle ready to take you to the Twenty-fifth."

"Twenty-fifth?" Ksanya asked just ahead of Oceanvine.

"Twenty-fifth Battalion, Ma'am," the sergeant replied. "Lieutenant Colonel Voransk is waiting for us."

The sergeant looked surprised when Ksanya got into the armored vehicle next to Oceanvine, but merely closed the hatch and went forward to the driver's seat. Oceanvine and Ksanya found six armed marines in the back with them who got suddenly silent when the two women sat down.

"Oh go ahead and keep telling dirty jokes," Ksanya told them. "I'll let you know if you get to one I haven't heard."

"Uh, no, ma'am, I don't think so," a corporal replied embarrassedly. So Oceanvine and Ksanya introduced themselves and spent the rest of the trip asking the marines who they were, where they came from and if they had a nice girl waiting for them back home; the usual sort of small talk that filled the trip.

They only had a few seconds to meet the Lieutenant Colonel before he started giving orders to his captains to prepare the battalion to move out. "It will be best if you two ladies stay near me," he told them. "Are you really wizards?"

"Not quite," Oceanvine corrected him. "I'm a journeywoman and a master's candidate. Countess Ksanya is just the opposite. She's a magic-null, but she's here to help coordinate the Oceanvine's Girls company."

"I hear it's closer to a brigade," Voransk replied.

"Actually we're a few dozen shy of a battalion," Oceanvine chuckled.



“Well, I’ve been ordered to defer to you, ma’am,” Voransk replied.

“Only on matters I can help with magic, Colonel,” Oceanvine told him. “I don’t know a battlefield from a checkers board. You know what your men can do better than I ever could. I’ll keep an eye out for magical hazards, but at least until we meet the rest of the brigade at the palace, this is your game.”

“Thank you, my lady,” Voransk replied, obviously relieved. “I’m sure we’ll work together well.”

“The Parliament Building would have been deserted had the janitorial staff not shown up for work this morning,” Oceanvine told Sextant four hours later when they met at the cordon the marines had thrown up around the palace. “That was sort of weird. Here the government has been supplanted for days and these people just keep coming into work as though nothing had happened. I think we frightened them badly though.”

“I think it’s nice they were at work as usual,” Ksanya told them.

“I’m surprised there has been so little looting in the city the last few days,” Sextant commented. “I expected to see cars tipped over and burned, broken windows in shops, maybe even people carrying stuff out of those shops. The shops were closed, but only a few had been broken into.”

“A lot of the people who might have been looting were caught in the Bond-Hook curse,” Ksanya told him. “I wonder what happened to them.”

“I think they’re in the palace,” Sextant told her. “I was within sight of the gate just before your battalion arrived and there were a lot of people just inside. Thousands of them, I think. Most of them seemed to have been soldiers, but I think there were some civilians too. We’re going to have to fight our way through, you know.”

“A lot of innocent people are going to die unless Uncle Candle has a new way to release them from this curse,” Oceanvine commented.

“Where is he, by the way?” Sextant asked.

“Southgatecommandeered a platoon before you got here,” Oceanvine informed him, “and they went looking for him and the marines with him. At least that’s what the Girls told me. The only fighting has been down in the Harbor District. There was an entire Army brigade blocking Uncle Candle’s way and they were forced to call in air support. I’m sure you heard the explosions. Last I heard, though, the surviving soldiers were in retreat, but they may be making it hard for the marines to advance even so. General Vintov sent his three reserve battalions to back up the one Uncle Candle is with so they should be along presently.”

A few minutes later Candle and Southgate joined them. “I see now why most mages have been conscientious objectors,” Candle told them.

“We’re needed here, Uncle,” Oceanvine told him.

“Hmm? Oh yes,” Candle nodded. “Civil wars are different, but I certainly wouldn’t get involved in a war between nations. That sort of thing gives mages a bad name.”

“Haven’t there been any mages who went to war?” Sextant asked. “What about Wizard Crossreed? Wasn’t he part of the Orentan Army at Sinid?”

“We have, on occasion, agreed to provide defensive measures. Crossreed was backed into a corner in which he could not refuse to shield the Bellinen Marines from magical attacks. As it happens, the only mage in the Granomish Army was Master Swageblock who as you may recall conspired with Crossreed to bring the Granom-Bellinen War to a final end. Neither of them supported the war. Swageblock was drafted by whichever Ksaveras was king at the time, the seventh, I think. Crossreed was being blackmailed by Damowa, the Bellinen Warlord. That’s the sort of force you need to bring a mage to war and you see how well it worked out for Ksaveras and Damowa.”

“Fairly well, it seems,” Ksanya commented.

“Not really,” Candle countered. “Both were lauded publicly for signing the treaty, but Ksaveras lost a lot of power after the war to Parliament. It was regained by his grandson Ksaveras VIII - You Granomen really do have it easy when it comes to memorizing the names of your kings, don’t you? – but that was literally a lifetime later. Ksaveras VII spent the rest of his long life trying to improve his image with magnificent public works and charitable projects. Well, that was good for everyone, I suppose.

“Damowa was given a big parade on his return to Merinne,” Candle continued, “then several Senators quietly had him tried and convicted on charges of bribery and extortion. He spent the rest of his life under house arrest on a small island off the coast of Lillo. The moral of the story, kiddies, is don’t mess with a mage.”

“What did mages have to do with their problems?” Sextant asked.

“Who do you think supplied the evidence against Damowa?” Candle countered “and it was the magical faculty at the University at Querna who backed Parliament against Ksaveras. They wouldn’t have done that had they not sympathized with Swageblock. So much for your history lesson today. Now it’s time to find a place to sleep tonight. That building over there looks good.”

“That’s the Wurra Palace,” Southgate pointed out.

“Well spotted,” Candle laughed.

Twenty-one

“That ward looks evil,” Ksanya commented not too much later as they conferred with King Ksaveras and his military advisors. Oceanvine privately agreed. When she first spotted it, it was invisible, betrayed only by its aura. Now, however, whoever had cast it found no reason to keep it hidden and it was in plain sight. It was an immense dome that covered the entire palace. It was a deep smoky red in color but occasionally it emitted sparks of stray energy that arced toward nearby buildings.

“It’s an impressive ward,” Candle admitted, looking up at the construct, “but unlike most of what the rogue mages of One Maiyim have been throwing at us, it is not particularly sophisticated. Most of the key spells they have thrown at us over the years were new, but this is technology that was old when I was born.”

“It’s keeping the Navy and Marines out,” Sextant pointed out. The marines had been shooting, not only guns at the ward, but also firing rockets and crashing trucks into it. Nothing had so much as dented the ward and the only effect was to send pulses of a lighter color echoing outward through the ward.

“It can’t keep me out,” Ksanya told him confidently.

“Nor any of us,” Candle told her. “This is not an alternating current ward.”

“Multiphase ward,” Oceanvine corrected him.

“Have it your way,” Candle shrugged to Southgate’s obvious amusement. “My point is, this isn’t one of them. They should have used one and the only reason I can think of that they did not is that they don’t know how. I’m a bit surprised they don’t but that’s just fine by me. Any mage knowing Silverwind’s technique can stroll on through it.”

“How about the rest of us, Wizard,” Ksaveras asked pointedly. “On last count we had only four mages.”

“Well, I could probably pass a number of you through with me,” Candle considered, “but it would be like trying to come against those soldiers inside one at a time. I’d also like to put the element of surprise on our side.”

“We can’t just walk through the gate, can we?” Oceanvine asked.

“We could,” Candle replied, “but it would involve killing a lot of people and I’d like to keep that to a minimum, especially since there may be a lot of innocents inside.”

“Flying through the ward won’t be much of a surprise,” Southgate pointed out.

“No but we still have a back way into the palace and I’d bet good money nobody inside knows where it is.”

“I want to go in with you,” Ksaveras told him.

Candle shook his head. “Mages only, I think. Don’t worry, that ward will collapse the moment we distract whoever erected it. That’s another mistake they made, it’s not attached to a power source. It is being actively maintained. As soon as it is dropped you can come on through with the Marines. In the meantime I think it will be best if you keep knocking on the door. It will distract them and they may not notice us until it is too late.”

They quickly made their way back to the Wurra Street Station and were soon at the plain-looking door that led back into the palace.

“It’s locked!” Ksanya exclaimed after rushing to open it.

“What are you doing here, Ksanya?” Candle asked sternly. “I said, ‘Mages only.’”

“Methis says I am a mage,” Ksanya shot back. “Just a very specialized one. Maybe I should call myself, ‘Contrary.’”

“Why not?” Candle replied sourly, adding under his breath, “Everyone else does.”

“I’ll open it,” Oceanvine offered even as she reached through the door telekinetically to unbolt it from the other side.”

“But who locked it?” Ksanya asked.

“I did,” Candle told her. “I wasn’t about to leave a secret passage into the palace wide open, now was I?”

Oceanvine opened the door and they went on into the passage, although Ksanya hung back for a second to relock the door behind them. “Good thinking,” Candle told her. “We don’t want anyone else following us.”

“Uh, actually,” Ksanya replied. “I just did it out of habit, although I guess for the same reasons when you get right down to it.”

They made their way quickly back to the other end of the passage and opened the secret door at that end. Candle was about to charge through, but Sextant held him back. “There’s a ward blocking our path, sir,” he told the wizard.

“So there is,” Candle agreed after a moment. “and it isn’t the one I set up when we left. I guess they did find this door after all, although they may not have found the release for it. Someone has a nasty mind, though no surprise there. Anyone who touches this ward gets a dose of the Bond-Hook curse.”

“But once again, it’s only a normal direct... uh single phase ward,” Southgate pointed out.

“You too?” Candle asked.

“Oceanvine is right,” Southgate maintained. “Single and multiphase are better descriptive terms. Dear, you should write a paper on that too.”

“Where would I submit it?” Oceanvine asked.

“There are still technical journals that may be interested,” Southgate told her. “We should see to publishing your earlier work on wards as well.”

“Right now we need to take that ward down,” Ksanya reminded them.

“Or walk right through it,” Candle told her. “It won’t even touch you and we can phase through it.”

“Uncle?” Oceanvine asked. “Is it possible to use a second ward to neutralize a first? If there are phases, couldn’t a mage set up a ward that would set up an interference pattern that could effectively leave a hole in the first ward?”

“Don’t try it,” Candle warned her. “Theoretically, you’re correct, but there’s a lot more to a ward than its phase and unless you understand the ward in question completely, your second ward could set off the spells keyed to the first one, or release energy explosively.”

“More often than not,” Southgate added, “you will either have no effect or both wards will collapse, but as Candle told you, the energy has to go somewhere.”

They stepped harmlessly through the ward and made their way deeper into the palace. Once inside, the halls seemed relatively calm. There were only occasional people in the hallways, sometimes soldiers, sometimes civilians, presumably People’s Party members who had joined the Commonwealth, but mostly

just palace servants. It was fortunate that the first one who spotted them was one of the regular servants. "In here!" he hissed. They followed his beckoning arm into a small room filled with cleaning supplies. "You took a big chance coming here," the maintenance man told them, "but thank the Gods you did."

"What's been happening here?" Candle asked.

"Wicked, evil things since the night you got the royal family out," the man told them. "Most of us servants were brought back into the palace. They came to our homes and told us we still had jobs. Didn't give us a lot of choice in the matter either. Forced us to move in here even though only a few of us lived more than two blocks away in the Petronelle Building."

"You don't live in the palace?" Oceanvine asked.

"Haven't in two decades, my lady," the man replied. "The palace isn't large enough for all of us, so the old king had a special building constructed for us. But that's not important now. How is His Majesty?"

"Alive and well," Candle told the man. "We're here to prepare the palace for his return."

"Well you can count on the staff to help you any way we can," the man replied. "There are dozens of secret passages that we know about all through the palace. Some even the king doesn't know about."

"Why would the Wurra Palace need so many secret passages?" Southgate wondered. "It's a relatively new structure and built long after most people would have been worried about a siege."

"Well," the man answered, "I don't know that they were meant to be secrets, really, but they are the ways by which the staff gets around the palace without being constantly under foot."

"Can you get us to a place from which we can observe the main courtyard and the tower?" Candle asked.

"Of course, my lord!"

He led them through a panel in the wall of his supply room and into a narrow corridor that threaded its way between the larger areas of the palace. Every so often they ran into other servants who stopped to let them pass. Every few encounters, their guide would stop to talk for a moment. Little by little the word spread out among the palace staff, that the mages had returned and that Ksaveras was preparing to do the same. Finally they came out into a third-floor room that had the view Candle desired.

"From the spell strings," Candle observed, "it looks like most of the people we want are in the tower this evening."

"Are those all dead people in the courtyard?" Ksanya asked.

"My Gods!" Southgate swore. "They are dead, but the Bond of Aritos still holds them."

"Those screams the Girls reported other night," Oceanvine gasped. "They must have been from all the Bond-Hook victims. The One Maiyim mages killed them all then used the Bond to animate them and bring them here. This is horrible!"

"And we don't have time to release them now," Candle remarked grimly, "but if we can startle whoever controls them sufficiently, they'll never be reactivated and we can release the curse later. We're going to

need a diversion of some sort.”

“I’ll go,” Ksanya volunteered.

“Vine will go with you,” Candle decided.

“Oceanvine!” Oceanvine corrected him.

“Yeah, you too,” Candle retorted. “Don’t do anything precipitous, but try to keep small things happening around the courtyard. Not too big. We don’t want to tip off our presence to the big boys upstairs, but we want their military dupes to be nervous.”

“So random noises and odd things falling mysteriously?” Oceanvine asked.

“Yes that will do,” Candle nodded. “The rest of us are going to make our way to the Tower. Don’t forget to use that staff of yours,” Candle advised her. “We may need you upstairs and that staff ought to give you enough of a boost to fly up there after the ward comes down.”

Twenty-two

Oceanvine and Ksanya made their way back into the secret maze of passages that were the lifeblood of the palace. They found a maid from the kitchen who offered to guide them. “I never really knew these were here,” Ksanya remarked quietly as they continued on. “This might make life a little more interesting once we take the kingdom back. Is there a secret passage up to the tower?” she asked.

“Not beyond the fifth floor, my lady,” the maid replied. “The only way to the top is via the elevator.”

“That’s too bad,” Ksanya remarked. “We could have taken them by surprise.”

“Fine by me. That means they’re trapped there,” Oceanvine told her. “Although why isn’t there an emergency stairway?”

“There used to be,” Ksanya replied, “but Ksaveras IX had it taken out to make for more room on each of the tower floors. The original elevator was a manually-run mechanical thing and there are generators these days to act as a power back up. Still, in the case of fire... No. That would anger Veras.”

“What’s that?” Oceanvine asked.

“I was just thinking, if we set fire to the tower, all the Commonwealth leaders would be trapped up there,” Ksanya remarked. “But that’s Veras’ favorite room. We’ll have to do it the hard way, I guess.”

“I guess,” Oceanvine agreed.

A minute later they were on a small stone balcony overlooking the courtyard from the second floor. Down below, they could see hundreds of soldiers in position, facing the street where the smoky red ward and the wrought iron were still blocking the path of the besieging forces. There were also several hundred corpses in the corners of the large courtyard.

“I wonder if after this Veras will trust me in Bellinen again,” Ksanya remarked. “I can visit my parents

and maybe get this sight out of my mind. It's going to be with me for a long, long time if I stay here."

"It's the smell that's getting to me," Oceanvine replied. "We're going to need those gates open, aren't we?"

"Unless you're planning to fight the army single-handedly," Ksanya retorted.

"For a while that's pretty much what I will be doing," Oceanvine told her. She stretched her mind forward and tried opening the iron gates, but she was barely able to move them. "Uh, cousin," she whispered to Ksanya, "You want to pull your null magic field in? I'm not looking for even more of a workout today."

"Sorry," Ksanya replied.

Oceanvine tried again and the gates swung open easily. As she had hoped, the soldiers did not turn around to see her but instead stared at the opening gates. An officer ordered the gates shut once more, but before anyone could reach them, Oceanvine sent two extremely intense fireballs at the hinges, welding the gates open.

"Down!" she hissed to Ksanya, dragging her to the floor of the balcony.

"Up there!" someone shouted from below.

"Aw heck!" Oceanvine muttered. "I was hoping to do a bit more before we got noticed."

Below, the captain was bellowing orders and soldiers were scrambling into the palace at the same time a grappling hook came up and over the balcony, barely missing Ksanya's leg. Oceanvine burned the attached rope, and the women left the balcony just ahead of two more hooks. Once more in the secret passages they discovered their guide waiting for them.

"You should have run for cover," Oceanvine told her, "but I'm glad you're still here. How many other rooms can we get to that overlook the courtyard?"

"Quite a few, my lady," the maid responded.

"Would you show us how to get to one in the North Wing?" Ksanya asked.

"Of course, my lady," the maid curtsied. "This way, if you please."

"That way, whether I please or not," Ksanya chuckled as the maid led them once more deep into the palace's hidden arteries. When they passed a tight circular staircase, Ksanya asked. "How far up does this go?"

"To the top floor of the keep, of course, my lady."

"Excellent!" Ksanya purred. "Oceanvine, let's go up a flight or two. We'll really throw them off if we keep changing floors."

"All right," Oceanvine agreed.

A few minutes later, while Oceanvine was trying to decide what to do next, Ksanya swung herself

partway over the edge of the balcony and shouted, "Hey, boys! We're up here!" Oceanvine yanked her back even as several gunshots could be heard accompanied by the sounds of bullets impacting against the palace walls. "That was fun!" Ksanya laughed.

"You're crazy!" Oceanvine told her.

"Was it a distraction or not?" Ksanya countered, still laughing even as another order from down below sent more soldiers into the palace. "Come on, let's go up another floor!"

They got away with that stunt twice more until they reached the second floor again. They made their way to the small balcony and looked down into the courtyard.

"Look's empty," Oceanvine commented.

"They're all looking for us," Ksanya pointed out.

"That too," Oceanvine told her tightly.

"What do you mean?"

"Where are all the corpses?" Oceanvine asked pointedly.

Before Ksanya could answer, however, the door to the normal hallway burst open and several soldiers ran into the room, blocking Oceanvine and Ksanya's path of retreat.

"Get them!" someone yelled.

"Eep!" Ksanya yelped.

Candle watched Oceanvine and Ksanya fade back into the secret passage before turning to Southgate and Sextant. "We need to make our way to the elevator," he told them, "I don't want to get lost in those passages, though. I think we're in a fairly deserted part of the palace. Let's give the conventional corridors a shot."

"Wards up," Southgate suggested strongly as they left the room.

"Definitely," Candle agreed, using the staff to amplify his own ward easily to bullet-proof strength.

Stealth was necessary as they made their way through the palace. The hallways were mostly deserted, but they passed several piles of corpses, all victims of the Bond-Hook curse. Candle gestured for Southgate and Sextant to avoid touching the bodies, even with their shoes. Sextant didn't know why the wizard bothered to warn them. Touching dead bodies was not something he was likely to try.

They also needed to duck into side rooms or take alternate passages when they heard footsteps approaching. "We don't know those are soldiers' footsteps," Southgate pointed out after the fifth change of direction.



“We don’t know they aren’t either,” Candle told her. “If you like we can go back and find out for certain.”

“There’s no need to snap at me, Ange,” Southgate told him sharply, “but it’s looking like we’re going to have to fight somebody eventually if we want to reach the elevator.”

“And it doesn’t look like we get to choose either, sir,” Sextant added. “The halls are getting more active I think.”

“The girls are probably having a slightly different effect than planned,” Candle grumbled. “I wanted the soldiers distracted, not kicked into action.”

“It’s a battle plan, sir,” Sextant reminded him. “It was doomed the moment it went into action.”

“Just like any other battle plan, yes,” Candle agreed. “Well, let’s play this cautious for a little while longer.”

They continued threading their way through the maze of corridors and finally found themselves facing the elevator doors. In front of those doors, however, were eleven men and women, all Granomen, dressed in conservative gray-striped suits, two wore the odd-shaped hats that marked them in Granomish society as Lords of Parliament.

Southgate cast a ward that bound the men and women in their places. “I hate politicians,” she told Candle and Sextant. “We have here some of the leading members of the Peoples’ Party. The Mayor of Querna and two of his city councilmen. Ah, Barons Oktavian and Nurberdi, they’ve been Wallono’s yes-men in Parliament. I’m not surprised to see them here although they seem to have forgotten their pet ministers and deputy ministers. What were you boys doing here? Trying to guard the elevator? Who from? Us or,” she looked upward, “them?”

“Maiyim will be one!” the captive politicians shouted almost in unison. Southgate felt herself being forcefully thrown backward and let her ward go to try to cushion the blow as she hit the wall.

Sextant hit the wall, felt himself falling face first as he bounced off, rolled on to the floor, then came up and cast a wide projectile ward at the politicians, who were now glowing bright red. They were, in turn, thrown back against the elevator doors and stopped glowing. However, as Candle was about to deliver a final blow Baron Nurberdi cast a strong protective ward between him and his fellows and the three attacking mages. It would have been effective had Sextant not levitated a large pot from behind the baron and sent it flying into his head. The others, held their hands up in the air and shouted, “Maiyim will be one!” once more.

Candle was expecting the same spell he had encountered in Rjalkatyp when One Maiyim had attempted to kill him and everyone else in Blizzard’s home, but instead these rings had been charged with an impenetrable ward that was powered by the Pohn variant of the Bond of Aritos.

Knowing how to handle that one, Candle invoked the Seal of Aritos and was about to use it to neutralized the Bond of Pohn, when he heard Southgate gasp beside him. Looking over his shoulder he saw the corridor was filled with hundreds of walking corpses.

“Jump!” Oceanvine shouted to Ksanya, throwing a ward up between them and the advancing soldiers,

“Are you crazy?” Ksanya asked. “It’s over twenty-five feet!”

“I’ll catch you,” Oceanvine promised, lifting herself up and over the balcony rail. She hovered for a moment then slowly let herself down.

“Oh heck” Ksanya muttered nervously, jumping headfirst into the open air over the courtyard.

Oceanvine mustered all the power stored within her staff and reached out for Ksanya. At first everything was all right, but then Ksanya lost concentration and her null-magic field got away from her. Both women plummeted to the ground, but with an extra burst of effort, Oceanvine managed to slow their descent enough that hitting the ground was no worse than falling a few inches.

“I thought you were going to catch me,” Ksanya told her sourly.

“I did catch you,” Oceanvine retorted.

“You almost missed.”

“But I didn’t, did I?” Oceanvine replied. There was a shout and several soldiers were running out of the palace. “Come on, run for the gate. The ward won’t affect us.”

They almost made it, but just as they were about to pass through the smoky red dome, two soldiers tackled them from behind. Oceanvine dropped her staff in the fall and while she tried to telekinetically throw the one holding her away, Ksanya was too close and was inhibiting the journeywoman’s abilities. The men started dragging the two women back but stopped abruptly as Ksaveras stepped through a hole in the ward and commanded them, “Leave Lady Oceanvine and Countess Ksanya alone.”

The soldiers looked up and recognized their king immediately. “Your Majesty!” they instantly saluted, letting go of the women.

“They told us you were dead,” a corporal continued.

“They lied,” Ksaveras told them. “Countess, it’s a good thing you are able to nullify this ward. If you don’t mind though, could you do so again to let the others in?”

Ksanya nodded and stood in the middle of the gate, letting her null-magic effect spread as widely as she could. Marines filed past her on both sides for several minutes followed by at least two hundred of Oceanvine’s Girls.

“There are still more coming,” Ksaveras told them after speaking to the Army captain who came to investigate what was happening, “but they can guard the palace perimeter. It appears that while many of my generals might have been disloyal, the lower ranks of the Army remain loyal.”

“Good thing or they might have killed you on sight,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“Strangely, I never stopped to think of that,” Ksaveras admitted. “I guess they never did either. Well let’s go take back the palace.”

“Sure,” Ksanya laughed. “It’s almost my bedtime.”

“I’ll handle the curse victims,” Candle told Southgate and Sextant. “See what you can do with the chorus by the elevator.”

Southgate and Sextant attempted to over-power the Bond of Pohn-powered ward protecting the men at the elevator, but the ward absorbed everything they threw at it and just made the protection stronger. Three of the men held up amulets of some sort and started to shout the, “Maiyim will be one!” invocation, but Sextant did not wait for them to finish and telekinetically plucked the trinkets from their hands.

“Hah!” he exclaimed triumphantly, “so that ward isn’t entirely impervious!”

“So I see,” Southgate noted. She did Sextant one better and slammed the politicians hard against the elevator door for the second time and then tried to drop them to the floor, but their ward was too small for that much motion and kept them from actually falling down. She started lifting them toward the ceiling, but a bolt of bright orange light streaked out and hit her in the chest. She collapsed to the floor.

Sextant wasted no time or pity on the man who had cast the spell and telekinetically crushed the man’s skull. Then, as he considered his next move, he noticed a spell string wiggle out from behind the ward and head toward the walking dead Candle was trying to handle.

While Southgate and Sextant were battling the People’s Party mages, Candle tried to invoke the Seal of Methis, but discovered he still did not have a firm enough grasp of all its intricacies. He abandoned that attempt before it could backfire on him and invoked the Seal of Aritos instead. While Methis’ power had been more effective against the Bond of Kerawlat, Aritos had shown him how to finesse the power of Kerawlat. It was a longer process. Candle decided it might have had something to do with the differing personalities of the two Gods. Aritos was always patient with His children even though they never deserved the consideration, but Methis, for all her sweet disposition, had little patience for such irritants and often went straight to the heart of the matter to dispose of problems quickly. Both would do the job, but Candle found he tended to side with Methis’ method increasingly as he got older.

He was able to hold the advancing curse victims off with a ward, but defusing the Bond of Kerawlat safely would take some time yet. Hundreds of spell strings spun their way out from both ends of the golden staff, each one connecting itself to a different victim of the curse. Candle noted that he would never have had even this much trouble with the real Kerawlat; not with the tools he had at hand, but then the demon would never have used every last ounce of his power unless absolutely desperate as it would have left him vulnerable in many other ways. These mages of One Maiyim had no such restraints since it was not their own power they were playing with. Suddenly a spell string slipped through his ward and connected to the Bond of Kerawlat, changing everything. Power was now coming at Candle far too quickly. All his concentration was bound up in safely dispelling the energy that threatened to overwhelm even the golden staff he used. He had been sending a small stream of the energy out a nearby window, but he had almost no control over the sudden torrent and it burst upward explosively, tearing a gaping hole through several floors of the keep until it reached the open sky at last.

Sextant, seeing what was happening, sent a string of his own and attached it to the one that was threatening to overwhelm Candle. Candle had described how he had turned the power of the ring spell in Rjalkatyp back on itself, but what Sextant had in mind was more complex. Quickly, before the enemy

mage could stop him, Sextant sent “instructions” along the string that was causing the power to flood toward Candle and instead told it to flow back up the controlling string. He just barely disconnected from the enemy spell in time, but even without the ability to see auras, Sextant could have seen the lightning-like blast head directly toward the politicians. Their ward tried to absorb everything that came at them but it was no match for the unfettered power of a demon.

The ward grew brighter and brighter until it was blindingly white. The moment seemed to last an eternity until the people inside the ward began to scream. The scream only lasted a few seconds though before the ward suddenly disappeared, leaving eleven piles of white ash, where the politicians had been standing moments earlier.

The reanimated dead also dropped in their tracks. Most of the power from the curse that had been controlling them had been drained away and Candle quickly finished the job while Sextant saw to Southgate .

Twenty-three

Southgate had been knocked out, but only for a few seconds, and was already trying to sit up against the wall. “I think I broke something,” she admitted painfully to Sextant. “That’s the problem with getting old, you know. Bones get brittle, the mind becomes less sharp, and yet you never stop thinking you can get away with the stunts you pulled when you were still just a kid.”

“Where do you hurt, ma’am?” Sextant asked.

“You don’t need to be so formal all the time, Sextant” Southgate , tried to laugh. “It makes you sound stuffy. It’s my right leg. I think I broke it in the fall. I know I sprained my ankle at the very least.” Candle joined them, looking at his old friend concernedly. “I’m sorry, Ange,” she told him softly, “but I think you’ll have to finish this without me.”

“Don’t worry, Korinna,” Candle told her just as softly. “I’ll handle it with the kids.”

“They’re not children, Ange,” she told him firmly. “Definitely, not children, and you’ve trained them well.”

“Over here!” Ksanya’s voice could be heard. Sextant got up to see who was coming, but Candle kept his eyes on Southgate .

“I’ve had a little help along the way,” Candle admitted wryly. “Methis and Aritos. And Vine started Elie’s training.”

“Who?” Southgate asked.

“Young Oceanvine,” Candle chuckled. “She was born to the name Elinor, just like my sister.”

“Appropriate, I think,” Southgate smiled, but was unable to hold the expression as a surge of pain shot through her.

“I’m starting to think Vine taught her namesake a lot more than any of us gave her credit for,” Candle admitted before realizing he was surrounded. Looking up, he saw King Ksaveras, starting to kneel

beside him.

“Lady Southgate,” Ksaveras greeted her. “You have been injured?”

“A broken leg,” Southgate shrugged. “A sprained ankle. I’ll survive.” Oceanvine and Ksanya arrived just then and joined them on the floor.

“Get a medic up here for Marquessa Southgate!” Ksaveras commanded.

“I’m not a marquessa,” Southgate protested.

“You are now,” Ksaveras told her firmly.

“But I’m not even gentle-born!” Southgate told him.

“Like I am?” Candle countered, laughing. Oceanvine hugged Southgate while Ksanya kissed her on the cheek, both murmuring congratulations. Finally, it was up to Candle to break the mood. Standing up to let the marine medics tend to Southgate’s injuries, he told Oceanvine and Sextant. “We still have our work cut out for us. There are several People’s Party leaders unaccounted for, not the least of which is the self-proclaimed Lord President Wallono. Is the rest of the palace secured?” Candle asked Ksaveras.

“We have the first floor and according to the soldiers who have rejoined us,” Ksaveras replied, “we ought not expect too much resistance in the rest of the palace. All the leaders are up there.” He pointed at the tower.

“We can’t take the elevator up,” Sextant pointed out. “It would make us too much of an easy target and give them warning of our approach.”

“Your grandfather should have never removed the stairs,” Candle remarked to the young king.

“We will have to tell him that next time he happens to come round to visit,” Ksaveras replied dryly. “Do ghosts exist?”

“Not that I’m aware of, Your Majesty,” Candle replied. “There are those who believe that a person who is mentally strong enough, might leave a sort of psychic echo in a place they suffered a particularly painful or terrifying experience, but I am not aware that your grandfather suffered such at any time in his life, with the possible exception of the passing of Queen Petronelle two years before his own death.”

“Grandfather was never quite the same after that,” Ksaveras noted, “Grandma Petronelle was a remarkable woman.”

“Even more so in her youth,” Candle told him.

“I imagine so,” Ksaveras admitted, “but I didn’t know her then.”

“There’s no safe way for you and the troops to get up to the top of the tower,” Candle pointed out, “and we can’t call on air support to strafe the room up there since that great dirty red dome is still over the palace. I think it will be best if you stay down here while the journeymen and I go up and handle the mages up there.”

“I’m coming too!” Ksanya insisted.

“We’re going to levitate up the tower and come in through the windows,” Candle told her. “You’re a magic-null. Even with this staff I doubt I could lift you that far.”

“Oceanvine can,” Ksanya protested.

“Oceanvine and you have a very intimate relationship,” Candle told her. “That’s the only explanation I can come up with. Somehow she knows precisely how to wiggle her way through your null-magic field to touch the real you.”

“That sounds dirty, Uncle,” Oceanvine protested, feeling a hot blush spread across her cheeks.

“I don’t know why,” Candle told her calmly. “The fact of the matter is you can do it, at least some of the time. Perhaps you are phasing through her null-magic effect the same way you might phase through a ward.”

“Not that easily, nor as reliably,” Oceanvine replied. “Ksanya, I nearly dropped both of us when we jumped off the balcony. If that happens up there we could both be killed. I’m sorry.”

“You could do it if I wasn’t magic-null, though,” Ksanya noted.

“We wouldn’t even consider taking you up there with us if you were not magic null,” Oceanvine replied. “Stay here with Ksaveras, Cousin. Who knows? He may yet need your special sort of protection.”

“Time to lift off,” Candle told her sharply, matching his actions to his words.

Oceanvine followed immediately and Sextant paused only to bow briefly toward Ksaveras, shooting upward to catch up even as he straightened. “Handy having this hole in the ceiling,” he commented to the others.

“I doubt the people who patch up all the holes will agree with you,” Oceanvine replied, “but it beats jumping out the windows, I suppose.”

“We want to spread out and attack from different directions,” Candle told them as they continued to rise, “and stay close to the tower. We’re trying to surprise them. Okay,” he continued, stopping them just a few feet from the top. Sextant you will be entering through the window just above us. Oceanvine, you’ll go through the one twenty feet that way and I’ll go in through one of the ones on the north side of the tower. Both of you stay out of sight until you hear me busting in.”

Oceanvine and Sextant did not have long to wait. There was a great explosion that blew all the windows in the top room out. Lifting herself to window level, Oceanvine saw a group of seven mages standing behind a ward, but facing toward Candle. She used a small projectile ward of her non-stick variety. Just like the time she used that technique on the rogue mage Adamant, it blasted its way through the ward and slammed into one of the mages standing behind the ward. It was a spell that a year earlier she had needed Candle’s staff to augment in order to be effective. This time she was able to accomplish that on her own.

She, zoomed in through the now pane-less window and was about to follow through on her initial attack when she felt herself being thrown backward through the windows once again. She fell almost sixty feet before catching herself and heading back to the top of the tower.

Sextant, unlike Oceanvine, entered the window first and maneuvered around behind the mages before commencing his attack. They had their eyes entirely on Candle and then on Oceanvine so he was able to consider his attack. He studied the ward and discovered there was nothing particularly unusual about it. A year earlier he might have been intimidated, but not now. Just as Oceanvine had done, he prepared to send a small projectile ward at them, then on seeing how they had retaliated, he erected a small, half-round non-stick ward up in front of him and then sent the projectile, somewhat larger than the one Oceanvine had used at the rogue mages.

His projectile ward lost a lot of momentum as it penetrated the rogues' ward, but still managed to knock the mages within around. Three of them turned around and shot a combination of fire and force at him. The non-stick shield ward held, but it and he were forced back into the elevator car, which had been locked open at the top floor. Another attack slammed him hard into the back wall of the elevator. As he slumped to the floor, Sextant telekinetically unlocked the car and pushed the ground floor button just before passing out.

At the same time Candle had to reposition himself. He was still outside the tower, but with Sextant directly behind the mages, he would have been hit if Candle's spell somehow missed or was redirected. Every time Candle tried to attack from outside, however, someone shot offensive spells of various sorts, all enforced by the Bond of Pohn and it was all he could do to counter them with his staff.

Oceanvine lifted herself back up the side of the tower and, seeing Candle having trouble getting in, she threw the hardest, hottest fire spell she could muster. It was a diversion, she knew, but perhaps a successful one.

Candle capitalized on it and finally entered the tower room, dropping the ceiling on the rogue mages. Their ward protected them, but they were blinded by the rubble as Candle invoked the Seal of Aritos and Oceanvine eased herself in through a window. She was alarmed that Sextant was nowhere in sight, but forced herself to put that out of her mind and conjured up another projectile ward.

It wasn't quite like the last one she had cast. This one was keyed with a fire spell and as it splashed through the now weakened defensive ward and exploded, burning all the mages within to one extent or another. Two looked like they might recover, but the other five were as badly scorched as the rogue Adamant had been.

"Not bad," Candle commended her.

"I couldn't have managed it by myself," Oceanvine replied looking around the room. There was only a single light on near the elevator. The rest of the large room was cloaked in shadow with the only other light filtering in from outside. "Uh oh!"

"What?" Candle asked.

"We're not done," Oceanvine told him. "The big ward is still up."

"Yes, yes," a cold harsh voice said from the far corner of the room. "Well spotted, girl." Two Granomen stepped forward from the shadows. One Candle and Oceanvine recognized as Lord President Kaspar Wallono, the other was a woman neither of them recognized. Both appeared to be wearing the heavy gold rings worn by the One Maiyim members in Rjalkatyp and by the politicians who had blocked the way to the elevator. He seemed supremely confident in the face of two mages who had just defeated seven others.

Oceanvine had used up all the stored power in her staff and was actively trying to charge it, but she wondered why Candle wasn't attacking even as Baron Kaspar Wallono continued to speak.

"Please forgive my manners," Wallono continued, "you probably recognize me as the Lord President.

"Former Lord President," Oceanvine retorted. "Your Commonwealth is currently vying with Saindo for shortest lived government."

"Oh, I have supporters everywhere," Wallono replied. "This is far from over, just a minor setback. One that will be settled before the sun rises. Anyway, this is my lovely wife, Lady Esfar or as we call her these days, Mistress Justice, and I will soon be known as Wizard Victory."

"A wizard?" Oceanvine scoffed. "Everyone knows there is only one true wizard left in the world."

"Then everyone is wrong!" Victory told her heatedly. "You only know your own weak academically sponsored line of mages. What could you possibly know of true magic?"

Oceanvine took a look at Candle and realized he was being held immobile. Tracing back the string it was Justice holding him like that. She reinforced her own ward, making its sparkling surface visibly bright. "Cute," Victory sneered even as she sent a sharp-edged projectile ward, severing the string of the spell that held Candle immobile. He fell gasping to the floor.

Just then the elevator opened and without bothering to look, Victory threw an extremely large, fiery bolt of energy at the opening doors. Smoke and flames immediately erupted from the area, obscuring Oceanvine's view of whoever had tried to return via the elevator. She focused her power and sent two spells at the pair of rogues. The first was another non-stick projectile ward, the other was the large conference table from the far side of the room.

Victory caught her projectile in his hand and threw it back at her even as Justice stopped the table apparently without effort. Oceanvine's ward stopped the returning projectile but the backlash of the two colliding wards caused them both to be disrupted. Energy, as she had learned, cannot be destroyed and it came back at her as telekinetic force, slamming her back at the windows. She quickly held her staff out in front of her in an attempt to absorb as much of the energy as she could. The staff was smoking from both ends as she impacted the wall between two windows. She held on to consciousness, but just barely.

Justice was laughing as she applied a binding ward on Oceanvine and started squeezing tighter. This was not just a battle. Justice was playing with her by pulsing the pressure on and off unbearably. Oceanvine was just about to scream with the pain when the pressure suddenly stopped, accented by a gasp and a moan that erupted from Justice's lips. "Justice!" Victory half shouted, half moaned.

Oceanvine opened her eyes to see a ghastly wound in Justice's neck, spurting blood several feet. The woman fell to the floor limply, twitched for a few more seconds and then went motionless forever.

"There ain't no Justice," quipped a familiar female voice coldly. Oceanvine squinted through the smoke filling the room from the elevator area to see Ksanya holding a reddened sword.

"No!" Victory screamed. He threw spell after spell at Ksanya; fire, lightning and projectile wards, but none had any effect on her. Oceanvine was still too woozy to cast any spells, but she started crawling over to where Candle was still gasping on the floor several yards away. Then a large blast of telekinetic force blasted in through one of the open windows with super-hurricane force, pushing Victory across the room and out the windows at the far end.



From where she was, Oceanvine saw Sextant sail in through the window and land on the floor, but he was unable to stay standing for long as an even stronger spell from Victory hit his shielding ward, sending him right back out the window. Then Victory reentered the room and, invoking the Bond of Aritos, warded shut all the windows with opaque and impermeable fields.

The room was still on fire and now it was rapidly filling up with smoke. Oceanvine could hear Ksanya coughing, having inhaled too much smoke. Through the smoke, she thought she saw Victory hit her with the back of his fist and she heard her Granomish cousin hit the floor. By then, however, she had found Candle's staff. She had hoped it would help her clear her mind as it had once before in Silamon, but this time it did nothing to help along those lines. Instead, she used the staff to help her erect a binding ward around Victory.

She could feel Victory trying to break free of the confinement, but the augmentation ability of the staff allowed her hold him albeit with difficulty. "Keep holding him," Candle instructed her, between fits of coughing, "you're also holding in the Bond of Pohn and I'll need to dispel it, before you can let him go."

"What makes you think I'm going to let him go?" Oceanvine coughed back. "Can you reopen the windows, first though?"

The first rays of dawn instantly flooded into the room as Candle dismantled Victory's ward and a cold fresh breeze blew in from the southwest, sweeping the smoke out with it. Oceanvine's suspicion that Candle was helping it along was borne out a moment later when he extinguished the smoldering blaze before the wind could make it flare up again.

Sextant floated back into the room but Oceanvine was too busy trying to keep Victory imprisoned in her ward. She could sense the power of the Bond of Pohn building up inside as Victory tried to burst his way out. Seeing her struggle, Sextant ran over and, taking hold of the staff, lent her some of his power and control. "I'm here for you," he told her. "I can maintain the spell if you want to check on Ksanya."

Oceanvine nodded and let him have the staff. Exhaustion swept over her and she realized just how much of her personal energy had been leached while the staff gave her an illusion of freshness. *It helped me after all*, she thought to herself. Aloud, she warned Sextant. "Watch out. He's trying something nasty in there."

Sextant nodded and closed his eyes to note that Candle was slowly draining the Bond of its power, but with the ward inhibiting the process he only had limited success. Victory stopped struggling for a moment and Sextant at first thought he had given up. Instead however, he stopped trying to burst the confinement spell, and instead concentrated all his power on a small spot.

Using the Bond of Pohn as a drill, Victory poked a small hole in the ward that held him captive and then used that hole to send a paralysis spell at Candle, who taken by surprise, stiffened and fell to the floor.

Sextant renewed the imprisonment ward, closing over the hole Victory had drilled through the one Oceanvine had cast. He immediately felt Victory attempting to break through once more. Candle had once told the Prime Minister of Sutheria that a mage could not be held in jail against his will. Even a half-trained apprentice could use simple telekinesis to open any locked door or cut through bars and bolts. Sextant knew he could use teleportation to entirely move any such obstacle and while he had not tried it, he could teleport himself if necessary. Teleportation of a living creature was difficult because the shock would cause the teleported to lose conscious for at least five minutes even if young and healthy.

Inside the ward, Victory was about to burst free, so Sextant teleported him one hundred feet to the east. The unconscious body of Victory was briefly visible just in front of the rising sun before it dropped out of sight. As the one-time Lord President fell to his death, the great red ward that enveloped the palace slowly dissipated.

Twenty-four

Candle opened his eyes. “Don’t drop that ward yet,” he warned Sextant. He stood up and took hold of the staff. Without a conscious mind controlling the Bond of Pohn, still active but contained within the imprisonment ward, Candle was able to absorb its energy into the staff in seconds. “There, that’s better,” he told Sextant.

“You woke up quickly,” Sextant observed, letting Candle take the golden staff as Oceanvine helped Ksanya to her feet.

“I wasn’t asleep,” Candle explained. “I was paralyzed. Let that be a lesson to you. Always keep your wards up. I got cocky there and believing Vine’s ward would keep Wallono contained, I did not bother maintaining one of my own. Shows you even a wizard can make mistakes.”

“Uncle Candle,” Oceanvine ask, “could Baron Kaspar or Victory really have been a wizard?”

“He may have attained the mastery necessary,” Candle admitted, “but I suspect One Maiyim’s standards are lower than those the Universities used to subscribe to. His wife could have been a master level mage, she seemed to have the control that comes with reaching that level, but Lack-of-Victory did not. He had learned a lot of powerful spells, but you two know powerful spells too. His control wavered too much. I wouldn’t want to have to battle someone like him every day, but Adamant was more of a threat. Good thing we had Ksanya, though. She surprised the heck out of both of them.”

“Yes,” Oceanvine agreed. “Uncle, I think we ought to let the king know he has his palace back now.”

“Good idea,” Candle admitted. “I sure hope the elevator is still working.”

“It ought to be,” Ksanya told him. “I stretched my null-magic field out as far as I could when the doors opened. Most of that smoke came from the charred wooden frame around the elevator door.”

“Good thing they didn’t just throw furniture at you,” Sextant commented.

“They wouldn’t have,” Candle chuckled as they headed for the elevator. “No offense, kids, but throwing material objects is something most advanced mages see as something only a beginner might do.” He pushed the ground floor button and while the door did not close they started to descend. “It won’t pass anyone’s safety code this way,” Candle remarked, “but compared to some of the mess, this will probably be an easy thing to fix. Anyway, I’ve never understood the attitude myself. Use what you’ve got and keep mixing your attacks. You never know what’s going to work best until you try it.”

“Did any of the curse victims survive?” Ksanya asked quietly. Oceanvine look at her. The quiet tone was not her usual way and she recognized the problem right away. The question was how soon she would be needed.

“Only the few we released early on,” Candle told her as the elevator car slowed to a halt. “Victory,

Justice and their cronies killed all the slaves and used them as the animated dead we saw here in the palace. Sure hope they were the only ones in One Maiyim who ever thought of that trick. That was pure evil and anyone who would do such a thing deserves more than death. Too bad death is the most we can give them. Any more and we would be as evil as they are.” The king, marines and soldiers were waiting as the doors on the ground floor opened, but Candle continued talking to Oceanvine, Sextant and Ksanya, “I’m proud of all three of you. You each did exactly what you had to without gloating, boasting, attempting to torture or play with your opponents. In short, while they were evil and arrogant, you accorded them the respect any intelligent being deserves; a respect they would never have accorded any of us. In the old days we’d have said you showed your quality. Your Majesty, I must apologize, but we made a bit of a mess of your favorite room.”

“I can always redecorate,” Ksaveras replied.

“Were there any other animated corpses around the palace?” Candle asked.

“No, they were all here. Are they safe to touch?” Ksaveras asked.

“With gloves,” Candle replied. “They’ve been dead for a couple days or more, but I removed the curse before we went upstairs.”

“Well, I’d like a full report,” Ksaveras requested, “from you and the rest of our leaders. I believe the main dining room is as clean as any of the large rooms may be.”

“Please, Your Majesty,” Oceanvine interrupted as politely as she could, with a quick look at Ksanya, “but I’m feeling a bit woozy. Would you mind if Ksanya helped me find a quiet place to rest for half an hour or so?”

“Take as long as you need, my lady,” the king told her with a respectful bow.

Oceanvine and Ksanya reentered the elevator and took it to the second floor then wordlessly made their way to the Garden Wing of the palace. Oceanvine was pleasantly surprised to find her suite had not been disturbed in her absence and was very proud of Ksanya who managed to keep her composure until they had sat down beside each other on the couch in the sitting room.

Ksanya looked at her human cousin through eyes rapidly filling with tears. She shook her head back and forth uncertainly, but Oceanvine told her, “I know,” and opened her arms. Ksanya fell into Oceanvine’s embrace and wept for a good long time.

“You’ve been through this before, haven’t you?” Ksanya asked a quarter of an hour later, her arms still wrapped desperately around Oceanvine.

“Last year in Sutheria,” Oceanvine admitted.

“I killed her,” Ksanya voiced her worries aloud. “This is going to ruin me, isn’t it?”

“Only if you let it, dear,” Oceanvine told her, unconsciously mimicking Methis. “Look, I doubt you’ll ever get used to it. I haven’t and Uncle Candle says you never should. But it does stop hurting after a while and not as long a while as you might think.”

“Did you do something afterward to make you feel better?” Ksanya asked.

“I wrote a paper,” Oceanvine told her.

“You what?” Ksanya asked, half laughing.

“I wrote a paper,” Oceanvine repeated. “Uncle Candle assigned it to me as part of my academic term at sea. It was on the new type of ward I invented in Sutheria and I wrote it on the *Maiyim Bourne* while we were sailing home. I think the trick was keeping busy with normal stuff. Not make work, mind you. Uncle assigned me that paper before it happened, you see, but between crewing on the boat and writing that paper, I didn’t really have time to feel sorry for myself.”

“Yes,” Ksanya nodded, finally untangling herself from Oceanvine, “that’s what it is. I’m feeling sorry for myself. I don’t like it.”

“Then stop doing it,” Oceanvine told her. It was a completely ridiculous suggestion and both women knew it. Emotions couldn’t be turned off and on that easily, but they looked at each other for a frozen moment before they both started laughing uncontrollably. “Feeling a little better?” Oceanvine asked when they finally stopped.

“I feel a lot better,” Ksanya told her, smiling. “Oh, I know I’m going to go back and forth with the tide for a while, but if I can feel better this soon, there’s hope. You’re my best and dearest friend, Oceanvine!”

Suddenly her name sounded wrong to Oceanvine; too formal, too stuffy. “Call me Vine,” she told Ksanya as they hugged again.

Twenty-five

“I know he tried to sound noncommittal about it,” Ksanya told Oceanvine and Sextant a few days later while waiting for Ksaveras to hold the first court since the restoration of the monarchy. Queen Orya and the prince and princess had arrived back in Querna the day before to the cheers of the populace as they rode toward the Wurra Palace in a demonstration of happiness and support that as far as anyone could tell was almost completely spontaneous. “But I think Veras absolutely loves your idea of an international mission to Midbar. He never acts all excited about that sort of thing; his father used to reprimand him for being too emotional, you know. But I can always tell when something strikes his fancy. The space program is his greatest interest outside of the wellbeing of his subjects. He never wanted it to be a competition. Never! He just wants to get into space and since he can’t, he wants to be able to help others get there. The idea of pooling experience and engineering skills is exactly the sort of thing to advance space exploration the way he wants it to be.

“Now as long as Emmine and Bellinen agree,” Ksanya continued, “I think it might just happen. Too bad you never found the mage who cursed the Gran 4 mission.”

“We’re very sure it was Baron Kaspar,” Sextant replied. “He was the only rogue mage we know for certain used the Bond of Pohn. He should have done his research better or maybe he just didn’t care. Pohn was probably the least suitable Bond to use for what he tried, which I suppose we should all be grateful for.”

“I just wish we had found Senator Hawakamala,” Oceanvine commented. “We know she came to Querna, but she never turned up here.”

“Just because she flew here,” Sextant reminded her, “it doesn’t mean she stayed very long. The Customs Service in Querna has a record of her entering the kingdom. But not of her leaving.”

“It’s possible she was killed during the chaos,” Candle told then as he and Southgate approached. Southgate had suffered a broken leg along with her sprained ankle, but she was hobbling around on crutches well enough and Oceanvine noticed she was using levitation liberally to help her get around.

“Do you really think so?” Ksanya asked.

“No, I’ve never been that lucky,” Candle laughed. “She’s going to resurface somewhere eventually. I just hope I’m there to stop her when she does. My own hypothesis is that she stopped in Querna very briefly to let Victory – what a lame mage name – know what happened in Rjalkatyp. That’s probably why he was as ready for us as he was and why the Bond-Hook curse took such a different form here. There were more differences than can be accounted for in merely substituting the Bond of Kerawlat in place of the Bond of Gredac, after all. Then she probably flew out of Querna again. Customs may have lost the record of her departure in the confusion of the last few days or she may have left on a strictly internal flight. She could have flown to Mith or Kif or Marga for all I know. From there she might well have flown out of the kingdom.”

“She may also have picked up a new identity,” Southgate suggested, “and left here as an entirely different person. There are thousands of Orenta who come and go from Querna every week. She wouldn’t have been unusual enough for anyone to notice and the chance of being checked by the same agent who stamped her passport on the way in is small enough to be laughable.

“By the way,” Southgate continued, “it’s official; Candle and I made all the arrangements. You know it is too late to attend the Fall Semester at the university in Randona.”

“I know,” Oceanvine agreed. “Classes started two weeks ago. It’s too late to join in now.”

“But it isn’t too late for the Spring Session here in Querna,” Southgate told her. “It doesn’t start for another two weeks. You’re officially enrolled as guest students from Randona for one semester and I think you’ll like our approach to the physical sciences Candle keeps shoving at you. Of course we’ll also be expecting you to teach two classes in your greatest strengths.”

“My greatest strength is the liberal arts,” Oceanvine commented.

“And general practice magic,” Southgate told her. “I think you’ll do just fine and expect your classes to be very popular. We don’t have many heroes of the kingdom your age teaching at University, you know.”

At the far end of the hall, a herald thumped his staff on the floor three times. “Oyez!” he called, his resonant voice filling the hall. “All rise for His Most Royal Majesty, Ksaveras XI, Lord of all Granom, Duke of Quirnlia, and Beloved of Gran and his Queen Orezhda, Duchess of Quirnlia and beloved of Querna!”

Most of the people in the hall were already standing, but all turned to face and applaud the royal couple, bowing to them as they progressed the length of the hall to the thrones. On reaching the thrones, Ksaveras turned and made the customary welcoming remarks before getting down to business.

“The Wizard Candle, Marquess of Sentendir and Companion of the Silver Stay is commanded to appear before the court!” the herald announced.

“I’ve always been tempted to teleport when they say that,” he whispered to Oceanvine and Ksanya as he passed them. They both giggled.

“Wizard, we owe you our lives and our crowns. Our kingdom owes you everything,” Ksaveras began, “and this is not the first time you have saved the life of the King of Granom. You are a knight of the realm and a hero of the kingdom and yet you have refused every honor we can think of to offer you.”

“As you have said yourself, Majesty,” Candle replied, “I have already been rewarded by Royal Granom as much as anyone ever has. Your continued health and happiness and that of your subjects are all the reward I need.”

“Then you have our profound thanks and our declaration that should you ever need anything no matter how small or great from us, it is yours without question or condition.”

Candle thanked him and then withdrew in order to allow the next scheduled business take place. Southgate was summoned and formally invested as Marquessa of Nanir, a small uninhabited island just south and east of Candle’s island Sentendir. That concluded all announced business for this court session, but Ksaveras was not finished yet.

“The Lady Oceanvine, Companion of the Star of Emmine, and Sir Sextant, Companion of the Star of Emmine are commanded to appear before the court!” the herald announced.

Oceanvine shot a glance at both Sextant and Ksanya, but both merely shrugged in response.

“Lady Oceanvine, Sir Sextant,” Ksaveras began after they had approached and shown honor by curtsying or bowing. “The Order of the Silver Stay is the highest order of knighthood granted to anyone by the King of Granom. It is so rarely granted that we have never granted it before and our royal father elevated only one person to the order. Our grandfather who reigned so much longer only granted it to five people in all the years he reigned. Two of those people are in the hall this evening; Wizard Candle and Doctor Southgate. A third was the Lady Oceanvine’s great-grandmother, also known by the mage name Oceanvine, so it is singularly pleasurable to induct the two of you into that most honorable order this evening.”

The ceremony was brief but, to Oceanvine’s tastes, elegant. It involved an ancient ceremony that was no longer practiced in Emmine in which the recipients knelt before the king and he laid his sword of state on their shoulders while proclaiming their new rank. Finally, it was over and as they rose the king requested, “Would you both please attend and witness one final item of business?”

They nodded and the herald summoned, “Countess Ksanya Renata Dorofea Petronelle is commanded to appear before the court!”

Looking totally bewildered, Ksanya made her way toward the thrones and curtsyed deeply. She studied Ksaveras’s face as closely as she could, trying to divine what he could possibly have on his mind, but his thoughts were a closed book. She would have to wait for him to tell her.

And wait she did. As she was looking for signs from the king, he too was studying her and taking some obvious satisfaction from his wayward cousin’s confusion. Finally, he began to speak. “Countess Ksanya, Granomish society is ruled as much by our laws as by our traditions,” he began. “So much so, in

fact, that several scholars have pointed out that our body of law is a fluid and ever-changing creature when compared to our collection of traditions.

“We cannot disagree with such learned men, for they are right in this case,” he continued. “Granomish tradition is not only indelibly written into the rules of our society, but no one is more bound by these unwritten laws of Granom than her king.

“By tradition, no member of the royal family has ever been elevated in rank, or granted additional titles or honors save by inheritance. That tradition was established for good cause and I will not be the one to break it. So while you were no less instrumental in saving our beloved Granom than the others we have honored this evening, we have nothing to give you besides our profound and public thanks.”

That last was not technically true. Earlier in the day, Ksaveras had sent Ksanya a very special tiara from the Crown Jewels; one that only her great-grandmother, Princess Ksana of Northmarket had worn before her.

“In fact,” Ksaveras continued on smoothly, “far from granting you additional honors, we are of a mind to impose a hard and onerous task upon you.” Ksanya frowned on hearing that. Not only was such a threat inappropriate, it was also very unlike Ksaveras, but there was a slight sparkle in his expression as he said it and Ksanya waited for her royal cousin to drop the other shoe. “It seems that our representative to the court of Emmine has long suffered from a shortage of support staff and, as he is looking forward to a timely retirement, he has sent word that some much needed succor would be appreciated.”

Ksanya smiled at the thought. She had been practically begging for the chance to do something of value for the kingdom for years. Being a member of a major embassy would certainly fill the bill and allow her to show just what she could do.

“Our relations with Royal Emmine have been strained, to say the least, for decades and it is a most sensitive and demanding post, one that our current ambassador, Baron Genrik Parassov, has handled with distinction for many years now. But he has been asking for assistance of late. Therefore,” Ksaveras began to wind down, “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.”

“Really?” Ksanya blurted, unconsciously jumping back to her feet and hugging Ksaveras. Muffled laughter from the attendees of the court filtered through to her and she was aware that not only was Ksaveras not hugging her in return, but was shaking somewhat under her assault. Mortified at her breach of etiquette, Ksanya released him and took a step backward, curtsying and then kneeling once again, this time afraid to look her king in the eyes.

However, Ksaveras reached out and with a light touch lifted her head until she saw he was laughing harder than anyone. “We’ll take that as a yes,” he told her.

Epilogue

Renton

One and one half years later

“It’s a shame you couldn’t join us in person tonight,” Oceanvine told Ksanya over the phone.

“I wish I could!” Ksanya replied. “It has got to be more fun there than here at the embassy. I don’t blame you for begging off, but I am the ambassador and technically the host of the evening.”

“It’s too late to call it evening anymore,” Oceanvine laughed just before being overtaken by a yawn.

“I’ll be there later today, sometime in the afternoon, I should think,” Ksanya promised. “I need to lay a flower at your great-grandmother’s grave. Should have done it a year ago really. What?” she asked someone at her end of the connection. “Now? Oh, all right. Vine, I gotta go. EBS wants to interview me live before the big event.”

“We’ll wave at you in the teevee,” Oceanvine promised. They traded goodbyes and hung up.

“You two were talking long enough,” Candle noted when Oceanvine finally returned to the large tavern room at Candleson’s Inn. “Just how much catching up did you two need to do? You just saw each other a few days ago at the launch party.”

“Oh, it was mostly just girl-talk, Uncle,” Oceanvine replied.

“Yeah, Grandpa!” Sally, his fourteen year old granddaughter, told him sleepily, “you wouldn’t understand.”

“I suppose I wouldn’t,” Candle laughed.

The restaurant and tavern had closed two and a half hours earlier at midnight, so only Candle’s immediate family, Oceanvine and Sextant were still there to view the large thirty-five inch screen that Candle’s son, Thomas kept in the tavern room. His other, older granddaughter, Jillandette, was sitting on the couch between Oceanvine and Sextant, trying valiantly to stay awake, but instead she kept nodding off leaning alternately on Sextant and Oceanvine’s shoulders.

Sally, who had curled up and napped on the couch during Oceanvine’s absence, moved just enough to allow Oceanvine to sit back down and then fell back asleep in her lap. Candle smiled at the picture, wishing he had a camera with which to capture it. Sally had immediately attached herself to Oceanvine the very first time they met and while the journeywoman had only visited back here a few times in the last two and one half years, each time she did it was as if they had known each other for life.

Then, Candle realized he did not need a camera to capture the moment and, after a moment of concentration, managed to materialize a thamatograph of the two. He showed it to Sextant, who smiled when he finally took his eyes off the television screen.

“It’s snowing out there again,” Thomas reported as he came into the tavern room a few minutes later. He sat down on a loveseat next to his wife, putting his arm around her fondly.

“We’re not going anywhere tonight,” Candle replied lightly.

“Just as well,” Thomas laughed in a mannerism that accentuated their relationship, “I don’t think you’d want to go too far tonight of all nights.”

“I wouldn’t mind going about two hundred and thirty-five thousand miles,” Candle told him. It was the



mean distance from Maiyim to Midbar.

“It’s not snowing too hard, is it?” Oceanvine asked.

“Not supposed to,” Thomas assured her. “Just a light coating to make everything look like we sprayed it on to welcome your cousin tomorrow. Oh, is that her now?”

“It is,” Oceanvine replied. “Sally? Want to see your Granomish cousin?” Sally opened her eyes and grunted an interrogative. “That’s her right there.” Oceanvine pointed at the screen.

Ksanya was wearing a stunningly beautiful midnight blue gown that went perfectly with her medium brown hair and chalk-white skin. She was also wearing her great-grandmother’s tiara and the gold satin sash that marked her as a member of the Granomish royal house of Granova.

“She’s pretty,” Sally commented.

“Very pretty,” Jill added, waking up. “Most Granomen look like they need to go on a diet, but she’s...”

“Beautiful by almost anyone’s standards,” Sextant finished for her. “Ksanya got lucky in the genetic sweepstakes and inherited her light-boned physique. It seems to be a dominant trait on her side of the Granomish royal family.”

“Well, she’s pretty by our standards,” Jill noted critically, but how do Granomen see her?”

“As both attractive and eligible,” Oceanvine laughed. “She’s had four marriage proposals in the last year, but turned them all down.”

“Why?” Jill asked.

“Like anyone else, she’s looking for just the right guy,” Oceanvine told her. “In her case that means someone she doesn’t think wants her just because she’s a royal. She’s lucky Veras isn’t trying to arrange a marriage for her, but there’s a nice young man in the Isle of Fire Diplomatic Corps she has her eye on. I don’t know if anything will come of it, but he’s from an old senatorial family there so if it does, there should not be anything to stop them.”

They listened to Ksanya’s interview which was brief and in which she said nothing of any consequence. Instead she merely told the interviewer that she was thrilled to experience the first landing on Midbar and that it was being shared with the entire world. When the interview was over, the television picture changed to a bleak gray picture showing one leg of the Midbar Excursion Module in the foreground and the rugged gray landscape of Midbar behind it.

Even with nothing happening in the picture for the next half an hour, they all found it a fascinating sight. Never before had such a close picture of the surface of Maiyim’s only natural satellite been broadcast live to the entire world.

Finally an announcer told them the Midbar lander’s hatch was being opened and that soon the three man crew would be descending to the surface. He went on to explain needlessly for the fiftieth time, Oceanvine thought, since the lander had touched down, that the spacecraft was of Granomish manufacture – the Gran 5, in fact, but that while the crew was composed of one member of each of the sentient species on Maiyim – men from Emmine and Granom and a woman from Bellinen – nobody would say who would be the first person to actually walk on the surface of Midbar.

“Will we ever know, do you think?” Sextant asked the room at large. “Just who was first, that is?”

“I hope not,” Candle replied. Oceanvine nodded her head in agreement. She would have thought she would be able to tell which was which from the relative sizes and shapes of their bodies, but the large puffy space suits hid most such visual signs and the ethernauts were careful not to be seen together on camera until after they had all descended the craft’s ladder and the camera had been turned to get a better view of the moon. The ethernauts simultaneously planted the banners of their respective nations and only then did the Granomish ethernaut speak.

“We come for the sake of peace and unity for all the peoples of Maiyim.”

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# About this Title

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