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Ars Nova Magica

Book Three

The Tears of Methis

by

Jonathan Edward Feinstein

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Author's Foreword

Actually, while I have a lot to say about this story, this time I'm saying it all at the end of the book as everything I have to say involves what happens in the story and would be deemed as spoilers.

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. I have suggested donating to any of the charities providing tsunami relief in the Indian Ocean basin and then to those supporting the people hit by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and other victims of various natural disasters. There are also other causes worthy of your support; landslides, famines and relief from various man-made disasters, so all I can say this time is pick a cause and support it.

Jonathan E. Feinstein
May 1, 2007
Westport, MA

The Tears of Methis

Prologue

Three and a half years ago...

"I hate this place," the Granom shivered.

She and her companion, an Orentan man, had been summoned to this remote location. They weren't even certain where they were as they had been ordered to take drugs that would knock them out for several hours just before a team of five hooded men and women of various species transported them here.

Wherever they were, however, they had been moved a long way. In Randona it had been a cold winter, pre-dawn morning. When they stepped out of the small van, it was hot, humid and raining. Obviously,

they could not have driven all the way.

The building was no different from thousands of other glass and steel office buildings these days, save that it stood alone on a hill overlooking an unknown bay. Inside they might well have never left the capital city of the Emmine Archipelago. The air conditioning was working overtime and the internal temperature was over thirty degrees cooler than what it was outside. The cold dry air made them feel as though the hot tropical rain was freezing on their skin.

One of their escorts wordlessly pointed them toward an elevator at the far end of the building's lobby. They followed the mute instruction, but the hooded man stepped back out of the elevator after pushing the button for the top floor.

The elevator cab rose slowly and when it finally arrived, the doors slid open to reveal a dimly lit corridor. They walked down the short hallway and a door opened to their right. The office inside was as poorly lit as the hall had been. There was a large desk at the far end of the room at which someone was seated. They walked forward but remained standing even though there were three chairs arranged before the desk.

"Maiyim will be One!" they saluted the person behind the desk.

"Have a seat," a deep masculine voice growled at them. They did so, leaving the middle chair unoccupied. Then, just as their eyes were starting to adjust to the darkness, a light came on behind the man they were here to meet. It was perfectly situated to keep them from seeing the face inside his deep blue hood. "And where is the third member of your little party of refugees?"

"Petrana Hawakamala died last night, sir," the Granomish woman admitted warily. "She died in attempting to complete her mission."

"Oh? Was she involved in that fiasco at the royal ball?" he asked. "It's been on the news all morning. It was planned poorly and its execution was even worse. I would be having a little discussion with the Arithan of Randona had he not been killed himself last night. Ah, well, it's not much of a loss."

"Not much of..." the Orentan man began, but the man behind the desk cut him off with a sharp gesture.

"He overstepped his orders," the mystery man replied tightly. "Hacon Ancel and his queen were not to be targeted at this time. In fact after the collapse of the People's Party in Rjalkatyp and Querna, all chapters had been ordered to lay low and be quiet. No doubt, our former friend in Randona thought he knew better. Arithans!" the last word was spoken like a curse. "Petrana is no great loss either. I trained her myself and she was never more than a barely passable mage for the movement."

"We have suffered losses in Rjalkatyp and Querna and that idiot's bumbling will set us back in Randona as well," he continued, "but our strength remains unabated." The other two nodded their agreement although the looks on their faces told another story. "Oh? You disagree?" the man asked, amused. "Well, you will have a chance to see for yourselves. I have work for you two. I had wanted all three of our displaced mages from the Isle of Fire involved, but there are others whose lives are similarly forfeit." The two looked at each other. That was not good news; this interview was in the manner of a final chance for redemption. "The People's Party was a mere sideshow compared to the master plan. Last night was not even that. Over the next few years you will be performing an invaluable task for One Maiyim."

He reached into a drawer and pulled out a pair of rings. "Your new ranks," he told them. "You'll be instructed as to their use when you get to Killo." He reached into the drawer and pulled out a pair of

plane tickets and put them next to the rings. “You’ll be met at the airport.”

Two years ago...

“We come for the sake of peace and unity for all the peoples of Maiyim.” The television repeated as it had done every few minutes since the first people had stepped forth on Midbar, Mayim’s only natural satellite, just a few hours earlier.

“Nice sentiment,” the Wizard Candle commented dryly. “I wonder how long the warm and fuzzy moment will last.”

“Now, Uncle,” Countess Ksanya admonished him. “We have to start somewhere.” Ksanya was the Granomish ambassador to Emmine and had arrived in Renton just a few minutes earlier. They were sitting in the restaurant at Candleson’s, the hotel owned by Candle’s son, Thomas, a place bustling with activity this noontime.

Brunch at Candleson’s in Renton was always a busy and exciting affair, but it was normally only held on the weekends. However, Thomas had accurately predicted his regulars would have been up late the night before to watch the landing on Midbar and so had instructed the kitchen staff to prepare the usual weekend feast even though it was the middle of the week.

Brunch here had become one of Journeywoman Oceanvine’s favorite occasions when visiting Renton, even though she rarely overate. Today, in fact, she had satisfied herself with eggs, bacon and a pile of rye toast and in honor of the occasion she had even allowed herself a glass of sparkling wine. Since becoming a mage, Oceanvine rarely drank any alcoholic beverage because alcohol inhibited her ability to concentrate and concentration was the key to practicing magic. As she ate, looking around at the people at the table, friends and family all, she also maintained a minor spell that kept a large blue-white pearl in orbit about her head.

Suddenly, the pearl went sailing across the room and Oceanvine had to “reach out” with her mind to bring it back. Behind her a girlish giggle erupted and she turned to see Candle’s younger granddaughter, Sally, smirking at her. “We have got to get you a better hobby,” she told the fourteen-year old.

“I didn’t cheat that time,” Sally told her proudly. “I used magic.”

“You’re getting better,” Oceanvine admitted cheerfully, “but your grandfather is still going to have to devise some new exercises for you.”

“Why can’t you?” Sally asked seriously.

“I’m still just a student myself,” Oceanvine informed her.

“You taught in Querna, Vine,” Master Sextant pointed out. He had just received his graduate degree a month earlier and could still be seen occasionally contemplating the new magestone that had accompanied it.

“I taught liberal arts, Six,” Oceanvine countered.

“And basic magical theory,” Sextant added.

“Well, there is that,” Oceanvine allowed, “I suppose I might discuss that with you, Sally... Where’d she go?”

“Back to waiting on tables,” Thomas Candleson told her. “She and Jill are on duty this afternoon.”

“They’ll be coming with us, won’t they?” Ksanya asked.

“Of course,” Sandra, Thomas’ wife, replied. “This is a family affair, madam.”

“Just Ksanya, please,” the countess replied, “Besides in Granom the address is ‘my lady.’ Thank you for allowing me to accompany you, however.”

“Oh, Ksanya, you’re family too even if this is your first visit,” Sandra told her. “The first Oceanvine was your great aunt, wasn’t she?”

“Double great, I think,” Ksanya corrected her uncertainly. “It’s too early in the morning for that sort of math and in Granom I would have called her my aunt regardless of the number of generations. It’s not like I call Vine my third cousin. Is that right?” she asked Oceanvine.

“Twice removed,” Oceanvine replied. “You forgot to factor in the generational differences on both sides of the family.”

“See?” Ksanya asked. “The Emmine way of figuring kinship is so confusing. I had to memorize the same sorts of genealogies you did growing up, Vine, but anyone on the list was just a cousin, close or distant, unless they were even more closely related, like an uncle or a grandfather.”

“Phew!” Jillandette, Thomas and Sandra’s elder daughter sighed, joining them at the table. “I finished my shift. Now I can eat, finally!”

“How about Sally,” Thomas asked.

“She’s still filling her plate,” Jill replied. “Better watch out, Oceanvine. She doesn’t think you ate enough yet. I think she’s getting extras for you.”

“She’ll be disappointed then,” Oceanvine laughed. “I couldn’t eat another bite. But I’ll bet Maia’s still hungry.”

Maia Denfirth was Candle’s secretary. She had arrived with Ksanya, but since entering the restaurant she and the wizard had been busily working at the far end of the table and neither of them had taken the time for more than a sip or two of coffee since.

Sally arrived as the television replayed the now famous words once again. “You had something to do with that, didn’t you, Ksanya?” she asked.

“What?” Ksanya laughed. “Getting people to Midbar? No, that was Veras’ great passion.” Veras was short for Ksaveras, the king of the Granom Archipelago.

“I mean, getting a human and an Orent on the crew,” Sally amplified.

“Oh that,” Ksanya responded. “Well, yes, I did present the invitation to King Hacon Ancel, but you know Vine and Six were just as responsible. They were the ones who convinced Veras to share the glory, not that he needed much convincing, mind you.”

Maia looked up from her conversation with Candle and interjected, “It was your presentation that brought Emmine in, Ksanya.”

“Yeah, well,” Ksanya considered, “but then I had saved his life, you know, and he went on about how it was a debt he could never fully repay and that was before he even knew who I was. This gave us both a way to symbolically relieve the debt without embarrassing Emmine.”

“Huh?” Sally asked around a mouthful of waffles. “How did it do that?”

“I’d like to know that too,” Sextant admitted. “Seems to me it should put Emmine further in Granom’s debt.”

“It’s diplomatic logic,” Ksanya laughed. “It’s not supposed to make sense to normal people. Part of it was in the presentation – I made it sound like His Majesty was doing me a favor.”

“And he believed you?” Sextant asked, not crediting a word of it.

“You know His Majesty as well as I do,” Ksanya replied easily. “Better, maybe. I don’t get invited to private dinners at the palace every week.”

“Neither do I,” Sextant replied. “Vine gets all the invites.”

“And it’s only once a month,” Oceanvine protested.

“But you’re usually her date,” Ksanya countered Sextant’s argument.

“Not always,” Sextant replied.

“Most of the time,” Oceanvine replied, “unless His Majesty wants to see me alone.”

“But how did that balance the debt?” Sally asked.

“It’s all about what the Orenta think of as face-saving,” Ksanya explained. “I presented a way in which the king of Emmine could officially do a favor for the Granomish ambassador. If it makes you feel any better, His Majesty privately feels he is doubly in my debt, just not officially. Not only did we get a human ethernaut on the Gran-5 mission to Midbar, but we were also able to co-opt the use of Emmine’s tracking stations for the mission. That part probably did more to clinch the deal since it meant Granom publicly recognized the value of Emmine’s resources.”

“It still sounds like you did more for Emmine than Emmine did for you,” Jill told her seriously.

“I agree,” Ksanya laughed, “but it got Veras what he wanted and both kings thought they got the better of the deal. Best kind of agreement if you ask me.”

An hour later Thomas rounded them up and used the hotel's courtesy van to drive them across town to the site of the original Renton School. Not far from the ancient house that had been built by Wizard Silverwind were three gravestones where two people were waiting for them. One was a Granomish woman who seemed to be in her late twenties. Like Ksanya and all Granomen, she had chalk white skin, but Ksanya was taller and lighter-boned than most of her kind, including this woman. The other seemed human enough although his skin color and the shape of his face was unlike any group of people on Maiyim.

"Fireiron! Artifice!" Sally called out to them as she got out of the van.

"I didn't expect to see you two here today," Candle admitted after everyone had greeted one another. "It's not like it's an anniversary of one sort or another."

"We talked about it," Fireiron replied, "but decided we would like to be here and with you all on this of all days."

"Why today?" Sextant asked.

"For the same reason you're here today," Artifice replied. "Because last night representatives of all three intelligent species arrived and walked on the surface of Midbar and it might not have happened had it not been for Silverwind and Oceanvine."

"And you too, of course, Candle," Fireiron added.

"Perhaps," Candle nodded, "but Silverwind started it. Had it not been for him, I would have likely died at a very young age."

"It seems strange," Jill opined, looking sadly at the stones that marked the graves of two of the greatest mages Maiyim had ever known. "There ought to be more people here honoring them."

"There's a ceremony going on in the lobby of the Royal Institute," Sextant told her. "In front of the copy of the *Maiyim Bourne*."

"And another going on where they think Great Grandmother Oceanvine was buried," Oceanvine added.

"She was buried there," Candle laughed. "It's just that I dug her up and brought her back here. My sister valued her privacy as did Silverwind and they both wanted to be buried together."

While they were talking, Ksanya, approached the graves of the wizards and kneeled in front of them. She held a single red rose in her hand and studied the grave markers. They were simple stones in which the names of Silverwind and Oceanvine had been carved along with the dates of their births and deaths. On Oceanvine's stone however, a very special piece of crystal had been set into the rock. It was oblong, about the size of a playing card and a bit over half an inch thick. Inside the crystal was a glowing golden symbol Ksanya and some of the others knew as the Seal of Aritos. There was no such crystal on Silverwind's stone. Instead a small section of the stone glowed with a soft golden light all its own. After a few minutes, she laid the rose down in front of the first Oceanvine's stone, then got back to her feet.

Journeywoman Oceanvine was next. She had come with two yellow and pink roses, one each for her great grandparents. Just as Ksanya had done, she kneeled before the graves and paused for a minute while her pearl continued to circle her head slowly.

“Go ahead, Oceanvine,” Candle encouraged her. “Just the way I showed you.”

Oceanvine nodded and closed her eyes. Of every bit of magic she had ever attempted, this was the most advanced. Then, when she was sufficiently relaxed, she turned her will toward the two roses and under her direction the stems sprouted roots and planted themselves. She was not yet done. She gathered as much power as she could and gave the roses an additional “instruction.”

When she was done, Sextant helped her to her feet. “You put too much of yourself into that spell, Vine,” he noted when she leaned a bit more on his arm than he expected. “I thought you outgrew that tendency years ago.”

“Special occasion,” she told him. “I wanted to do that without an external power source.”

“Dangerous,” he warned her.

“So I’m young and foolish,” she shrugged. “Maybe I’ll grow out of it. Was there anything you wanted to do here?”

“Just being here is good enough for me,” Sextant replied, steering her away to make room for the others. “Oh, here, let me help.” He put his hand to her forehead and allowed a bit of his own energy and that in the world around them to flow into her to replenish what she had expended in the spell.

“You brought those roses to life?” Sally asked Oceanvine after she too had honored the two wizards.

“No one could do that,” Oceanvine told her, while Artifice and Fireiron were leaving flowers at the graves. “The roses were freshly cut and plants don’t die as quickly as animals do. They weren’t quite dead so I encouraged them to grow fresh roots. That’s something a good gardener can do without magic. My spell just sped up the process.”

“But you did something else,” Sally observed. “I could see that, even though I couldn’t figure out what it was.”

“That was the really hard part,” Oceanvine explained. “I sort of encouraged the plants to stay small. If I did it right, they’ll never get more than about a foot tall. The flowers will stay full-sized, however.”

“Neat!” Sally enthused. “Could you teach me how to do that?”

“Not for a long time, dear,” Oceanvine replied. “First of all that was master-level magic. Apprentices and journeymen aren’t allowed to cast such spells without supervision. There are still laws on the books about that, in fact, not that anyone has bothered to enforce them recently.”

“You did it without supervision,” Sally accused her.

“Not really,” Oceanvine shook her head. “Your grandfather was watching me every second. Didn’t you notice?”

“I was too busy trying to figure out how you were doing it,” Sally admitted.

“Promise me you won’t try it for yourself,” Oceanvine told her seriously. “You really aren’t ready for it. Your Granddad’s taught you a few apprentice-level spells, but you haven’t really had very much training yet.”

“Don’t worry, Sally,” Candle told her. “We’ll get you there eventually, if you really want to study magic, but it’s hard work and doesn’t come easily to anyone.”

“Okay,” Sally nodded respectfully.

When they were done at the graves of Silverwind and Oceanvine, Candle led Thomas, Sandra, Jill and Sally to the third gravestone a dozen yards away. Ksanya started to follow them, but Oceanvine held her back, explaining, “That’s private.”

“Who?” Ksanya whispered back.

“Uncle Candle’s wife,” Oceanvine told her softly. “Her name was Jillanda.”

“Auntie Jillanda?” Ksanya mused *sotto voce*.

“Yeah,” Oceanvine sighed sadly.

Candle and his immediate family did not stay there long. Just as he had on previous visits, Candle used magic to create a fresh rose which he left on Jillanda’s stone before they all returned to the hotel for a quiet evening together.

Saindo

One

The radio of a passing car was playing bad music a little too loudly. The bass had been boosted to an annoyingly high level and Ksanya winced visibly as the pulsating noise went right through her. “Niah? Where’s that?” she asked Oceanvine after the car had moved on.

“It’s in Southern Horalia,” Oceanvine replied. She had returned to Randona late the previous evening and immediately accepted an invitation to lunch with Ksanya and Maia. It was a warm late spring afternoon and they were enjoying the weather on a sidewalk café in the Granomish section of Randona.

“But what were you doing there?” Ksanya pressed. “Maia wouldn’t say.”

“It wouldn’t have been my place to say,” Maia replied calmly.

“Are you sure I can’t hire you?” Ksanya asked her. “I have trouble getting my current secretary to keep her mouth shut.”

“Replace her,” Maia suggested.

“What do you think I’m trying to do?” Ksanya laughed “I can’t though. Not easily anyway. She’s the daughter of the Baron of Pafsa. Her father’s been an important supporter of the monarchy in the past three years since the revolution failed.”

“Then hiring me would hardly solve your problem, would it?” Maia smiled at her.

“I could assign her to work under you,” Ksanya shrugged.

“Then she would be my problem,” Maia interpreted. “Sorry, but no. besides I like my job just fine.”

“I’m surprised Helm hasn’t just asked you to marry him yet,” Ksanya changed the subject. “You two have been seeing a lot of each other lately, haven’t you?”

“I’ve been accompanying him to various required functions this season,” Maia admitted. “But, I’m just a common colonial girl. I think I’m there mostly to shield him from some of the more predatory ladies of the court.”

“I seriously doubt that,” Oceanvine told her. “Crown Prince Helm is genuinely fond of you.”

“But the woman he marries will probably be queen one day,” Maia pointed out. “Could you really see me as Queen of Emmine?”

“Sounds good to me,” Oceanvine shrugged. “Better you than Diora Mairsten. She was two classes ahead of me in prep school. If there had been a Dean’s List for being disagreeable, she would have headed it every semester. Trust me, it would be your patriotic duty to marry His Highness if she were the only alternative.”

“And some of the others aren’t much better,” Ksanya smirked, “but, Vine, you still haven’t answered my question.”

“Oh, well we were hired to verify the murderer of Niah’s late mayor,” Oceanvine explained.

“I heard about that,” Ksanya admitted. “Wasn’t her husband arrested?”

“He was,” Oceanvine admitted, “but we only needed a few minutes to exonerate him. Then we spent the next week chasing down clues to the real murderer. Turns out she was killed by a public school teacher there. That’s going to be a sticky case, I think, which may be why you haven’t heard much about it yet. You see, the teacher had been blaming the mayor for withholding funds that had been earmarked for the local school department. From what we could tell, he tracked her down, probably only with demanding answers in mind, but I suspect he didn’t like the answers he got and one thing led to another and the teacher went off into a fit of rage.”

“Sounds more like the only question is whether or not there’s a case for premeditated murder,” Ksanya opined.

“I’d tend to guess against that,” Oceanvine commented, “but that’s not the sticky part. As it happens the teacher’s accusations were correct. Not only had the mayor been reallocating funds from the schools, but from a number of other budget items in Niah as well. A lot of it went into her pockets, or rather a numbered bank account in Wennil. Her husband was an accomplice in that crime, by the way, but most of it went to pay off cronies she had put in charge of other projects, mostly the local streets.

“You know,” Oceanvine continued, “if you’re going to claim street repairs went over-budget, it would help your case if you at least saw to filling in some of the potholes. The streets there were a mess and looked like no one had so much as painted on a crosswalk in years. Anyway, we had to stay a few extra days after that to testify before a judge concerning the validity of the spells we used. That was just a

preliminary hearing or an indictment or something. One or all of us may need to go back when the real trials start, but that won't be for months yet."

"You've been involved in a lot of crime investigations lately, haven't you?" Ksanya observed.

"Just in the last few months," Oceanvine shrugged, "and three is not a particularly large number. We had that case in Ellisto just a few weeks ago to investigate spoilage in their Sonatrie cheeses. That was a strange one; cheeses spoil all the time, but while we eventually stopped the cheese from going bad – it was some sort of bacteria – we never did figure out how it got from place to place. We eventually concluded it was an air-born infection. Before that we were helping out on a salvage project on Milla and that archaeological dig where they found that ancient charged artifact. Uncle Candle was absolutely thrilled about that. The discovery of a still-functioning ancient amulet over two thousand years old. It really bothered him to have to deactivate it."

"Why did he, then?" Ksanya asked.

"It was charged up with a killing spell," Oceanvine explained. "A lot of those old amulets were, you know. Most were used for healing and disease prevention, but the ancients weren't as advanced along those lines as we are, so even if it had been a healing amulet we might have had to deactivate it, if the spell it was charged with was potentially dangerous, and most medicinal spells can be abused, you know."

"Any signs of One Maiyim out there?" Ksanya asked. It was a question she asked almost every time they got together.

"No," Oceanvine shook her head. A stray breeze caught a lock of her dark, almost black, hair and blew it in front of her left eye. She brushed it away absently and continued, "There's been nothing out of them since your own adventure here in Randona three and a half years ago."

"Maybe that was it for them then," Ksanya decided. "A lot of their members were killed or arrested during and after the ball."

"Not all of them," Maia corrected her. "Vine's grandmother, Countess Myrrha, was never arrested, you know."

"There was no real evidence against her," Oceanvine replied, slightly defensively. She still harbored deep resentments against the woman who had marred so many of Oceanvine's childhood memories, but perversely she still felt some residual loyalty to the old countess simply because she was family. Countess Myrrha did not seem to reciprocate, however, and had convinced her son, the earl, to discourage Oceanvine from visiting the manor ever since her graduation from University with a Journeyman's degree. "I mean, we all know she visited that Agate Cooper woman regularly, but they'd been friends for years and you can hardly try someone for the crime of dropping by for tea."

"I doubt His Majesty's investigators would have let her off had they been able to get anything against her," Maia added, "but then they would have been extra careful about indicting a member of the nobility; especially one whose granddaughter is a close confidante of the king."

"Hacon Ancel doesn't really like her either," Oceanvine admitted, "and I would hardly call myself a close confidante."

"Really?" Ksanya laughed. "Who else would he encourage to speak honestly about her disagreements

with him?”

“I don’t really disagree with His Majesty all that often,” Oceanvine pointed out. “Hardly ever, really; not like my great-grandmother did. And that’s probably why his people have really let Countess Myrrha off so easily. She’s the daughter of Silverwind and the first Oceanvine, much as she hates to admit it, and no one wants to drag their names through the mud if they don’t have to.”

“Could be,” Ksanya nodded, “and it’s always possible that she’s not really very high up in One Maiyim’s hierarchy.”

“I don’t think she is,” Oceanvine remarked. “I think it was Methis who told me she was used as a sort of poster-child by the movement; first as the daughter of two wizards and later because she was married to one of the leading voices in the House of Lords.”

“I thought you always said your father was relatively unimportant in the House,” Ksanya recalled.

“Dad is,” Oceanvine admitted, “or was until the last couple of years. He seems to be becoming more prominent lately, more outspoken, but I was referring to his father, Earl Antonn Jenynges. Look, can we get on to some other subject? My genealogy seems to be depressing me today.”

“Sure,” Ksanya nodded.

“Well, you’d better get working on that thesis of yours, Vine,” Maia told her. “You know you won’t be the only journeyman mage on Maiyim much longer.”

“I know,” Oceanvine smiled. “We’re really starting a new age of magic. At least, I hope so.”

“Oh you have,” Ksanya assured her. “All three major universities now have curricula in general magical studies for the first time in decades and a lot of good old teachers have come out of retirement to teach full time.”

“Uncle Candle thinks we should reinstitute the old tradition of having apprentices request, ‘Teach me,’ of their masters. I guess they used to start classes like that on the undergraduate level, and I know that used to be the way prospective apprentices would make the request of masters back a few generations ago.”

“Sounds like a stuffy and old-fashioned way of doing things,” Ksanya noted.

“Sometimes Uncle Candle is stuffy and old-fashioned,” Oceanvine admitted.

“Which is odd considering what a radical he’s always been,” Maia laughed. “I’ve had the opportunity to look up his old University record file here. If it wasn’t such an invasion of privacy, I’d share it with you, but then you’ve heard most of those stories directly from him. I just wanted to know how many of them were true.”

“And how many are true?” Ksanya asked.

“Every single one of them so far,” Maia reported with a laugh.

“I don’t think we need to bring back that particular tradition, though,” Oceanvine cut back in, “the ‘Teach me,’ thing, that is. It just doesn’t fit in the modern University. Oh I suppose it could be a wonderful thing if done in a heartfelt manner by a prospective student, but do it in class every morning

and it would just be a perfunctory pair of words. I just wish I could be teaching full-time as well, but with all the jobs we've had lately, my own schoolwork is suffering."

"I keep expecting you to have me type up your thesis for you, Vine," Maia told her, stepping back even further into their conversation.

"Uncle Candle said I'm to type my own papers," Oceanvine replied. "He told me that years ago on the trip back from Silamon."

"We won't tell him then," Maia laughed. "Besides hardly anyone types their own theses. Too many typos and it would be rejected. You need a professional to do that right and it just so happens I'm a professional typist."

"Then I'll have to pay you for the service," Oceanvine replied practically.

"Your money's no good with me, Vine," Maia laughed. "I never charge friends."

"Thanks," Oceanvine told her warmly, "but between all these jobs lately, flying all over Maiyim, I barely have time to polish that thesis up."

"So you are working on it?" Ksanya asked. "How's it coming?"

"I hope to have it ready for defense at the end of next semester," Oceanvine informed her. "but I still need a topic. Uncle Candle keeps shooting all my ideas down. Evidently all my ideas are too broad and general or else better suited for a wizard's dissertation. If I can get him to agree to something, I should have time to finish knocking out the rough draft over the summer. We're taking out the *Maiyim Bourne* again and that always leaves me a few hours a day when I'm not on shift to read or write."

"Where are you off to this year?" Ksanya asked.

"Merinne," Oceanvine replied. "Uncle Candle is finally making good on his promise to get us into the library there."

"Excuse me," a waitress interrupted them. "Is one of you Lady Oceanvine?"

"*The* Lady Oceanvine!" Ksanya corrected her, laughingly.

"I'm willing to dispense with the definite article this afternoon," Oceanvine commented dryly and then sighed. "I'm Oceanvine."

"There's a call for you, my lady," the waitress informed her. "Inside."

"Thank you," Oceanvine replied and followed the woman into the café.

"Vine!" Sextant's voice told her over the phone. "Sorry to interrupt your lunch date, but His Majesty needs to see us right away."

"It would have been nice if I'd been able to finish the fruit salad," Oceanvine commented, "but if His Majesty is summoning us, I'll rush back home and change into something more suitable for Court."

"Don't bother," Sextant told her. "This time it's come-as-you-are. It's not a public audience so I doubt

he'd care if you showed up in an Orentan swim suit." The Orentan women of the Bellinen Archipelago preferred topless bathing suits.

"He's a man, Six," Oceanvine laughed. "He would probably prefer it."

"Ha! He might at that," Sextant laughed. "So I'll grab a cab from here, if one will stop for me. Do you want me to pick you up?"

"Better yet," Sextant told her. "Wizard Candle just handed me the keys to his car. We'll pick you up."

"Six, wait!" Oceanvine tried to stop him, but Sextant had already hung up the line. "That car only has two seats," she commented to herself out loud.

"Problems, Vine?" Maia asked when the journeywoman returned to the table.

"Could be," Oceanvine replied. "The king wants to see Uncle Candle, Sextant and me. It's not even close to one of our birthdays and none of us is on the Honors List, so I doubt it's good news."

"Maybe I should head back to the embassy," Ksanya decided. "If there's something nasty going on, I may be able to find out about it there."

"And I should return to the office," Maia told them. "Someone has to hold down the fort, you know. Waitress! Could we have the rest of our lunches wrapped to go, please?"

"Yes, ma'am," the woman replied, rushing to comply with the request.

"Oh, here's Six and Uncle Candle," Oceanvine noticed seeing Candle's little red sports car heading up the street. She gulped down what was left of her sweet seltzer and turned to Maia. "Um, could you take my lunch back with you too?"

"Of course," Maia assured her.

The car's horn honked impatiently and they heard Candle shouting, "Come on, Vine! The King is waiting."

"That's Oceanvine!" she corrected Candle automatically and headed for the car.

Two

"Where am I supposed to sit?" Oceanvine asked both Six and Candle tartly. "I'm too big to fit in the glove compartment."

"Try going on a diet," Candle suggested whimsically. "Better yet," he added as the top of the little red convertible opened and folded itself up, "sit in back."

"On the folded roof?" she demanded.

"There's a small ledge just behind the seats," he informed her. "You'll fit." Using telekinesis, the wizard finished folding back the top even as Oceanvine climbed in and squeezed herself into the small space.

She was barely in place before Sextant zoomed out and back into traffic. “Six, slow down!” she admonished him. “You’re swerving all over the road and incidentally making a mess of my hair.”

“It doesn’t seem to bother you when we’re on the boat,” Candle pointed out.

“I don’t generally ride the *Maiyim Bourne* to the palace,” Oceanvine replied. Then she started laughing. “Where would I moor her?”

“Good point,” Candle replied. “I’ll try to convince His Majesty to build a dock in the courtyard.”

“And a canal down to the harbor,” Sextant added. “Oh oh! There’s a police car on our tail and his lights are on.”

“Told you!” Oceanvine responded.

“Not about the cop, you didn’t,” Sextant replied even as he pulled over to the curb.

“I said you were driving recklessly, though,” Oceanvine replied.

“Okay, kids, no fighting in front of the nice policeman,” Candle warned them. “Good afternoon, Officer! Is there a problem?”

“Do you know how fast you were going, sir?” the officer asked with stern politeness.

Sextant started to reply, but Candle cut him off, “Sorry, Officer, but we’re obeying a summons from His Majesty. He commanded us to appear with all due haste.”

“That may well be, sir,” the officer replied, although the look in his eye said, *That’s the third time this week I’ve heard that excuse*, “but driving safely is of paramount importance.”

“And those under a royal summons may not be legally obstructed,” Candle countered. “We didn’t have time to call ahead for an escort.”

A likely story, the police officer did not say. “Do you know what the penalty is for falsely making such a claim, sir?”

“It’s never come up, Officer,” Candle told him truthfully. Something about the way he said that obviously changed the officer’s mind.

“Well I’ll give you an escort,” the man told them, “but if we get to the palace and you’re not expected I’ll have to take you in. Do you really want to stick to that story, sir?”

“Lead on, officer,” Candle replied confidently.

A few minutes later the guard at the palace gate recognized the car and its passengers and waved them on through and the officer followed them through. “You really were summoned here, sir?” he asked Candle as Sextant assisted Oceanvine out of the back.

“It happens from time to time,” Candle shrugged. The cop wished them a good day and returned to his duties.

“Looks like it might rain,” Sextant noted, looking up at the sky.

“There is a chance this afternoon,” Candle admitted. He was about to put the top of the car back up, but Oceanvine beat him to it, closing the roof in the same manner he had opened it. “You’re getting very smooth with that spell,” he commended her.

“Thanks,” she replied, “but after four years or so, I should hope I’d have this one down.”

“But not necessarily so gracefully,” Candle replied. “Some mages never grow out of their initial clumsiness. They over-power their spells.”

“So you’ve told us before,” Oceanvine laughed as they entered the office wing of the palace, “but I thought you were training us out of that.”

“I’m obviously a better teacher than I thought,” Candle remarked.

“Or we’re better students,” Sextant laughed.

“No, I’ve always known you two were good,” Candle replied, “and told you so repeatedly. Well, let’s go see what ground-shaking calamity has befallen our poor Maiyim this time.”

“Why do you say that, Uncle?” Oceanvine asked.

“Because that’s generally why kings summon mages,” Candle retorted. “Maybe I’m wrong this time.” But he was not.

King Hacon Ancel was seated with an athletic-looking gentleman, apparently in his forties, when the mages were escorted into the conference room. “Please be seated,” he told them, before they could do more than half bow or curtsy. “We don’t have time for the formalities today. Lord Tamollen, although today it is certainly more appropriate to call you Wizard Candle, Sir Sextant, Lady Oceanvine, I’d like you to meet Colonel Hallur Mannet, Director of the Friendship Corps. Colonel Mannet, these are the people I’ve been telling you about.”

“Pleased to meet you all,” Colonel Mannet responded in a deep voice. He rose out of his chair to greet them and shook hands firmly with each in turn. Colonel Mannet stood nearly as tall as most Orenta and had skin nearly as dark, betraying the fact he had grown up within the Probellinen Islands. Few Probellineners ever left their home islands, preferring to live a traditional lifestyle akin to that of a century earlier, before the abortive Probellinen Rebellion. However, Colonel Mannet was obviously one of the few who entered mainstream Emmine life. Those Probellineners who did, generally excelled at anything they chose to attempt, so none of the mages were surprised to meet one of those few in charge of Emmine’s prestigious Royal Friendship Corps.

“Likewise,” Oceanvine replied even as Sextant and Candle murmured similarly. “I must admit I considered volunteering for the Friendship Corps a few years ago myself.”

“What stopped you, my lady?” Colonel Mannet asked curiously.

“I got apprenticed to Wizard Candle instead,” Oceanvine smiled. “So far that’s led me all over Maiyim, so maybe my life didn’t turn out so differently.”

“It could be,” Mannet allowed, “and from what I hear the Sutherians are certainly better off for it.”

“I asked you here,” the king told the mages, “because one of Colonel Mannet’s teams has dropped out of contact. Colonel?”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Mannet nodded. “Normally search and rescue is conducted by the Navy or Coast Guard or sometimes by the Marines, but this particular team is in the Saindo Archipelago.”

“Saindo?” Oceanvine asked, suddenly worried. “That’s where my cousin, Jollin is.”

Colonel Mannet checked his notes. “Jollin Smith that would be? She’s accounted for.”

“Accounted for?” Oceanvine asked, not liking the sound of that.

“She’s safe and well at last report, my lady,” Mannet amplified. Oceanvine nodded and he continued. “The party in question went missing on Moruna Island where most of our people were stationed.”

“That’s the big island of the archipelago, isn’t it?” Sextant asked.

“Yes, sir,” Mannet replied. “They were headed inland from the port town of Mati, but never arrived at their destination. The incident has caused some unrest on Moruna so we are considering evacuating all Friendship Corps personnel from those islands, but we still need help finding the missing party.”

“Why us?” Sextant wondered.

“We cannot safely send a military mission, no matter how small,” Hacon Ancel replied. “Our relations with both Bellinen and Granom have been on edge of late. Also as you know, Granom built an airport outside of Saindo city at about the same time we built one to service Mati. Retrospectively, that may not have been the wisest course of action, but at the time we felt it was necessary to match the Granomish move with one of our own. Now any military move in that particular direction would be seen as a potential attempt to take and hold the archipelago.”

“Why would anyone want it?” Candle scoffed.

“It is ideally placed from a strategic point of view,” the king shrugged. “However if we were perceived to threaten Granomish interests in Saindo, not only Granom, but their allies in Bellinen and the Isle of Fire, would feel compelled to respond and that would do no one any good.”

“But Ambassador Ksanya is my cousin too,” Oceanvine pointed out. “I’m sure she would understand if we explained the situation to her. For that matter I thought relations between us and Granom were warming these days.”

“Countess Ksanya Granova is a delightful lady,” Hacon Ancel agreed, “and I’m sure you are right she would understand, but she would have little influence over Granom’s allies. Besides there would always be the chance this was just an excuse to put our forces into a more favorable strategic position and I fear King Ksaveras would feel compelled to respond just as we would if the situation were reversed.

“Also,” the king continued, “it is because we have achieved a certain measure of détente with Granom that we are hesitant to take a risk that would jeopardize the agreements we have all worked on these past three years. No. It will be less antagonistic to send in Maiyim’s top three mages. You are not only heroes of Emmine, but of the Isle of Fire and also companions of the Granomish Order of the Silver Stay.

Further, Wizard Candle is not only our own Lord Tamollen, but the Marquess of the Granomish island of Sentendir. Besides we do not know that anything is actually wrong. It could just be that the party got lost, or the phone lines at their destination have been cut. We understand that happens all too frequently.

“However, by the last report we know that two of the leading warlords in that part of Moruna are vying for domination of the region in which our people went missing,” Hacon Ancel concluded.

“I still think a military response could be in order,” Candle replied after listening to the king’s explanation. “I’ve always thought the people of Saindo needed somewhat more guidance than our Friendship Corps volunteers are able to give.”

“We are in negotiations to send in a multinational fleet to straighten out the mess in Saindo once and for all,” Hacon Ancel replied.

Candle laughed. “Once you go in you’ll never be able to come out. Leave those islands without an outside force to compel their petty warlords to behave and they’ll be back at each others’ throats in no time. The people there have been living in the worst sort of anarchy for so long, they not only don’t know any other way, they don’t believe there is another way. They aren’t like the Wennilans who also live in a form of anarchy. In Wennil they’ve learned to respect each other’s rights and somehow made their system of governance, or lack of such, work. Saindo? The moment we pull our troops and ships out of that territory, the warlords or their successors will go back to bullying each other.

“You can’t enforce order on people, Your Majesty,” Candle continued. “Not really. They have to want it and in Saindo anyone who wants to be a leaser will eventually act the same way as the current warlords. It’s the only way they know. And if one of them should manage to overcome the others he’ll likely be a repressive dictator, killing all potential opponents and granting the people of the islands even less freedom than they have now. Only a very exceptional person could rule those islands without becoming a despot.”

“Then we shall have to find such a person, Lord Tamollen,” the king replied seriously.

“It’s going to take generations,” Oceanvine inserted quietly.

“Lady Oceanvine?” Hacon Ancel asked. He showed surprise at her interjection. It was Oceanvine’s habit to be deferential to the king. It was the way she had been brought up and in spite of His Majesty’s encouragement to be outspoken, she more often kept her thoughts to herself in his presence.

“I don’t think we can or should impose a government on the people of Saindo, or anyone else for that matter, but especially not Saindo, Your Majesty,” she replied. “Saindo is not Sutheria. It is not a colony of Emmine and as far as I know it never has been.”

“It was a prison colony for both Emmine and Granom once,” Hacon Ancel told her. “That ended over one hundred and seventy years ago, of course.”

“That’s worse,” Oceanvine replied. “So we dumped our criminals and undesirables on those islands but then eventually abandoned them and their descendants. Now we’re considering going in and trying to make nice by forcing them to behave the way we think they should?”

“The people of Saindo are living in oppression and squalor for the most part, my lady,” Colonel Mannet told her.

“So I’ve heard,” Oceanvine agreed, “but the way to help them is the way we have been helping them - with Friendship Corp volunteers. Show them a better way to live, make them want it.”

“And try to set up conditions in which the warlords are forced to come together in a less repressive system without our overt military presence,” Sextant added.

“There you go!” Candle approved. “The best way to get people to behave the way you want them to is with positive incentives. Suggest a representative government to the people there and then find a way to make the warlords believe it is in their best interests, because until they do nothing will really change. You may force elections on the people, but they’ll only vote for the warlords themselves, or their stooges. You might impose a temporary government on those islands, but no one will pay much attention to it and it will eventually fall, probably not too soon after we withdraw the fleet.

“But whatever we do,” Candle warned his king, “we shouldn’t treat those islands like a political Eight-base ball to be swatted back and forth between us and Granom. That sort of thing will only encourage the warlords.”

“Interesting advice,” Hacon Ancel admitted, “and we shall take it fully into account, but for now, though, we need you to see to the safety of our people there. Getting there will be problematic, however. We can’t fly you directly in to Mati. We had to close the airport a few hours ago due to hostilities in the area. I suggest flying you to Sommos in Bellinen in my private jet. From there you could probably hire a boat or perhaps we could arrange for the Bellinen Coast Guard to give you a lift on one of their cutters. Our ambassador is still negotiating for that, so you won’t know for certain until you get there. We should know by then, of course.”

“I have a better idea, Your Majesty,” Candle told him. “Fly us into Keesport and we’ll take the *Maiyim Bourne*. It may cost us a day or two, but not any more, and it will be less conspicuous than a Coast Guard cutter, no matter whose flag is flying from the yardarm.”

“Modern ships don’t have yardarms any longer,” Colonel Mannet corrected him.

“Just an expression,” Candle laughed. “My point is the *Maiyim Bourne* can slip in just like any other private boat and no one will think anything of it. Send in a military vessel and the whole island will be on alert. Besides, just because our people dropped out of sight on Moruna, they may not still be there. Best way to hide something is to put it where no one is looking. The *Maiyim Bourne* will give us the flexibility we need should it become necessary to go island hopping.”

“Agreed,” Hacon Ancel nodded.

Three

Ten minutes later they were aboard a helicopter and headed for the nearby Sloane Naval Air Base. Oceanvine marveled at the view of the city below them, “I’ve never seen the city like this! Taking off from Jorric International, we fly out over the great bay and head upward so fast there’s no time to just look at Randona.”

“This is the best way to see it,” Candle agreed. “Too bad we’re in such a hurry today. You don’t seem to be complaining that once more you’re being whisked out of town without so much as your toothbrush.”

“I’m starting to get used to that, I think,” Oceanvine chuckled. “Besides, we’ll be on the *Maiyim Bourne* tonight. I’ll have everything I need and more once we’re on board. Oh! We forgot to call ahead and let Mister Carter know we were coming.”

“I’ll give Maia a call when we touch down at Sloane,” Candle assured her. “She’ll let Gerry know we’re on the way. I doubt he needs much warning though, except to pick us up at the airport. He doesn’t put the boat in storage any more. Keesport is warm enough to leave her out all year and since I don’t need to hide her from the king, what’s the point?”

“To keep others from breaking in, perhaps?” Sextant asked.

“Past one of my wards?” Candle laughed. “They would get on board and then quickly decide to leave again.”

“Another mage could get past that ward,” Oceanvine commented. “I could.”

“True enough, but you two may be the only ones advanced enough to do so these days,” Candle replied. “Where else are you going to find another master-level mage or nearly so?”

“One Maiyim?” Oceanvine suggested.

“We haven’t heard from them in years,” Candle pointed out, “but you’re right. We’ll inspect the boat before boarding.”

“And afterwards as well,” Oceanvine told him, “and I have some ideas for better protection for when we put her away this fall.”

“By the way did you know who Sloane Naval Base was named after?” Candle asked them.

“A history lesson?” Oceanvine groaned. “Now?”

“I am your teacher,” Candle chuckled, “but that’s not why I brought it up. The first time I was here, I wondered about that myself. Back when I was about your age, I met Darla Sloane.”

“The journalist?” Sextant asked.

“The same,” Candle nodded. “She was in Merinne at the same time Oceanvine and I stopped One Maiyim there. Actually, she worked with us on that particular case, although at the end she had to play the part of damsel in distress. So I wondered if the base was named after her for some reason. Turns out it wasn’t but it was named after her son, Admiral Conrad Sloane. Most folks have never heard of him because we try not to throw the Probellinen Rebellion back in the faces of the Probellineners, but Admiral Sloane served with distinction in those islands during the rebellion.”

“They didn’t teach us that bit of history much in school,” Sextant noted. “Just sort of skipped over it.”

“I’ve noticed,” Candle sighed. “Well it started when Lord Tarense began getting rather heavy-handed in his dealings with the natives who were already feeling pressed by the ever increasing colonists from the rest of the archipelago. Sloane came in at the head of a brigade of Marines, but while there were a few battles, in the end he was able to calm the situation down through careful negotiations. Of course by that time Lord Tarense had been killed when a group of both natives and colonists attacked his mansion and

burned it to the ground. That man was not particularly loved by either side it seems. Anyway, Sloane brought the Probellinens back into the kingdom as loyal subjects of Hacon II and the people, colonists and natives alike, petitioned the king to install Sloane as the new Lord Tarense.”

“I wasn’t aware that anyone made a distinction between the natives of the Probellinens and the colonists,” Oceanvine commented.

“Not any more,” Candle replied, “but that’s also due to Sloane and his descendants. Oh! We’re here already?”

“Didn’t you notice, sir?” Sextant laughed. “The king is giving us the bum’s rush.”

“So he is,” Candle laughed. “Come on, kids. We don’t even have to worry about checking our bags.”

“I hope I didn’t leave the gas on,” Oceanvine worried.

“I’ll have Maia check in on all our flats,” Candle assured her.

“Better ask her to clean out the refrigerators too,” Sextant suggested. “Last summer I forgot and found a jar of what I think used to be tomato sauce when I got back. I think it was getting ready to walk out under its own power.”

“And you probably destroyed an entire microscopic civilization when you tossed it out,” Oceanvine laughed as she stepped out of the chopper.

“Probably,” Sextant agreed.

The helicopter had landed directly next to a sleek jet emblazoned with the royal arms of Emmine. Sextant and Oceanvine started running toward the mobile stairs that led to the craft’s hatch but stopped when they heard one of the guards saying, “This way, my lord.”

They turned in time to see Candle telling the man, “Hold up a minute, I have a call to make or we could lose an hour or two at the other end. Is there a public phone nearby?”

“The king’s plane is still connected to the local service, my lord,” the guard replied. “You may call from there.”

“Hmm,” Candle considered as he headed back for the ladder. “It’s good to be the king.”

They boarded quickly and were welcomed by the pilot and co-pilot. The pilot showed Candle to the phone while the co-pilot showed Oceanvine and Sextant to the seats. “We were scrambled in a bit of a hurry,” the co-pilot admitted so the drinks are strictly self-serve.”

“That’s okay,” Oceanvine chuckled. “I’m a big girl now. I can even open a pop-top can. Interesting layout in here.”

“This is the lounge,” the man explained. “As you can see, there are two rows of window seats and a small conference table with seats in the middle. There’s a private chamber at the back of the cabin where His Majesty sometimes sleeps on a long flight and the restrooms are just to the side of that compartment. We came past the kitchenette on the way in.”

“Where Wizard Candle is using the phone?” Sextant asked.

“Right.”

“Any chance of sitting in the cockpit for the take-off,” Sextant requested.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the co-pilot replied. “There’s no place for an observer to sit and safety regulations require all personnel to be seated during take-offs and landings.”

“Makes sense,” Sextant allowed reluctantly, looking out the window to see the helicopter take off once again.

“If you like, however,” the man continued just before heading forward, “I’ll be glad to take you and the lady forward once we’ve reached our cruising altitude.”

“Fun! I’d like that,” Oceanvine replied. “Thank you.”

“Okay!” Candle remarked as he entered the lounge. “Maia’s taking care of everything. With a bit of luck Gerry will be there to pick us up. If not, I can always hire a cab. Hmm, not wasting any time on this leg of the trip either,” he noted as the jet’s engines revved up and they started moving. He sat down and fastened his seat belt before remarking, “By the way, Vine, I know the chopper dropped us right by the plane this time, but did you notice which gate the plane was parked at?”

It was an old joke to them now. On their first trip together Candle had pointed out that on every flight he ever took he always took off from and landed at the farthest gate from the terminal.

“There wasn’t any gate,” Oceanvine argued. “We were just outside a hanger, in fact.” The jet taxied rapidly to the end of the runway and paused to wait for final clearance.

“Yes,” Candle agreed, “but it was the hanger that was farthest out from this base’s control tower.” The plane started moving forward again.

“And that’s Oceanvine!” she added as the plane’s wheels left the ground.

The flight to Keesport took just over an hour so it was still the middle of the afternoon when the mages debarked at Keesport Municipal Airport, Gate 4. “See?” Candle told Oceanvine. “The furthest gate out again!”

“I think the pilot called ahead and requested it especially for you, uncle,” Oceanvine teased him.

“I’m not sure that one counts in any case, sir,” Sextant considered. “It’s a small airport and that gate’s the only one that could accommodate the king’s plane.”

“Furthest gate is furthest gate,” Candle insisted. Sextant shrugged and dropped the subject.

“Karilyn!” Oceanvine called cheerfully, seeing Gerry Carter’s wife waiting for them in one of the seats.

“Oceanvine!” she called back. “Nice to see you again, dear.” After greeting Sextant and Candle she asked. “No luggage this time?”

“Less than two hours ago, I was having lunch with friends,” Oceanvine laughed. “Since then we got

stopped for speeding through the streets of Randona, given a police escort to the palace, a quick conference with His Majesty, thrown on a helicopter, and then a plane and here we are. If there was any time to pack a suitcase none of us were in the right place to do it.”

“Do you want to go shopping? Pick up a change of clothing at least?” Karilyn asked.

“No need,” Candle told her. “We left everything we need on board the boat last time. We’ll be fine.”

“Well, I bought a few groceries,” Karilyn went on as they left the terminal. “Gerry told me you’d be in a hurry, but I didn’t want to send you off without something to eat. I bought enough to get you a day or two up the coast.”

“You shouldn’t have,” Candle told her, “but it was very nice of you. Thank you.”

“My pleasure,” she replied. “It wasn’t much. Just some bread, cheese, sausage and some condiments – sandwich food. Oh, and some drinks.”

Oceanvine and Sextant shared a knowing glance. They wouldn’t really need the food Karilyn had so thoughtfully bought for them. Whatever they needed would be provided by the boat herself, but that was a secret shared only by those who had ever traveled on the *Maiyim Bourne*.

Keesport was a large seaport, servicing all of the northwestern end of Rallena, but as far as cities went it was only medium-sized and the harbor area was only a quarter of an hour from the airport. “So where are you off to this summer?” Karilyn asked.

“Saindo,” Candle replied dryly..

“Saindo?”

“I hear it’s the new Othisl this year,” Candle replied. “The vacation spot of the elite.”

“Saindo?” Karilyn repeated. “That’s not the way I hear it. Just the opposite, in fact. More like no one would go there in their right mind unless they were well-armed or desperate. Probably both”

“Good thing we’re well-armed, then,” Candle replied. “We’ll have to think of it as a working vacation, though. If we’re really lucky, maybe we can finish up our business there fairly quickly and sail back by way of Merinne which was where we were planning to go in the first place.”

“Well, you all take of yourselves,” Karilyn told them as she drove up on the wharf the *Maiyim Bourne* was berthed at just across from the old Brigantine *Skate*. She parked just in front of the *Maiyim Bourne*. “Good journey!”

“Thanks, Karilyn!” Oceanvine replied, getting out of the car.

“We’ll bring you something back,” Sextant promised.

“From Saindo?” Karilyn wondered aloud.

“Or Bellinen,” Candle amended. “We owe you. ‘Til next time. Hey, Gerry, is she ready for us?”

“If you hadn’t locked her up so tightly, I’d have aired her out,” Gerry Carter replied. “But I did check

the rigging and the sails and every part I could from out here. Is all this original parts?"

"Absolutely," Candle laughed. "It's all holding up isn't it?"

"For sixty-something years? I'd normally say that was impossible, but you did say the boat was enchanted. Sure wish I knew that sort of magic, Uncle Candle."

"Me too, Gerry," Candle told him sincerely. "Let me pay you for the port costs."

"I can afford it," Gerry told him, waving him off.

"No, I insist," Candle continued. "Storage fees too for that matter. You and your dad stored her in your warehouse for decades and I know Geraint charged Silverwind for his various services."

"Dad never charged Silverwind for that particular service," Gerry replied. Behind him, Oceanvine opened the cabin hatch and climbed in with Sextant close behind. "I thought you had that locked."

"I did," Candle laughed. "The kids happen to have the key, is all."

"She didn't use a key."

"Sure she did," Candle chuckled, "it's just that the key was a spell."

"I should have known," Gerry shook his head.

"Hold up a second," Candle told him ducking inside as well. He stepped into the master cabin and took a cloth moneybag off the top of the dresser. Stepping back up on deck he handed it to Gerry. "Here, take Karilyn out to dinner or something."

Gerry peaked inside the bag and saw it was filled with gold and silver coins. "Uncle, you're crazy. I could probably buy her an entire restaurant with this."

"Then use the rest for the kids' college tuition," Candle suggestion.

"The grandkids, Uncle," Gerry retorted. "Metch and Terry graduated last year."

"Whatever you like," Candle chuckled as Sextant and Oceanvine returned on deck, having changed into clothing more appropriate to sailing. Both were wearing jeans, but while Sextant wore a plain blue shirt, Oceanvine had once more donned a blouse of Orentan silk printed with a bold floral design. Candle smiled. The shirts had become as much a signature for her as they had for her great-grandmother. "Well, I hate to shove you ashore, Gerry..."

"I know," Gerry chuckled, taking a step toward the dock. "As always you're in a hurry to cast off."

"This time more than ever," Candle replied. "I'll tell you about it when we get back. I promise."

"Good journey, Uncle," Gerry told him, finally climbing back on to the wharf.

"Stay well, Gerry," Candle responded. Then with a mental flick of his mind, he released the *Maiyim Bourne's* lines from the wharf's cleats. Oceanvine and Sextant hauled the lines in and stored them properly while the wizard used a specialized form of telekinesis to pilot the boat out smoothly and

speedily into a clear area of the harbor. They raised the sails and a few minutes later the boat was aloft on her hydrofoils and headed for the Quarna Strait .

Four

“Well, I guess we can all calm down now,” Candle sighed as they cleared Keesport harbor. “It’s going to be a few days, but in spite of what Karilyn thinks, we won’t have to stop off in Tarnsa or anywhere else for that matter along the way.”

“I’m always more relaxed on this boat,” Oceanvine remarked, “There’s just something about her that keeps me calm.”

“That’s got to be all in your head, Vine,” Candle told her. He ignored the automatic correction and went on, “I doubt Nildar or Wenni added a tranquilizer spell to the complex that runs this vessel. I’m not sure that would have helped us, especially when we were running down Xenlabit.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure of that,” Oceanvine retorted. “You were chasing down a demon, after all. I can’t imagine that was commonplace even for the three of you.”

“Well, it wasn’t the first time,” Candle considered, “but anything that might have dulled our wits would have been a liability. Also I don’t recall establishing a rapport with the *Maiyim Bourne* like you have until after we’d been sailing her for a few months.”

“To me it was like coming home,” Oceanvine replied. Her face darkened a bit and then grew sad. “Better.”

“Still banished from Olen?” Candle asked gently.

“It’s not quite that bad,” Oceanvine sighed. “Mom and Clemen still talk to me and if I happen to meet Dad in public or at the palace, he acts like almost nothing’s changed. Well, he’s a bit stiff and his smile always looks so forced, but he at least makes the attempt.”

“Of course he does,” Sextant told her. “The king himself approves of you and what you do. How can he disagree, at least publically? Have you even tried going home lately?”

“Winter holidays the year before last,” Oceanvine replied. “Grandmother wasn’t there until near the end, but she might as well have been. Dad wouldn’t even behave as though I was in the same room. And when he was there, Mom and Clemen had to behave nearly the same. Though Mom never took it to such extremes and Clemen would keep winking at me. I think he was trying to assure me that it was just an act. I’m surprised Dad hasn’t taken down Jollin’s horseshoe yet.

“But it’s not just at home,” she continued. “Grandmother must have gotten at my aunts, uncles and cousins too. They rarely return my calls or notes. And did you know I ran into my cousin Ema on campus a few weeks ago? She’s sixteen now and was there with her Mom, my Aunt Kaisa, looking over the school in preparation for matriculation next fall. Well, Aunt Kaisa was all formal like my Dad is when forced to greet me in public, but little Ema turned white, like she had seen a ghost or something. Is that what I am now? A ghost? Am I dead to my family?”

“Of course not,” Candle assured her. “I think Myrrha’s prejudices may have something to do with all

that. You're right, but you have to realize, your father is in a tight spot between his mother and his only daughter and, face it, Myrrha had more to do with his upbringing than you did." Oceanvine laughed in spite of herself at the mental image that brought up. "But give him a little more time, I'm sure he'll come around eventually."

"And my close cousins?" Oceanvine asked.

"Take Ema to the palace with you," Sextant suggested. "She's young yet and seeing how important her older cousin is to the kingdom might impress her."

"Bribe her with a chance to have tea with the queen, you mean?" Oceanvine asked.

"Well, I don't think of it as a bribe so much as opening her eyes to the way things really are outside Myrrha's immediate family," Sextant explained. "Introduce her to Ksanya as well, that should be a real eye-opener too. Then finally, if she manages to unbend a bit, haul her off to meet the Smiths and the Coopers on Kern."

"Assuming she even comes to University," Oceanvine replied. "Now that they've seen me there, the family may have already changed her educational plans for her. We're going to be sailing all night?" she changed the subject.

"No reason to stop and this isn't a pleasure cruise this time around," Candle replied. "Why?"

"Then maybe I should take a nap now, then I can stay up all night while one of you gets some sleep," she suggested.

"Well, we are in a fairly busy sea lane," Candle agreed. "All right, go get some sleep if you can. Sextant and I will take the first watch."

"Wake me for dinner," Oceanvine told them and headed below.

"I hadn't realized it was still so bad for her at home, Six," Candle commented to Sextant.

"She doesn't mention it much, sir," Sextant replied, "but every so often. It doesn't seem fair though. Here she is – the hero of not one but two kingdoms, not to mention the Isle of Fire."

"And the cheese-makers of Ellisto," Candle chuckled.

"Them too," Sextant agreed, smiling, "and the people of a dozen other places we've been. But in her own family she's a pariah? That's just not right."

"Well, Myrrha is definitely her mother's daughter even if she always did look more like Silverwind," Candle commented. "Unfortunately she only seems to have inherited Vine's worse traits. She's intelligent and clever, yes, but she's also stubbornly pig-headed and holds a grudge even better than my sister ever could. She's never forgiven her parents for being who they were and she was extremely angry with her mother. For young Oceanvine to become a mage, and to take that name especially, was the final straw. I doubt Myrrha will ever forgive that."

"I hope you're wrong, sir," Sextant told him.

"So do I, Six," Candle sighed. "So do I."

The wind was favorable and they were still aloft as the sun reached the horizon and Oceanvine returned on deck. "I miss anything?" she asked cheerfully, showing no sign of her earlier worries. She brought out a tray full of sandwiches made from the fixings Karilyn had bought. There was a hex nut circling her head. When on the *Maiyim Bourne* Oceanvine rarely used her pearl for telekinetic practice, but instead used one of the hex nuts Candle had started her out with.

"I think you ask that every time you wake up on this boat, Vine," Sextant observed.

"It's an adventure, Six," she told him enthusiastically. "If I can't experience it first-hand I can do it vicariously through you." She helped herself to one of the sandwiches.

"Not bad," Candle complimented her. "What made you think of adding the pickled peppers? Normally I'd have used mustard with cheese and sausage like this."

"I made some like that too," Oceanvine admitted, "but then I wondered what might go even better and used the food box. Those peppers were what came out."

"What about something to drink?" Sextant asked.

"Karilyn got us a case of sweet seltzer," Oceanvine replied. "I'll go get some."

"No, no," Sextant stopped her. "My turn to fetch. I'll get it."

"Is that Tarnsa coming up to port?" Oceanvine asked.

"We're not moving that fast," Candle laughed. "In the *Skate* it would have taken two days to get there, assuming we didn't run into pirates or a serp or some other distraction along the way."

"Pirates?" Oceanvine asked. "Really?"

"When I was a kid, piracy was still a problem in this strait. I never encountered any, but Silverwind told me about a pirate ship he and Vine ran into, shortly before I met him. Evidently one of the crewmen was a mage and he kept the ship from falling to pieces when they piled on about half again as much sail as the ship should have had."

"So what did he do?" Oceanvine asked as Sextant returned with the drinks.

"He tickled the rogue mage," Candle told her.

"What?"

"He tickled the pirate mage," Candle repeated. "The ship had more sail on than it could support in a stiff breeze. When tickled, the other mage lost his concentration and the ship was driven under. Your great-grandmother told me she thought the ship had been in fairly poor repair, and had more than its fair share of rotten timbers. Under the strain, it folded up on itself."

"That's pretty good," Sextant laughed, "and has your usual moral as well."

"I wasn't aware the story had a moral," Candle admitted.

“It’s fairly simple, sir,” Sextant replied. “It’s not so much a matter of what you can do, it’s a matter of what you do with it. Silverwind was a great wizard, but he used a simple tactile illusion rather than brute force and in a sense used his opponent’s strength against him.”

“In all fairness,” Candle explained, “at the time a tactile illusion wasn’t considered such a simple spell. In fact it was Silverwind’s invention; one of his safer ones, admittedly.”

“What were his dangerous ones like?” Oceanvine asked.

“Well, maybe they weren’t all inventions,” Candle reminisced. “The night Arithan’s demon cult burned the old house down, the townsfolk who came to help put out the fire got a display rarely seen. While I was at University, he had taken to experimenting with explosives and accelerants. It may have started as a simple house fire, but the finale was a real show stopper. It was a minor miracle no one was hurt that night. Well, kids, if you don’t mind, I’m going to sleep during the next watch. You may keep running aloft for a while if you feel comfortable doing so. We have a nearly full moon so there should be enough light, although I think the forecast calls for the skies to cloud up after midnight. Traffic in the strait seems light enough for now, but don’t take any chances.”

“Good night, Uncle,” Oceanvine told him.

“G’night, Vine.”

“That’s Oceanvine,” she corrected him. Candle chuckled and disappeared through the hatch.

“I don’t get it,” Sextant admitted. “You’ve been allowing everyone to call you ‘Vine’ for years, since we were in Querna. But not your uncle?”

Oceanvine smiled. “I do that because he enjoys the banter. The few times I let him actually get away with calling me by a nickname, he seemed so disappointed I felt kind of guilty.”

“Oh, well, I was wondering,” Sextant explained.

“You should have asked sooner,” Oceanvine shrugged. “Nice sunset. Very red. That’s supposed to be a sign of fair weather, isn’t it?”

“Usually,” Sextant agreed. “Unlike Candle, I didn’t hear the marine weather forecast this afternoon. Hmm, maybe I should turn the radio on.”

“It’s more likely to keep Uncle Candle from sleeping,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“Not if we bring it out here, Vine.”

“I thought the radio was built into the cabinet,” Oceanvine replied, then before Sextant to say anything, “Oh, right. I keep forgetting what this boat can do sometimes. I’ll get it.”

They found a station playing a lot of recent popular tunes, with nerve-jangling syncopations and an accented back beat. Oceanvine suspected Candle would have hated the music and even she found some of it extreme, but for the most part she enjoyed listening to it as much as she did the classics she had been raised on.

Two hours after the sun had set, the prevailing wind slacked off and the boat slid back down into the

water, slowing considerably. Sextant retracted the foils while Oceanvine stayed at the helm of the vessel.

“It’s just as well,” Sextant decided, looking around, “I think we would have had to slow down soon anyway, there are a lot of ships in the strait tonight and we were catching up to them. In this light it would have been too dangerous to continue at speed.”

“We need to get to Saindo, quickly though,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“We will, Vine, but the wind has died down, so we aren’t going to get there any faster unless you want to get out and push,” Sextant replied. “What’s the look in your eyes?”

“We have staves down in the cabin you know,” she told him. “We left them here last fall.”

“We seem to have staves stashed in half a dozen places all over the world,” Sextant laughed.

“Where have you been stashing staves while I wasn’t looking?” Oceanvine asked, laughing. “Besides the one here, I only have one at home, and one at Methis’ Forge.”

“And one in Rjalkatyp at Blizzard’s place,” Sextant reminded her. “Also one in the WurraPalace in Querna. Okay, that’s only five, but...”

“The staves we left in Rjalkatyp and Querna were completely discharged before we left,” Oceanvine countered. “I doubt they still exist unless someone is using them to walk with. Well, maybe the ones we left with Blizzard and Olanna got reused for hanging her clothes on in her closets.”

“Now there’s a thought,” Sextant laughed. “And sometime in the future their townhouse will get sold and the new owners will never know their coat closet played a key part in the local history.”

“Well, the likely fate of the ones we left in Querna was to be used for firewood, since they really were rough, vaguely straight branches with the bark still on them,” Oceanvine remarked. “I like the ones we left here, though. They’re branches like those first ones we used, but with the bark stripped off they’re comfortably smooth. We probably ought to think about carving them, though.”

“If we carve them,” Sextant argued, “they won’t be so smooth anymore.”

“Actually I only had a fancy finial on the top in mind,” she explained.

“If we’re going to keep using them, we probably ought to get them shod,” Sextant added.

“Shod? You mean like horses?” Oceanvine asked.

“More like a steel or brass cap on the bottom,” he explained. “Something tough to protect the heels.”

“Oh, somehow I had this image of a miniature horseshoe,” Oceanvine laughed. “You know we should probably put some sort of rubber bumper on the bottoms as well, so we won’t accidentally ruin someone’s floor. A metal cap could really leave a dent in a wooden floor and could chip some stone tiles.”

“That’s an idea,” Sextant agreed. “But what made you bring up the staves?”

“Well, if we want to move faster,” Oceanvine suggested, “the power we stored in them would help.”

“By now they’ve probably discharged,” Sextant shook his head.

“Just the opposite,” Oceanvine disagreed. “The spell complex that powers the *Maiyim Bourne* seems to act to preserve the charge in magical items that are kept on board. I think the master components of the spell see items like the staves in the same way they do anything else on board. It’s like the boat has adopted the staves. If anything they’re in better shape than when we left them.”

“But we don’t want to use them now in any case,” Sextant argued. “Nautical traffic is too heavy so we need to keep the keel in the water until dawn.”

“Oh yeah.”

“Well, it’s a good idea in case we get becalmed in the Nildar Ocean,” Sextant assured her. “Do you hear something?”

Oceanvine listened carefully. From inside the cabin they could hear the faint sound of a wavering trumpet fanfare. “That sounds familiar,” she noted darkly. She got up and rushed down into the cabin. Sextant set the autopilot and followed.

The trumpet had stopped playing by the time Sextant got there and he heard a distant female voice saying, “Five. Justice. Bravo. Two. Six. Niner. Five. Crisis. Seven.” There was a long pause and then the voice continued, “Niner. Two. Six. Five. Seven. Seven. Two. One. Eight. One. Four. Four. Three. One. Three.” And so forth. It was only then that he realized that he should have been taking notes. Candle had long since instructed them and quite a few others to write down as much of such broadcasts as they could intercept, but it had been three years since he had last intercepted such a transmission.

Looking around, he saw that Oceanvine had not been as forgetful. She had grabbed a sheet of thaumagraphic paper from one of the drawers in the combination chart and dining room. Thaumagraphy had been a passing fad over six decades earlier. It gained its highest popularity as a party trick in which, with practice, people could cause images to appear on specially treated paper using the power of their minds. However, because only a trained mage could reliably cause sharp and accurate images on such paper its popularity was fleeting. More recently, Granomish scientists had found a way to use the process through a specialized adaptation of tech magic and invented cameras that used a similar process to reproduce images in a variety of wavelengths, both visible and non-visible. It was an expensive device, but had proven invaluable in the space program.

Rather than trusting herself to take rapid notes accurately, Oceanvine had helped herself to the psychically sensitive paper and was using it to record the numbers as they came out of the radio’s small speaker.

It was a long broadcast, lasting almost twenty minutes during which Sextant slipped her a second and then a third sheet, but finally the opening was repeated, “Five. Justice. Bravo. Two. Six. Niner. Five. Crisis. Seven.” Followed by the same trumpet fanfare.

“You got the whole thing that time?” Sextant asked.

“I did,” Oceanvine confirmed. “I wish I had some of this stuff during lectures.”

“I wasn’t aware you could take notes on this paper that way,” Sextant told her.

“Normally you can’t,” Candle told them from the doorway to his cabin. “Thaumagrophic paper was designed to be developed in a single instant. That’s part of why it was only of limited use. If you screwed up, you couldn’t go back and make corrections.”

“I didn’t know that,” Oceanvine admitted.

“Of course not, and since you didn’t, you asked the *Maiyim Bourne* for something that would work that way and got it,” Candle replied, stepping out into the galley. “Neat trick. I suppose if your request had been impossible you’d have gotten nothing, but in this case it was possible, so you got correctible thaumagrophic paper. Well, maybe some day we’ll figure out how to make some the more conventional way.”

“Did you want to see my notes, Uncle?” Oceanvine asked.

“Yes, thank you, but I’ll look at them tomorrow. I haven’t cracked the code yet and while it would be nice, I doubt this will be the key. G’night, kids.”

Five

Crossing the Nildar Ocean was a tricky affair and the winds were never completely favorable, so they were forced to take a long tacking course, zigzagging back and forth as they progressed toward their ultimate goal.

They left the Inland Seas of Emmine, however, the next afternoon with a stiff wind directly on their tail. Aloft with the spinnaker unfurled, they flew past the buoy that marked Emmine’s territorial boundary, much faster than Oceanvine would have liked. “I thought it was customary to observe the crossing ceremony,” she complained to Candle.

“It’s a custom, not a law,” Candle reminded her, “but you can think the words out in your mind if you like. I already have. I doubt the Gods really mind if we don’t stop just now. Call Them and ask for yourself if you like.”

“You don’t have the right channel on your radio,” Oceanvine replied tartly, but then broke the pose and chuckled. “Remember the prayer would be to Emtos and Emmine, not Nildar. We don’t even know exactly where the Elder Gods are.”

Some sixty-five years earlier, after the last of the demons, Arithan, had been destroyed, all the Elder Gods save one had chosen to leave Maiyim and explore the universe. Of the ten gods of Maiyim, only four still lived there. Those four, Aritos, Methis, Nildar and Wenni, had agreed to stay out of the day-to-day life of the peoples of Maiyim. Methis and Aritos occasionally stretched that self-imposed rule to give Candle, Oceanvine and Sextant advice, but even then there was a line beyond which They would not go.

“There is that,” Candle agreed. “I suppose the boat would give us some sort of communications device to reach them if we truly needed to... No, I take that back. There were several times we could have used such a thing during the quest. It never appeared. I doubt it would now. Well, Aritos has always said that we don’t really need the advice of the gods, and most of His counseling is to look within ourselves to find an answer.”

Oceanvine shrugged, thought a quick prayer, and went back to the book she had been reading.

“Wizard,” Sextant called from the cabin, “by my calculations we need to come about and change our heading to two ninety-five degrees. I know we’re making good time at the moment, but it’s in the wrong direction, and according to the forecast the winds are going to shift to the north in an hour or two anyway, so we’ll be in a better position by then to take advantage of the change.”

“You’re the navigator,” Candle acknowledged. “Oceanvine, retract the foils, please.”

She carefully marked her place and stowed the book in a watertight compartment, then worked the hand-crank mechanism that retracted the boat’s water wings and went to the bow to help Sextant strike the spinnaker and raise the jib, a large triangular sail that had once been more commonly called a “Granomish jib” to distinguish it from the somewhat smaller jibs that had been popular among Emmine yachtsmen. In modern Maiyim sailing, few still favored the old Emmine jibs, but the *Maiyim Bourne* was equipped with one of each in any case.

The boat eased down into the water, slowing abruptly and splashing salt spray over everything, and then Oceanvine hurried forward to help Sextant with the sails. Together over the years, they had become an excellent sailing team. With barely a wasted movement, Oceanvine released the sheet and slowly eased the halyard while Sextant quickly gathered up the sail and stowed it away in its compartment on the foredeck. Oceanvine was already releasing the jib from where it had been secured on the bow deck as Sextant finished stowing the spinnaker and together they rapidly hoisted the jib and ran the sheets back to the cockpit, securing the leeward sheet as the boat starting picking up speed once more. Had they been racing, of course, the spinnaker would have simply been stowed through the forward hatch that led to the cabin Sextant normally slept in, but the extra few seconds in this case to put it away properly were well worth it to assure the master mage he would have a dry bed to sleep in.

Candle gave the command and came about as Oceanvine and Sextant raced to move the jib to the other side of the mast, securing it in its new position. They spent a minute or so, adjusting the trim to perfectly suit their new heading, then once everything was secure, returned aft and sat down near Candle.

Oceanvine took the hex nut out of her pocket and sent it into orbit about her head again as Sextant asked, “Would you like me to take the helm, sir?”

“Not at the moment,” Candle replied. “We have some time today and I think it’s time to start your first lessons in creation magic.”

“Are we ready for that?” Oceanvine asked. “I’m still only a journeywoman.”

“And I was just barely a journeyman when Silverwind started training me,” Candle told her. “I told you both when we started that you had a lot of catching up to do, but I think you’ve done that by now. You can both do anything I could at the time I graduated. Most of your limits now are rooted in your own education. The more you learn about everything, the more you’ll be able to do, so you can’t stop learning. However, while there are still a lot of techniques I have yet to show you, I think creation is the one that will stand you in your best stead in the years to come.”

“I can’t say I haven’t been waiting for this, sir,” Sextant admitted. “I like the way you can just pull an object out of nothingness.”

“It’s not nothingness,” Candle corrected him. “It is direct energy-to-matter conversion, or sometimes

matter-to-energy-to-matter, or whatever gets to there, I guess.”

“So that’s why I had to understand subatomic physics?” Oceanvine asked.

“Not really,” Candle chuckled. “Silverwind’s grasp of such things was probably slightly less advanced than that of most high school students these days. We’ve learned so much in the last half century, you know. Silverwind wasn’t even aware of the Theory of Relativity or the study of quantum physics until I told him about them for that matter, so you can over-think the process. However, what it does take is an extreme amount of control.”

“It all comes down to that, doesn’t it?” Sextant mused.

“Always, Six,” Candle agreed. “Don’t worry, though, you outgrew your control issues years ago. And, Oceanvine, while I don’t know any way to measure such things quantitatively, I doubt there have been many journeymen who had your level of control. You’ve been applying yourself harder than even I did. So now it’s time to see if you two can get even better.

“It will be weeks or months before either of you will be ready to create so much as a drop of water and I don’t want you to try before I tell you to,” he continued to warn them. “This is very dangerous magic and Silverwind and I agreed that it was probably unsuccessful attempts at creation that killed most advanced mages during the Age of Faith. We don’t have any proof of that, of course, since so few wrote down what they were doing and the few who might have... Well, when your entire lab goes up with you, the chance of a key scrap of paper or parchment surviving is slim, now isn’t it.

“However, I do think you’re ready for the exercises in self-control that Silverwind started me on before showing me how to create and that’s where we will start today. Six, I had you do something like this once before, although not to this degree, so I’ll start with Vine.”

“Oceanvine,” she corrected him automatically.

“You know who I’m talking about,” Candle noted dryly. She smiled back at him. “Good. Now I know you do most of your exercises with your eyes open, but this time you need to close them. You are going to go into the deepest trance you possibly can. Yes, yes, I know that’s dangerous, but you’re at the stage where everything I’m going to teach you is dangerous. We’re beyond the safe stuff now. This is where the fun begins.”

“You obviously have a different definition of fun than I do,” Oceanvine retorted.

“I have been accused of being a thrill-seeker,” Candle admitted. “Once you are under I want you to invent a world. It doesn’t have to be entirely made up. You don’t need new and unusual laws of physics or anything exotic like that. Just don’t make it anything you’ve actually seen, although it can be a combination of elements from places you have experienced.”

“And you want me to bring it to life in a sort of self-contained illusion?” Oceanvine asked.

“Right,” Candle nodded. “And I want you to make it as realistic as possible. I want you to be able to control every blade of grass, assuming you have grass in your invented world, every stray breeze, et cetera. Start out with something simple. I think you’ll be surprised how hard that is, since the world around you is very complex.”

“How about a glassy plane?” Oceanvine suggested. “I can start out with very few details and build them

in as I go along.”

“Not a bad idea,” Candle agreed. “That way I can guide you along as you go. Don’t start yet!” he stopped her. “After a while, when I think you’re ready, I’m going to have Six try to break into your illusion and change it. It will be your job to resist him. It will be a bit like that old undergrads’ game.”

Oceanvine’s eyes snapped open. “What undergrads’ game?”

“That old mental tug-of-war thing I started you out with,” Candle replied. “Where one of you sets up a world and the other tries to take control.”

“You never started us out with anything like that,” Oceanvine told him. “You never even mentioned it.”

“Are you sure?” Candle asked, puzzled.

“Positive,” Oceanvine told him firmly.

“I must have,” Candle told her uncertainly. “It’s one of the basics; real elementary magic. It’s where most apprentices used to start right after simple telekinesis.”

“Not us,” Oceanvine replied.

“Can’t be,” Candle denied. “It’s a prerequisite to cooperative magic.”

“We seem to have skipped that step,” Oceanvine informed him dryly.

“Strange, I would have thought...” Candle began, then shifted mental gears. “Well, we’ll do that tomorrow, I guess. For now both of you just work on the first half. I’ll keep my eye on you and when I tell you to come out of it, don’t ignore me. It won’t be an illusion.”

“Right,” Oceanvine and Sextant told him as one.

Candle kept an eye on them and watched while they each set up their own internal illusions. They needed only a few suggestions such as, “Vine, you’re supposed to be keeping this an internal illusion, I can see yours from here. Think of this as a spell you’re about to case, but haven’t yet. Just construct it in your mind without trying to project it visibly,” and “Six, a bit more complex than that please.” After a while, however, they got the idea and he let them continue without further interference.

While they were working on that exercise, Candle stretched his own senses outward to see if there were any ships with which they might be on a collision course. Using the golden Staff of Aritos, he was able to “see” over two hundred miles. Behind and to the west of them there were a fair number of ships going about their business. That was a common sea lane, frequently used by ship traveling between the Emmine, Wennil and Granom archipelagos. To the southeast there were a few ships headed their way, no doubt heading toward the same sea lane, but the Maiyim Bourne would be out of their way by the time any of those ships could get here.

Satisfied there would be few if any dangers in their vicinity for a while, he set the boat’s autopilot. It was a device the god, Nildar, had invented. It allowed the crew to set a course and so long as the seas were not too rough the boat would hold to it without maintenance by someone at the helm. It normally did not work very well when the boat was aloft as it was now, but Candle did not intend to walk away from the helm for very long.

He went below and took a thick notebook out of his cabin. On his way back through the galley, he picked up a can of Karilyn's sweet seltzer before returning to the deck. It was warm, but a mage never needed ice to chill off a drink. It was a simple matter to transfer a little of the heat inside the can to the air all around. Then he sat down with his notebook and his drink. He disengaged the automatic control, however, because the boat had drifted several degrees from its course. Using telekinesis to adjust the course back to where he wanted it, he picked up the notebook and started writing, looking up every few minutes to make sure the boat was still on course, that Oceanvine and Sextant were proceeding with their exercise effectively but safely, and to take a sip of the sweet seltzer.

Two hours later the wind changed direction as Sextant had predicted and the boat could no longer stay aloft. Candle spared a moment to dry off his notebook before retracting the foils. Now that the *Maiyim Bourne's* hull was back in the water the autopilot would be of more use and he reset it before taking a look at his two students.

Soaking wet with salt water, both of them were still deep within their trances and firmly in control of their illusory worlds, but something strange had occurred. As far as Candle could remember, they had each been maintaining their own very different illusory worlds. Sometime during the last few minutes, however, those illusory worlds had merged and now they were working together to maintain a different world, but one with elements of the previous two.

Candle's first reaction was to wake Oceanvine and Sextant up immediately, but instead he observed what they had done. On closer inspection, he saw that each mage was maintaining their own illusion, but somehow the two worlds had joined so that now they were each holding only a single region of that new world and there was an area in between that was a combination of the two. It was as though each represented a separate archipelago, and together they had somehow formed a sea to connect them.

"How the heck did they do that," Candle wondered out loud. Then he woke them up and asked them directly.

"I wasn't aware we had connected our visions," Oceanvine admitted. "I was just continuing to add complexity to my world and then suddenly there was a lot more of it."

"I was building mine larger," Sextant admitted, "I guess I must have bumped up against Vine's illusion?"

"No, I doubt that's what happened," Candle told him. "The illusions were completely within your own minds. You could have made those worlds as large as you wanted without ever having them bump into each other. Maybe your auras touched when we splashed back into the water. I don't know for certain as I wasn't watching at that moment."

"Was it dangerous?" Oceanvine asked worriedly.

"If you hadn't had several years of practice at cooperative magic,"

Candle considered, "it might have been, but you two have thrown so many surprises at me since we started, I'll just chalk this one up as yet another. In the future, however, maybe it would be best if you don't both work on that exercise at the same time. Tomorrow I'll show you how to play that mental tug-of-war game freshmen apprentices seemed to take such delight in."

“What’s that?” Oceanvine asked the next afternoon. It was her turn at the helm and until now everything had seemed fairly routine.

The winds had remained light the day before until after midnight. With such relatively calm conditions, Candle decided they might as well let the autopilot handle the sailing and all get some rest. When Sextant woke up two hours before dawn, however, the breeze had freshened and swung around to a favorable quadrant, so he took his bearings, reset the course and deployed the hydrofoils. By the time Oceanvine and Candle woke up for breakfast they were surprised to find the *Maiyim Bourne* already aloft.

A few hours later, Candle noticed Oceanvine intensely studying the horizon. “What do you see?” Candle asked her.

“Directly ahead,” she reported, “there seems to be a patch of greenish water, probably a mile or two ahead. Must be large, though, to be seen at this distance.”

“They usually are, although that one is smaller than any I’ve seen,” Candle replied. “Mind you, it’s been decades and there aren’t many of them left.”

“What?” Oceanvine asked.

“Your namesake, dear,” Candle chuckled. “That’s oceanvine. The carnivorous seaweed known to attack and destroy ships just for the few edible bits on board.”

“Edible bits?” Oceanvine asked.

“Crew,” Candle replied dryly. “Cargo too, I suppose.”

“Hard to believe seaweed could have evolved just to eat ships’ crews,” Oceanvine opined.

“It didn’t,” Candle laughed. “It eats just about any creature of the sea it can catch. Fish, whales, even the occasional bird. It has sensors to detect when something is headed its way and lures its prey in by seeming to move away, but in reality it is moving around to surround it. It can move fairly fast by releasing air from tiny sacs.”

“You make it sound intelligent,” Oceanvine accused.

“Not really,” Candle shook his head. “Everything it does is a reaction to external stimuli. There’s no reasoning involved.”

“I should change course to avoid it,” Oceanvine decided.

“No need,” Candle assured her. “We’re not in any danger at all. Wait a few minutes and you’ll see for yourself.”

Oceanvine held her course and Sextant came astern to warn them of the approaching green patch. “We see it, Six,” she told him.

“And you know what that is?” Sextant asked. “That’s dangerous stuff.”

“Modern boats and ships no longer need to worry about oceanvine,” Candle told him. “Oceanvine, my

sister that is, studied the *Maiyim Bourne* fairly extensively as one of her post-doctoral studies. She discovered that the keel emits a subsonic sound as the boat moves through the water. That sound is the reason oceanvine, the weed, will not attack the *Maiyim Bourne*. Strangely that same sound will drive off a serp, assuming they aren't extinct these days.

"There hasn't been a serp sighting in a decade or two," Candle continued as they neared the leading edge of the patch of oceanvine. Just as he had predicted, the patch had seemed to open up in front of them and then close in behind, but instead of attacking the small boat, the carnivorous seaweed kept its distance and left a path open for the *Maiyim Bourne* to follow. "They were never very common and once mariners learned to fight them with explosive harpoons, the serps never really had a chance. There isn't much oceanvine left these days either. I'm not sure if it's a shortage of food these days or pollution. Probably both.

"First time I saw this stuff," he went on, "I was on my way with Silverwind and Oceanvine to Querna. What was the name of that ship? The *Isle of Marga* I think. The captain's name was... Yakov? No Yakaw of Kif. I spent a lot of my spare time with the ship's cook, Kenya. We went fishing most afternoons when I was done with my lessons. Anyway, that hyperthyroid weed out there wasn't quite so well-behaved that time. We had to fight it with fire spells and wards and even then it was a close thing. The old wooden ships, the larger ones that sailed the outer seas at least, used to be painted black because the only way to fight off oceanvine was to burn it and seeing as it climbed up the sides of the hull, you could not help but char the planks of the hull as well. Painting it black partially hid the damage when a ship finally made port. Even then it wasn't the sort of thing that happened often, not on the normally traveled sea lanes, but when it did a ship had only a fifty-fifty chance of surviving."

"And my great-grandmother chose to name herself after it?" Oceanvine marveled.

"My sister had a fiery temper, if you must know the truth," Candle explained. "She chose the name because it fit her temperament."

"And you chose it," Sextant added teasingly, "because you tend to wait for your prey to come to you."

"I chose it," she replied coldly, "to commemorate my great-grandmother. And because I thought it fit me."

"Strangely," Candle commented, "it does fit you. Just as well as it suited my sister, but for different reasons. I think you chose it because you wanted to be more like my sister. I've said this before, but you're a definitely more subtle person than Vine was in the first half of her life. But you both have the same strength of character. The name suits you, Vine, and it's absolutely yours."

"Thank you," she replied softly, failing to correct him for a change. "I think we're coming to the end of this patch."

"Definitely smaller than they were when I was a kid," Candle confirmed. "Back then we would have had to sail a half hour or more before reaching the edge of a patch of this stuff. Well, just as well. We could have been in trouble had we gotten becalmed here."

"Not really," Sextant corrected him. "We could have piloted the boat out."

"True enough," Candle agreed.

"So what is it about the sound that drives the oceanvine and serps off?" Sextant asked.

“Good question,” Candle chuckled. “It’s the same question that drove my sister to immerse herself in marine biology back in a day when very few were even interested in the field. Strange, isn’t it? Most of Maiyim is covered by ocean and yet only a few researchers were even interested in studying the interaction of life in the seas and almost none of them even thought to wonder about how that affects those of us on land.

“Ironically, we have One Maiyim to thank for that change,” Candle continued. “Back when ecology was still one of their primary interests, they got a lot of young students interested in the interactions and interdependencies of life. It still took a while to generate interest in extensive studies of sea life, but I suppose studying life on land was more convenient and they did have to start somewhere.

“Anyway, it took my sister years to figure out why, but it turns out that serps emit a subsonic hum that isn’t very different from the one that comes from the *Maiyim Bourne*. They use it to know where each other are. The only thing one of those great sea snakes will not attack is another serp, you see. Their eye sight is not very good, so anything making that sound is obviously another serp to them. Their hearing, however is excellent and it is thought they use that sound to detect prey, by bouncing sound waves off of them.”

“How can they tell the difference between the sound coming from another serp and an echo?” Sextant asked.

“No two serps emit an identical tone and pattern. It’s not really a hum, though it sounds like that to our poor land-bound ears. It’s actually an extremely rapid series of blips, crackles and what have you. It’s as though they spend their lives shouting their names to the world.”

“I know some people like that,” Sextant laughed.

“Don’t we all?” Oceanvine agreed. “Do they use the same sound when mating?”

“As far as your great-grandmother could tell, yes,” Candle replied. “That’s the one time each year when a serp would approach another under normal circumstances. There was a time, during the quest, that we were approached by several serps at once, but we think Arithan was goading them on in some way.”

“So what does that sound have to do with oceanvine?” Oceanvine asked.

“That’s a bit more uncertain,” Candle shrugged. “Oceanvine will not attack a live serp, although it doesn’t have any problems digesting a dead one. There have been several cases in which that was proved. Vine thought there was something about the pitch of the sound that was painful, or at least uncomfortable to oceanvine, the plant, but she was never able to prove that one way or the other. The vine will die in captivity; the smallest viable patch ever observed was still a quarter of a mile wide, about half the size of the one we just passed and the boat drives it off so we couldn’t get close enough to try any of the experiments she devised. We certainly could not approach in a normal boat without that sound, now could we?”

“This boat will drive off a dragon too, won’t it?” Sextant asked, remembering an earlier conversation.

“Yes it will,” Candle nodded, “although before you ask, I don’t know why. I doubt it’s the subsonic hum, and yes it is just a hum when this boat makes it. It’s just another mystery about the *Maiyim Bourne*, I guess. Maybe one of you two will figure it out someday. Of course, getting a dragon to attack will be difficult. They shy away from people even at the best of times and unlike the serps, they have very good

eye sight so can easily distinguish between a ship and a sheep. They only attack food, and they are smart enough to have learned that people are not worth the bother.”

“So is this boat enchanted to emit that sound?” Oceanvine asked.

“Actually, no,” Candle smiled. “I was very disappointed to learn there was no magic involved at all, but it’s just something about the shape of the keel and the way it moves through the water. Most boats and ships, however, carry subsonic transmitters to ward off serps and oceanvine, however. Although as I said, neither is much of a problem any longer. Too bad, really. Serps and oceanvine were and still are, maybe, a vital part of Maiyim’s ecology. If they are gone, or dying off, it means there will be an imbalance of some sort until another species evolves to fill that niche. Well, a problem for another day, kids. Vine, it’s your turn to go into a trance and try to keep Sextant from changing your world.”

“That’s Oceanvine,” she replied.

“That’s behind us,” Candle snapped back, chuckling.

Seven

Mati was the largest settlement in the Saindo archipelago; larger even than the grandiosely named Saindo City at the north end of the same island, Meruna. However, to the mages’ eyes it was quaint and old-fashioned and looked more like a small town as they approached the pier at which they intended to dock the boat. As they drew closer, however, the quaintness was ruined by the fact that every home and business in sight appeared to be well-protected by stationary weapons mounted on the roofs and walls.

“This your boat?” a sandy-haired man called to them from the dock. Like the few others in sight, he had a hand-gun in a holster on his right hip. He also wore a long knife in a leather sheath on his left.

“That’s right,” Candle replied. “I called ahead. Is there a problem?”

“Not if you have the port fees,” the man replied.

“Hah! Even I know there are no port fees in Saindo,” Candle laughed. “But this is a private pier, I know, and I should be paying for the use of that.”

“That’s what I meant,” the man grumbled.

“Hey!” a second man shouted, running down the wooden pier. “Get out of here!” He pulled out his gun and aimed it at the first man.

“Yeah, yeah,” the man grumbled, backing away slowly. “Can’t blame a guy for trying to make a bit.” He turned and walked off the wharf.

“Sorry about that,” the second man told Candle. “What was he trying to shake you down for? Port fees?”

“That’s what he said,” Candle nodded. “I knew better. Your name?”

“Harris Round,” the man replied. “You’re Candle?”

“I am,” Candle replied. “So that’s why you told me to ask your name on meeting you here?”

“It cuts down on lowlifes like the one who just left. I’ve seen him here before. One of these days someone will just shoot him on sight and there will be one less shake-down artist in the city.”

“Good enough,” Candle replied as Oceanvine and Sextant jumped on to the pier to secure lines to the cleats. “Come aboard and I’ll sign whatever papers you have.”

“Papers?” Harris Round laughed. “The only paper we exchange here is in the form of cash and receipts.”

“Mind if I pay in coin?” Candle asked.

“It all spends,” the man shrugged, but there was an immediate glimmer in his eyes. Coins were obviously preferable since no one in Saindo minted their own money. The relative values of paper money from the other lands of Maiyim floated freely against one another here, but coins had an intrinsic value and could be reused if the owner so desired.

Round took his money and left, but another man came down the pier even as he was only halfway off. They greeted each other before Round hurried away. Two other men in white linen suits stood at the end of the pier.

The new man was dressed in a white linen suit and wore a broad brimmed hat that looked hopelessly out of fashion to the mages. He was obviously better dressed than anyone else they had met so far, however. “You’re going to want to buy insurance for the yacht,” he told them matter-of-factly as he boarded the *Maiyim Bourne* without so much as a by-your-leave.

“Insurance?” Candle asked.

“Protection,” the man replied. “You pay me and I make sure nothing happens to it. I make sure nobody breaks in and steals your stuff. I make sure nobody sneaks in at night to slice your throats or worse,” he added with a pointed look at Oceanvine.

“We won’t need that,” Candle told him confidently.

“If you say so,” the man shrugged. “It’s all the same to me, but it’s a nice boat you have here. Be a shame if anything happened to it.”

“The boat is indestructible,” Candle replied, “not even the rigging can be cut and nothing can get past the door when it is locked.”

“I’ve heard that before,” the man in the white suit replied seriously. “There’s no lock that can’t be picked. No defense that can’t be broken through with enough force.”

“Perhaps, but I’d sure hate to have someone try,” Candle replied mildly, allowing a ball of fire to appear, seemingly in his right hand. He held it toward Round and added, “It’s kind of hard to survive being turned to ashes in an instant. Know what I mean?”

“Are you threatening me, old man?” the man asked nastily.

“Yes,” Candle replied calmly, “Couldn’t you tell?”

“Threatening men who work for Boss Wrent is not the way to a long and prosperous life,” the man growled.

“No, but I’ve done pretty well so far,” Candle chuckled.

“Listen, you...” the man began, but Candle cut him off.

“No, bosko, you listen.” With a flick of thought, Candle lifted the man in the white suit telekinetically off his feet and suspended him upside down above the dock so that they were still looking eye-to-eye.

“There’s an old superstition your mama might have taught you about what happens to fools who go around threatening wizards. Learn it. Study it. Take it to heart. It’s the road to enlightenment. Trust me on that. Now you go back and tell your Boss Wrent he is now personally responsible for the well-being of this boat and her crew and should anything happen – anything at all that displeases me – I will hunt him down and kill him and anyone else stupid enough to get in my way. Now get off my boat.” So saying, he tossed the man back up on the pier and turned toward the hatch of the *Maiyim Bourne*.

“You don’t usually leave a visible ward over that door, Uncle,” Oceanvine noted as they climbed up on to the pier to go into town.

“I’m not usually certain someone is going to try to break in,” Candle replied. “Keep your defenses ready, kids, especially the staves. I think this place is going to turn out to be even rougher than it looks.”

“And it looks pretty rough to start with,” Sextant noted.

The man who worked for Boss Wrent was just starting to sit up on the pier as they disembarked.

“Just one more thing,” Sextant paused and cast another two spells.

“What did you just do?” Oceanvine asked curiously.

“I warded the dock cleats and lines as well,” he smiled. “It seemed to me that if the owner was trying to shake us down for protection money and if he later couldn’t break in, he might be just nasty enough to cut the lines or at least unleash them.”

“The lines should be as indestructible as the rest of the boat,” Candle opined, “but that was good thinking on the cleats. Of course if anyone tried breaking in, he’s going to be stuck there until we get back, but it might not have stopped someone from just being malicious and I’d have hated to have to go swimming after the boat. Let’s go find the Friendship Corps’ local office, assuming it is still there.”

They took a few steps before several gun shots rang out from behind them. The bullets splashed uselessly against Candle’s ward and as the mages turned around, the man in white was busily trying to insert a new clip of bullets into his gun. He never got the chance to finish, however. An instant later Candle theatrically let loose a fireball and turned the man to a pile of white ash.

At the end of the dock the other two men who had been waiting turned and ran up the street as fast as they could.

“I think Boss Wrent is going to hear about this,” Oceanvine predicted.

“Good,” Candle replied. “I certainly hope so. We had enough witnesses.”

As they walked through the town, it became obvious they were the only ones not toting guns. Even the few women they saw carried pistols, prominently displayed and easy to reach, not that they saw many women, and none of them walked through the town unescorted. It was equally common to see men carrying not only holstered hand guns, but rifles and shot guns as well.

“Friendly town, hey, kids?” Candle asked. “The architecture is strictly out of my childhood too. I recall Tarnsa looked a lot like this back then. There’s nothing over two or three stories tall and all of the buildings have wooden frames, even the few faced in brick.”

“Did you have that many canons in Tarnsa too?” Oceanvine asked.

“Canons?” Candle laughed. “Not even in the town square. After the Age of Faith, gunpowder weaponry was never very popular until about fifty years ago. I must say some of those roof guns look almost like some of those weapons used during the latter days of the Age of Faith, but actually they are the only modern touch I see around here. I guess the folks of Mati spend all their money on the latest guns.”

“Cheerful thought,” Oceanvine opined. “Glad I brought the staff. The people around here seem rather nervous, and they’re all staring at us.”

“Yeah, well some of them probably think we look quaint walking around with quarterstaves as our only arms and others are wondering if we’re worth the bother to holdup,” Candle told her. “Don’t worry, we’re warded.” He indicated his own golden staff. “Actually you’ve never been to Wennil either, have you?”

“Not yet,” Oceanvine replied. “Should I have?”

“It might make you a bit more blasé about all the guns. The anarcho-libertarians of Wennil also walk around well-armed, although they’re a friendlier bunch than you’ll meet here. In Wennil, a gun is a sign of independence. It’s a statement that says, “I can defend myself and my friends. Here it’s just a symbol of strength, so folks carry the biggest piece of ironmongery they can tote in the hopes of bullying others out of their way. To their way of thinking we probably look weak and defenseless.”

“You make it sound like we should have been attacked the moment we got off the boat,” Sextant observed.

“I do,” Candle agreed, “but then I suspect most of them are worried that we’re trying to trick them into attacking. They honestly don’t know what to make of us. I doubt that will last. That’s why I told you to keep your minds on defenses.”

“Friendship Corpsmen don’t go around armed, do they?” Oceanvine asked.

“Not usually,” Candle replied. “Probably not here either. It could be why that party got into trouble, in fact.”

“You mean because they were unarmed, the locals figured they were fair game?” Sextant asked.

“That’s right,” Candle agreed.

“But why?” Oceanvine asked. “If they were captured, shouldn’t someone be asking for ransom and if they were killed, what’s the point? Shouldn’t someone at least be saying ‘You’re next,’ or something?”

“I don’t know,” Candle admitted, “but it’s been five days since we were briefed. Maybe there’s been news.”

The Royal Friendship Corps’ base in Mati had been set up in a small storefront building five blocks from the harbor. The directions Candle had been given during the briefing were wrong, however and they eventually had to resort to asking a large man who happened to arrive at a corner at the same time they did.

“Friendship Corps? Ha!” he laughed humorlessly. “They’d do more good just leaving us alone.”

“Could be,” Candle shrugged, “but do you know where we could find them?”

“Turn around and cross the street,” the man replied gruffly before heading away.

The mages turned around and saw the man had been right. Across the street they could see the flag of Emmine flying over a green door with the seal of the Friendship Corps painted on the door.

A lifetime of experience had taught them to look both ways before crossing a street, but Oceanvine privately wondered why anyone had bothered with streets here, even ones so narrow, since she had seen only one motorized vehicle since they arrived and only three horse-drawn wagons. Shrugging, she followed the two men across.

“Elie!” a joyful voice shouted in her direction as she entered the Friendship Corps office. Looking across the room she saw her cousin, Jollin Smith, with four other Friendship Corps volunteers. Jollin looked tired to Oceanvine’s eyes as she crossed the room. When they had met, four years earlier, Jollin was a lively young lady, the same age as Oceanvine. They had formed an instant friendship. Now, however, she looked as though she had not been getting enough sleep in months. A robust beauty, Jollin had obviously lost weight, but if anything she looked stronger than ever. “You look great!”

“You look good to me too, Jollin” Oceanvine lied, hugging her cousin warmly.

“I’m a mess,” Jollin laughed. “I haven’t slept more than an hour at a time in the last week, and I know it shows.” She released Oceanvine and greeted Candle and Sextant with equal enthusiasm. “We heard you all were coming,” Jollin told them. “What took you so long?”

“His Majesty was convinced we couldn’t fly in directly,” Candle explained, “so we came in on the *Maiyim Bourne*.”

“He was right about flying in,” Jollin admitted. “I don’t think anything short of a helicopter could land safely at the landing strip at the moment. Some of the locals tore the strips up last week. I hear the same thing happened at the Granomish airport, but then I guess you couldn’t have gotten permission to land there.”

“We probably could have,” Oceanvine shrugged. “Emmine may not be friendly with Granom at the moment, but the three of us are on good terms with Ksaveras and I’ve written to you about cousin Ksanya.”

“I’d forgotten about her,” Jollin admitted. “Someday you’ll have to introduce me. Can’t have too many

cousins. Do you think she would like a horseshoe too?"

"She might," Oceanvine laughed. "I just wonder if she would hang it over the embassy door or send it back to the WurraPalace."

"Maybe I'll make two," Jollin laughed tiredly, "but I should be letting you talk to our team leader." She turned to lead them upstairs.

"I half expected to find you had already been evacuated, Jollin," Oceanvine commented.

"Most of us have been, Elie, or should I be calling you Oceanvine now?" Jollin asked.

"Oceanvine's my legal mage name," Oceanvine replied, "but it is never inappropriate for friends and family to call a mage by their birth name. Use whichever you're most comfortable with or shorten it like I let most people do and just call me Vine."

"Vine," Jollin thought about it. "I like it."

"Well spoken, Vine," Candle told her.

"That's Oceanvine," she replied instantly to Candle's laugh.

Jollin laughed too. "Uncle Candle and Auntie Oceanvine used to have the same argument," she explained. "Anyway, most of the team has been evacuated. We're down to just a skeleton crew. I was given a chance to leave but opted to stay when I heard you three were on the way."

Team Leader Mahk Starren, had an open-door policy on his office. Unless he was doing something that could not be interrupted, the door was always open and any member of the team could just walk in. "Our reinforcements are here, Mahk," Jollin announced before introducing them.

"Thank you for coming so quickly," the team leader told them after shaking hands with each of the mages. "I only hope you haven't wasted your time."

"It would only be a waste of time if we don't at least try, now that we're here," Candle assured him.

"Thank you, Wizard. How much were you told about the situation?"

"Not a whole lot," Candle admitted. "I understand a party of team members went missing roughly a week ago but that's more or less all the important information. My briefing with the king and Colonel Mannet was almost as short as the trip from the palace to the airport. But when His Majesty asks for a favor, I generally say, 'yes.' So here we are."

"Excuse me, Mahk," one of the other team members asked from the doorway, "but Boss Wrent is here and requests to speak with you and your visitors."

"He requests?" Mahk asked curiously. "That's not the way the local warlords generally behave."

"He was downright polite and deferential about it, in fact," the volunteer reported.

"Interesting," Mahk shrugged. "Well, he's managed to peak my curiosity. Please invite him up here. These local bosses or warlords are a pretty nasty bunch. They rarely deign to talk directly to me. They

just send their lackeys to tell me what they expect. The one time Boss Wrent was here himself, he just walked up the stairs and into the office as though he owned the place.”

Boss Wrent did not look like a warlord to Oceanvine. He was dressed a little better than most of the men she had seen in Mati, but otherwise he did not seem appreciatively different from the man who had pointed them toward the Friendship Corps’ office. His representatives may have worn white linen suits, but he was wearing a pair of Emmine blue jeans and an Orentan silk shirt, although not one with the signature floral prints that she and Candle wore so often. He was also not especially tall or strong-looking. Oceanvine estimated she was an inch or two taller than this man who appeared to be in his mid-forties.

“Mister Starren,” Boss Wrent began pleasantly, “I mean you no insult, but I have actually come to see your guests.” He spoke with a cultured Emmine accent and Oceanvine wondered who this man had been before he came to Mati. The local accent was harsher and more nasal.

“Oh, should I leave you alone?” Mahk offered.

“No need,” the warlord replied. “This is your office.” He turned toward Candle, “Sir, I understand you had a bit of trouble with one of my employees this afternoon.”

“The man attempted to shake me down,” Candle replied, “and I declined his offer of an insurance policy. After that he got decidedly unpleasant. I’m afraid I have never had much patience with people who try to threaten me. I roughed him up a bit when I ejected him from my boat, but it would have gone no further had he not decided to start shooting.”

“That man was an idiot,” Boss Wrent replied harshly. “Only a fool would attempt to shoot a wizard. You are a wizard, are you not?”

“I am,” Candle admitted and introduced himself, “but Master Sextant and Journeywoman Oceanvine could easily have done the same. It was not advanced magic.”

“Oceanvine?” Wrent wondered. “I’ve heard that name.”

“My great-grandmother, no doubt,” Oceanvine replied coolly.

“No, I don’t think so,” Wrent replied, still puzzled. “It was in a paper from Querna. We do have some contact with the outside world. I’ve got it! You were involved with the restoration of the monarchy a few years ago.”

“We all were,” Oceanvine replied.

“But you led an army of women, the article said,” Wrent admitted. “It referred to you as their commanding officer. I thought that remarkable. I still do, especially for one so young and...” he trailed off and seemed to mentally shift gears. “I am here to apologize for the actions of Mister Garrant and assure you three that I hold no animosity toward you.”

Candle thought it highly unusual that this man would apologize in the first place and do so in person in the second, but decided that something about the circumstances must have shaken him to the core. Then he realized what must be going through the man’s mind. Out here on the fringes of civilization, people were living in the past somewhat, and although there had been few trained mages on these islands, the people here would not be as aware how rare mages had become in the outside world. In fact, being as isolated

as they were, the powers of mages in their eyes would have become greatly exaggerated. Wrent, Candle thought, was obviously worried about having come off as second best in the encounter and for a warlord to appear weak could be deadly. But he also had a healthy fear of what could happen should he attack the mages, so he had come to apologize in person. The act would hopefully appease Candle and company, while appearing bold to any witnesses who saw him walk into this office to confront him. It was a classic case of face-saving and one Candle felt he might exploit a bit further.

“We’re here to investigate the disappearance of a party of Friendship Corpsmen,” Candle told Wrent. “Would you know anything about it?”

“Nothing I have not read in the newspaper,” Wrent admitted. “You have to realize that my territory is Mati and even here I have, uh, competitors trying to move in from the north and east. I understand they were headed inland to Nillianto. My influence, sadly, does not extend more than about twenty miles from here and much of that is through treaties. Getting to Nillianto can be difficult and involves traveling through several territories.”

“We’ve done it before on numerous occasions,” Mahk put in.

“To most people you have a form of diplomatic immunity,” Wrent replied. “To attack you is to attack Royal Emmine. If you want my opinion, I would guess that either they did something really stupid or someone inland is trying to make a name for himself. The inland territories have not been as stable as those on the coast as of late.”

“I wasn’t aware there was a lot of stability anywhere in Saindo,” Candle commented.

“Compared to Emmine?” Wrent shrugged, “perhaps not. But for Saindo, Mati is quite stable. I’ve been boss here for five years now and expect to hold on to power for much longer.”

“Well, it appears we’re going to have to try to trace the path of our missing corpsmen,” Candle decided.

“As I said,” Wrent reminded him, “it is a dangerous journey, but I will send you a list of names; the men who rule the territories along the way and how I get along with them. Perhaps that will help.”

Wrent got up to leave and Mahk and the mages escorted him downstairs and to the door. As Wrent left the building he was immediately surrounded by his guards, all in white linen. Wrent smiled at them all and made a comment about settling accounts and then walked away as though he had achieved a great victory.

“What was that all about?” Oceanvine wondered. Candle explained his insight into face-saving. “And I thought the politics of Emmine were devious.”

“They are!” Jollin laughed, “but here the politics tend to be on a more local level.”

“And a more personal one as well,” Mahk added. “Jollin, I want you to evacuate with Dean and Hela tomorrow morning.”

“No, I need to go with Uncle Candle and the others,” she argued. “They’re going to need a guide and you know we can’t trust anyone local, especially now. I’ve been to Nillianto half a dozen times at least, so I know the way.”

“Very well, but I don’t know how much longer any of us are going to be able to stay here,” Mahk told

her. "I intend to stay in Mati until we know what happened to the missing party, but if I get a direct order to evac, none of us will be here on your return."

"I'll manage," Jollin replied. "Uncle Candle has his own transportation off the island, you know."

"That might not be there when you get back either," Mahk told them darkly. "Nice vessels have a habit of disappearing around here."

"Not the *Maiyim Bourne*," Sextant chuckled. "We have her well-warded."

"And she has some protections of her own," Candle added. "No mortal agency on these islands should be able to do anything to or with her. Now let's discuss how we're going to make our way inland."

Eight

Mahk supplied them with an open four-wheel drive vehicle with which to make their trek. "It doesn't look like much," he admitted, "but it will get over most of the terrain you may need to cross. It's certainly better than most of the other cars you'll find around here."

"Good enough," Candle decided. "I'll have to ward it as well as I have the boat. Tell me; are the crooks around here more stupid than those in the rest of the world?"

"What do you mean?" Mahk asked.

"I placed a ward on the hatch of the *Maiyim Bourne* yesterday when we came to see you," Candle explained. "It was primed to paralyze anyone who tried to break in; just for an hour or two. Anyway, I chased them off, but two of them came back and we found them on the deck the next morning. From what I could tell, they had regained the ability to move at least twice and then tried to break in again."

"I don't think they really understand magic here, Uncle," Jollin told him.

"Possibly not," Candle admitted, "but if I find them still there when we get back, they're only going to get another flying lesson."

"Maybe they'll finally figure out how to do it themselves," Sextant suggested.

"I hope not," Oceanvine remarked. "I haven't figured that out yet."

"It's really just levitation with propulsion added in," Candle told her. "I generally do it by pulling myself toward an object. Changing direction, of course, involves another spell and if you lose concentration you'd better hope to land on something soft. However, I haven't seen you lose concentration in years, so that's not much of a danger."

"It still sounds pretty dangerous," Oceanvine opined. "It's not like you can step on the brakes if you find yourself heading toward a tree."

"No," Candle replied, "you just cast another spell."

"Maybe I'll try it some other time," Oceanvine decided. "Somehow today doesn't sound like the right

time.”

“It isn’t,” Candle agreed, “but it could come in handy someday.”

“Learning to breathe under water might too, but I’m not sure I want to experiment along those lines,” Oceanvine told him.

“I think learning to fly by magic would be fun,” Jollin told her.

“Try levitating yourself up a hundred feet or more and then look down and see if you can still say that,” Oceanvine told her cousin.

“Better yet, Jollin,” Candle stopped them. “Why don’t you get into the driver’s seat and we’ll get going.”

Jollin climbed in, but was distracted by a flash of light from a pendant Oceanvine was wearing. “Is that new?” Jollin asked. Leaning in closer to have a better look.

“It was a gift from Methis,” Oceanvine told her. “It’s her seal; the symbol that stands for her and all she is.”

“Wow!” Jollin gasped appreciably. “It’s so complex. I can see patterns within the patterns and it’s moving too.”

“Like a clockwork flower,” Oceanvine commented.

“Yes, good description,” Jollin agreed.

“That’s how Ksanya saw it,” Oceanvine informed her,

“Don’t you see it the same way?” Jollin asked.

“Well, yes I do; when I look at it with my eyes,” Oceanvine agreed, “but there’s a deeper aspect to it when you study its aura.”

“Ladies,” Candle interrupted them. “There will be plenty of time to contemplate the Seal of Methis later – a lifetime, in fact. Let’s get moving sometime before dinner, hmm?”

“Oh, sorry, Uncle,” Jollin apologized.

The streets in Mati had been paved with old-fashioned cobblestones many years earlier. Whoever had done it had evidently known their job, for most of the pavement was still intact even if cobbles did not afford a smooth ride. Once beyond the town’s limits, however, what passed for a road was just a well-traveled path. Decades of occasional traffic had served to pack down the dirt, although without a central government, there were some areas where the path was surrounded on both sides by walls of dirt where the road had gradually been worn into a soft area. There were also occasional spots where the road became several times wider.

“That’s a legacy of the spring rains,” Jollin explained as they drove past the first of such areas. “The ground soaks up water, but it doesn’t drain well. It turned into a morass of mud, so a few vehicles – motorized or horse-drawn – can get through, but they make ruts in the mud, so after someone finally gets stuck in the mud the next ones to come along, go around them. This can happen a number of times. That

last patch looks about seven lanes wide. Think of it as the Panrallen Highway where it bypasses Randona, only on a smaller and muddier scale.” She was silent for a minute then asked, “Uncle Candle, this vehicle can handle the potholes in this road, so I can understand why you don’t bother trying to smooth out the ride with levitation, but why can’t you sail us over some of the obstacles. It would speed up the trip, wouldn’t it?”

“The missing party wouldn’t have done that,” Candle pointed out. “A large tree across the road or a large boulder, fallen from a nearby cliff would have forced them to go around. If we just jump over such things we could miss a clue as to where they are.”

“Well, I’ve lived my life so far without magical shortcuts past my problems,” Jollin shrugged, “but we’re not going to get very far today.”

“For all we know,” Candle remarked, “your missing friends had a problem at the first village.”

“Not to hear the locals tell it,” Sextant disagreed, “and I think we paid them enough to get the truth.”

“We’ll find that out at the next stop,” Candle replied. “If the locals there saw the missing party, then the first village told the truth.”

“Unless they’re all lying,” Jollin replied. “That happens here, you know. Don’t you have a truth spell or something?”

“I do,” Candle affirmed, “but I’d rather not use it. That sort of power is dangerous both to the subject and the mage.”

“If you say so,” Jollin replied uncertainly.

“It’s a horrible invasion of privacy, cousin,” Oceanvine told her.

“I suppose,” Jollin agreed, “but you have done it, Uncle?”

“I have,” he confirmed, “but I’ve regretted it almost every time. There are nicer ways to tell if someone is lying. Keeping your eyes open and learning to read body language, for example. It’s amazing how many people can sound like they’re telling the truth, but give it away by the way they hold themselves.

“The problem with reading a person’s mind,” he continued, “aside from the difficulty of filtering out all the thousands of involuntary commands to one’s body, is that it’s a power that can be all too easily abused, and it is not really all that different from other forms of mind control, like torture or the Hook.”

“The Hook?” Jollin asked.

“There is a spell,” Candle told her, “so simple almost any apprentice could cast it if shown how. It’s an enslavement spell and can be used on anyone if taken unaware. It’s been used many ways and for many reasons, but the most common use for it has been to enslave prostitutes. It allows their pimps to control them easily and also allows those pimps to punish their victims with a thought. They can use the spell to inflict pain or force the victim to harm him or herself. It can even be used to command the victim to die, whether by violent means or just being told to stop breathing or something similarly essential.”

“Is that why prostitutes are sometimes called ‘hookers?’” Jollin asked.

“You got it,” Candle told her.

“Does anyone still use that spell, now that there are so few mages?” she inquired.

“There may still be some, yes,” Candle replied darkly.

“One Maiyim was using a particularly dirty form of the spell a few years ago in Rjalkatyp and Querna,” Oceanvine added. “And while I hope the new students never learn spells like that, enrollment in general magic curricula has been up the last couple of years on all three archipelagos, especially in the universities. I’d like to think that all our journeyman candidates are good people of fine character, but we’re all of us only mortal. There will always be some who seek to abuse the power and so long as even one mage knows how to cast the Hook, it will always be a danger.”

“Besides, even if the Hook is forgotten,” Sextant added, “there’s always the possibility someone will invent something even worse. At least we know how to deal with the Hook.”

They spent the rest of the day stopping at each village along the way. The settlements were small and only one or two miles apart, so they spent more time talking asking questions of the locals than they did driving. In two villages, they were forced to pay a toll in order to drive through. Oceanvine protested that the first time it happened, but Candle quietly reached into his sack of coins and paid the toll quietly.

“The road here seems to be better maintained,” he pointed out to Oceanvine. “That sort of thing costs money. I suspect that’s where most of the tolls are going.”

By the end of the day, they had only made it halfway to Nillianto, and Candle instructed Jollin to park in front of a crude inn, where he hired a pair of rooms. Jollin wrinkled her nose the moment she stepped inside of the one she would be sharing with Oceanvine. “I wonder if this place has ever been fumigated,” she remarked disgustedly.

“I doubt it,” Oceanvine replied, “but I can do something about that.” She cast a selectively permeable ward that scooped up and evicted a larger quantity of insects than she had expected. “Eww!”

“I’ve seen worse, Vine” Jollin shrugged as Oceanvine shoved the pests out the nearest window, “but not before I came to Saindo. How did I survive this place without you? Can you keep them out while we sleep though?”

“I can,” Oceanvine confirmed, “but I should probably wait until we’re ready for bed.”

“They’ll have crawled back again by then,” Jollin warned her.

“Then I’ll just kick them out again,” Oceanvine replied. “Not sure I want to sleep in those beds even so.”

“Well, I wasn’t actually planning to get undressed,” Jollin replied, “and knowing the bugs are gone does make it better. Like I said, though, I’ve seen worse. I could barely sleep my first couple of weeks here and I wasn’t too keen on drinking the water or eating the food either, but you can get used to almost anything if you have to and that is part of why I came here, you know. The Friendship Corps goes to places like this because this is where we’re needed.”

“So how much longer are you in for?” Oceanvine asked. “And where to next?”

“My hitch is up this week, actually,” Jollin replied, “and I’m looking forward to going home to Kern. We may be a backward part of the kingdom, but at least we’re only a year or two out of date.”

“I liked Kern,” Oceanvine admitted. “It felt like home. Well, not my home. Olen hasn’t felt like home since my family found out I was practicing magic.”

“I thought it was just your Dad and grandmother.”

“It is,” Oceanvine nodded, “but Grandmother rules the family more absolutely than the King does Emmine.”

“More absolutely?” Jollin laughed. “Interesting choice of words, but it’s either absolute or it isn’t. His Majesty is hardly an absolute monarch for that matter. You should know that better than I.”

“True on both counts,” Oceanvine conceded. “Emmine has been a constitutional monarchy for a century and even before then, much of the king’s power had been delegated. Grandmother’s reign, however, is a lot closer to absolute, at least as far as her control over Dad goes.”

They discussed that in detail until dinner by which time, just as on the *Maiyim Bourne*, Oceanvine was able to put her concerns away. Dinner was a stew containing some sort of meat Oceanvine could not identify.

“Don’t ask,” Jollin advised, “especially if you like it. You would be surprised what the locals find tasty.”

“This isn’t too bad either,” Sextant told her, spooning out another mouthful.

“It isn’t,” Candle agreed, “and I’m fairly certain it’s goat.”

“Goat?” Oceanvine asked, taking a second look at the bowl in front of her.

“I told you not to ask,” Jollin reminded her.

Oceanvine continued to stare at the bowl another few seconds before forcing herself to take another bite. After that she shrugged and kept eating. The bread that was served with the meal was good as well, so while it was a simple meal, it wasn’t as bad as any of them had feared.

Candle stayed up late that night, buying rounds of the thin beer for the locals and trying to get more information out of them, so by the time they left the next morning he was looking a bit more tired than usual, but there was a way to magically increase one’s energy and after using it, he seemed fine.

They made it to Nillianto the next evening, but not before having to pay the toll three more times and pass through a customs booth of sorts once. Candle had been expecting the customs station. Mahk had warned him that some of the local strongmen used them to shake down travelers for more than they could with mere tolls, however, the “agents” were as corrupt as the man they worked for and Candle discovered that with a few relatively small bribes and the mention of Boss Wrent’s name, the men would look the other way rather than attempt to charge them for the importation of their own clothing and vehicle.

It was dark when they finally rolled into Nillianto and got rooms in another run-down inn, but when Candle started asking around after dinner, it became apparent that the initial briefing was correct and the missing corpsmen never arrived there.

They spent the next day driving back to the last two villages before Nillianto and finally managed to narrow their search to the three mile stretch of road between them, so they spent the third night in the town nearest the disappearance. Candle bought a round of drinks for the house at the local inn, while Sextant broke the ice with Silverwind's old fireball-in-the-bottle trick. In modern Maiyim, old-style mages had become exceedingly rare and in Saindo there had been almost none, so the locals were more fascinated with the spell itself than in the accuracy Sextant displayed in getting each one into the tiny mouth of the bottle. However, between the two mages, they did do the trick and several men in the bar started answering questions freely.

"Nah," one older man denied, "they never came through here."

Four others agreed, but one of them volunteered, "I was in Forent when they drove through. Their engine was giving them trouble and they stopped to work on it for a few minutes before continuing on. There were some others who came looking for them a few days later."

"That would have been the search party, Uncle," Jollin told Candle. "They couldn't find a trace of the others."

"They should have tried asking around like you did," the talkative man replied. "You don't ask, you don't learn, my Dad always said."

"Good point," Candle conceded. "So somewhere between here and there, they disappeared. Anyone have suggestions as to what might have happened to them?"

The bar went eerily silent at the question just before their informants decided they had better things to do on the far sides of the room. "Must have been one of the local warlords," Jollin remarked.

"That wouldn't be too surprising," Candle agreed, "since there doesn't seem to be a lot of truly free enterprise around here."

"Life runs on fear and intimidation in Saindo," Jollin told them sadly.

Nine

Knock, knock, knock. Sextant woke up at an insistent, but quiet knocking at the door of the room he was sharing with Candle. Checking his watch, he noticed it was almost one o'clock in the morning. He reached for his staff and whispered, "Sir! There's someone at the door."

"Well, tip him and send him on his way," Candle mumbled. "Wait a minute. What did you say?"

"There's someone knocking at the door," Sextant repeated. "Oh, wait, it's stopped now."

"Yes, well, so many problems will go away on their own if you just wait a bit," Candle replied. "Somehow, I doubt we could be that lucky." He took hold of the golden staff, still in the form of a pen and balanced on the arm of a nearby chair. "Go ahead and open the door."

"There's no one here," Sextant reported, poking his head out into the hallway.

"I can't believe we came all this way for someone to play 'Ding Dong Ditch,'" Candle remarked. "Did they leave a note?"

"An envelope on the floor," Sextant replied, picking the envelope up and opening it.

"Let's see," Candle held his hand out. A moment later a small globe of light illuminated the room softly and Candle read the note out loud, "'The people you are looking for are in a nearby cave. If you want to save their lives, go there immediately. They will be dead by morning.'"

"We should leave Vine and Jollin here," Sextant told Candle, "They'll be safer that way."

"I hope you're kidding," Candle told him with uncharacteristic seriousness. "Vine would kill us if she even thought there was a chance we'd do that. Worse, she'd probably never speak to you again."

"You think so?" Sextant asked, an odd tone in his voice.

"You know it as well as I do," Candle replied.

"I suppose I do," Sextant admitted, "but you can't blame me for trying to protect her."

"Sure I can," Candle retorted. "We're supposed to be a team. That means we each do our share. Besides, can you really see Vine being happy about being left behind?"

"Okay, so I'll shelve that idea," Sextant admitted defeat. "I'll go wake them up."

"It's a trap," Jollin opined as soon as she heard the contents of the note. "It's a fairly common one around here, in fact."

"Of course it's a trap," Candle agreed. "I'm planning on it."

"But it's foolhardy to go running out like this in the middle of the night. It was one of the first things they warned us against when I got here two years ago," Jollin continued.

"Well, we do have certain advantages the average person doesn't," Candle pointed out.

"*I am* an average person," Jollin retorted.

"No," Candle disagreed, "not really. I've seen you work in a forge, remember?"

"That's not magic," Jollin scoffed.

"It is the way you do it," Candle laughed. "Lots of people perform magic everyday without even realizing it. Any time you do something that relaxes you even while you're concentrating on something, especially while you're concentrating, you're tapping into magical energy. Blacksmithing is that sort of activity for you and even though you've never consciously willed it to happen, much of what you do at a forge is magic-assisted. Hasn't your brother always complained about how even when you do something wrong it turns out right?"

"There is that," Jollin considered, "and it has always bugged Willon that I didn't need to hammer a piece as much as he seemed to. I just thought he wasn't applying himself correctly. "

“And it never occurred to you that magic might be involved?” Oceanvine asked.

“Some people just have more talent than others,” Jollin shrugged.

“That’s what I was saying,” Candle chuckled.

“Are you sure I’m a mage?” Jollin asked.

“I’m sure you use magic at the forge,” Candle told her. “That’s not quite the same as being a mage. With training, you could probably be a mage though. The talent does seem to run in your family.”

“So if I get caught in a bind all I need to do is pretend I’m at the forge?” Jollin shot back.

“If that works for you,” Candle replied.

In spite of all the word play, they were out of the inn less than a quarter of an hour after Sextant had been awakened. Following the directions on the note carefully, they walked purposefully into a clearing. A moment later, a dozen guns exploded in the hands of the men waiting to ambush the mages. Three of them were killed instantly and Oceanvine and Sextant immobilized the rest a moment later.

They spent some time looking for the cave the Friendship Corps volunteers had supposedly been held prisoner in, but came up empty. Finally as the skies began to turn pre-dawn gray, they gave up and dragged the surviving attackers telekinetically back to the village.

The sun was barely up when they discovered two men standing woodenly next to their vehicle. “Don’t try to steal a wizard’s car,” Candle told them dismissively as he released them from their imprisonment. The two men fell to the ground and dizzily tried to sit up with varying results. A few minutes later, when they were able to stand once more, they did their best to hurry away although Candle had already lost interest in anyone as petty as a car thief.

“Anything you lot would like to tell me?” he asked the six bleeding captives from the abortive ambush. They were silent and only glowered at him and his crew. Meanwhile other natives of the town noticed what was going on and began to gather around to see what was happening. Candle ignored them. “Your silence is eloquent,” he told them sourly. “So let’s start at the beginning. What idiot came up with our fun and games last night? You don’t want to talk. No problem,” he brandished the golden staff at them. “You don’t have to. I just figured you’d prefer to keep one or two secrets, but what the heck. You,” he pointed at the man in the center of the group. “Who gave the orders?”

The man opened his mouth automatically and started speaking, “It was aachh...” he trailed off in a guttural grunt as he fought not to talk.

“You can’t refuse to answer, bosko,” Candle told him calmly. “That’s part of what I just did to you. You can fight it all you like, but you will answer my question in a minute or two.” The man kept sounding like he was choking on his own tongue and Candle waited patiently.

“Tomalla Syng,” he finally coughed a name out.

“That’s all you have to say?” Candle asked. “One name? An Orentan woman’s name at that. So who is Tomalla Syng when she’s up and dressed?”

The man started croaking again, but Candle waited him out. “She’s the boss’s woman!” he finally

shouted.

“Oh we are going to have to pull this out of you one tooth at a time, aren’t we?” Candle replied acidly.

“You can’t scare me!” another man, a very muscular Granom, told him. “You want to know the boss’s name? It’s Naramawa. Do you have any idea what he’ll do to you? He’ll eat your liver by this time tomorrow. Yeah we attacked you. We captured your people too and there’s not a thing you can do about it. Naramawa is the power here. Nobody dares stand up to him, because no one would live to see the next hour if they did. Naramawa will...”

“Oh shut up,” Oceanvine told him, casting a spell that silenced him completely. The man kept talking excitedly, but not a sound came out of his mouth.

“Amusing, Vine,” Candle told her, “but this one might actually tell us something we want to know.”

“What? Like the local warlord’s cannibalistic hobbies?” Oceanvine asked. “I don’t think he was making that up.”

“He wasn’t, or probably was not,” Jollin added. “A lot of the strongmen do it to increase the intimidation factor.”

“Normally that might work, but if this one tries it this time, I’ll have him eating his own liver,” replied Oceanvine stonily.

“Really?” Candle chuckled. “Let me know if you manage that. I’m pretty sure merely handing him one of his own internal organs will be terminal. I can think of a few I might have tried that on over the years.”

“There is that,” Oceanvine admitted, feeling the wind leave her sails, “but one way or the other he wouldn’t survive the experience.”

“Try to curb that temper, Vine. Right now you’re reminding me a bit too strongly of your great-grandmother,” Candle told her, “and as Fireiron might say, you’re losing all your adorability points.”

“I don’t take kindly to being shot at, Uncle,” Oceanvine retorted, “and that’s Oceanvine. Both of us.”

“Graciousness under fire, Niece,” Candle told her. “No one is getting away with anything. Now please drop the gag spell.” Oceanvine did so and watched as Candle turned on the man. “So, you seem to be in better shape than most of your buddies here, so I’m going to let you go.”

“Yeah?” the Granom blustered. “What’s the catch?”

“You’re going to report to this Naramawa, and his... whatever she is, this Syng person. I imagine they must be waiting for your report with baited breath. You’re going to tell them to release the Friendship Corps people immediately.”

“Or what?” the Granom demanded. “What can you do, old man?”

“Anything I care to,” Candle replied. He lifted the Granom telekinetically and threw him roughly against a nearby wall. The man tried to sit up but as he did a long gash appeared in the chalk white skin of his right arm and began to bleed freely. “You want that to be your neck? Well, if you don’t tell your boss, it will

be his neck. His and the necks of anyone foolish enough to get in my way. You tell him that. If he doesn't release the Friendship Corps people immediately, he'll be dead by sundown."

"He'll kill you and eat..." the Granom started again

"My liver, yes, I know," Candle finished for him after gagging the man again although for just a moment. "Is that really the best you can do? You know, originality gets more attention than merely shouting scare images."

"Sir," Sextant chuckled, "I think you've been teaching too long. And this is not the most responsive class you're likely to have."

"No worse than any other bunch of freshmen," Candle remarked lightly, and then he turned back to the injured thugs. "Your boss is helpless to stop us. Be certain you tell him that forme." He lifted all the thugs off the ground again. "Maybe it will save a bit of time. In any case, if he gives me any further trouble, he's dead. If he manages to get me angry, I'll allow him to live, but as a helpless cripple. I think we all know what will happen to him then. Think I'm bluffing? Can you move right now? It's only temporary, but I can make it permanent just as easily.

"Two hours," Candle continued. "You have those people here in two hours and in good health or I'll come looking for you and your worthless boss and his woman."

The Granom fell to the ground as Candle released him. The others stayed suspended in mid-air. The Granom got to his feet, took a few careful steps away from Candle, then turned to boasted, "In two hours you'll never find me!"

Candle reached out with his mind and froze the man in place. "I am your death," he told the Granom melodramatically. "You can never escape me. Fail to tell your boss what happened here and I shall be the last one you ever see. Two hours." With that he pushed the man several hundred yards magically until he was at the edge of the town.

"Let's have breakfast," Candle suggested.

"What about them?" Oceanvine indicated the bruised and bleeding thugs, still hanging in the air where Candle had left them.

"They'll still be there when we're finished," Candle replied.

After breakfast, he released two more with the same message for Naramawa and Tomalla Syng. Another hour later he released the rest of them, "We'll just give them an extra hour and go track them down."

"I saw you set the tracking spells, Uncle," Oceanvine remarked, "but I thought you didn't use mind-reading magic anymore."

"I didn't," Candle replied.

"But the man you forced to tell the truth," Oceanvine argued, "wasn't that a form of mind control?"

"Technically, perhaps," Candle admitted, "but I wasn't looking into his mind. It was similar to something your great-grandmother did once, though it was before my time."

“The old earl!” Jollin exclaimed. “Kormac of Medda. She cast a spell while still an apprentice that caused him to feel whatever the person closest to him felt. Is that really the same?”

“It’s a gentle manipulation of the mind,” Candle replied. “I just manipulated it in a different way. I didn’t read his thoughts but forced him to speak them. If he had really wanted to he could have actually lied merely by thinking about something that wasn’t true. But that’s sort of like being told to not think of an elephant. You can’t help but think of one at least for a moment.”

“Gentle, huh?” Jollin remarked, unconvinced.

“Compared to invading it outright?” Candle countered. “Or just snuffing it out like a small flame? Yes, it’s quite gentle and not even harmful in the long term.”

Ten

“Time’s up,” Candle decided after three hours had passed. “A few of our one-time attackers have scattered, but most of them are quite near each other about three miles north of here. I’d guess that would be the next town north of here.” He sounded pleased.

“That’s good?” Oceanvine asked.

“We can drive,” Candle explained. “I was afraid we would have to walk after them. Let’s get in the car.”

“What will you do when we catch up to them, sir?” Sextant asked.

“Everything I promised if I have to,” Candle replied.

At Candle’s direction, Sextant drove the vehicle into the center of the next village. “Keep your wards up,” Candle warned Sextant and Oceanvine.

“I’ve hardly let them down since we got here,” Oceanvine retorted.

“It’s good practice,” Candle told her, “especially since I haven’t seen you playing with your pearl or hexnut in days. Anyway there are a couple dozen guns pointing at us right now, so let’s not lose track of why we’re here.”

He led them a few yards from the car toward a building that, according to the sign over the door, was a general store. “You can come out now,” he spoke just loud enough to be heard inside. “I told you I would track you down.”

The Granomish thug stepped out into the doorway, Sextant noticed he had his right hand behind his back and intensified the protective ward he was maintaining. “Watch him,” he whispered to Oceanvine.

Suddenly the thug turned slightly and leveled an automatic rifle at them. A short burst of fire spat out from the rifle before it went spinning out of his hands. The Granom tried to chase after it, but Oceanvine stopped him short in the first step and, off balance, he fell to the ground.

With the initial thug immobilized, automatic weapons fire erupted all around them. Candle rose up into the air and, with the aid of the golden Staff of Aritos, knocked out all the gunmen, one by one, and took their weapons away from them as well. The weapons he floated back down to street level where they came to rest in a pile. That accomplished, he did the same with their erstwhile attackers. He was not surprised to find they represented all three intelligent species on Maiyim. For centuries the castoff of human, Orentan and Granomish society had come to Saindo as their refuge of last resort, but there were also three women among them. Anywhere else on Maiyim that would not have been a surprise, but on Saindo the society was so completely dominated by the men that he wouldn't have expected this. "So this Naramawa is an equal opportunity employer," Candle mused and he finally came back down to street level near the Granom Oceanvine was still holding on the ground.

"Tell me again why you still needed me here," Jollin commented to Oceanvine.

"You volunteered, remember?" Oceanvine shot back.

"Oh, yeah."

"Let him go, Oceanvine," Candle told her. "He's having trouble breathing."

"Sorry," Oceanvine apologized. "I wanted to be certain he couldn't move."

"You accomplished that, all right," Candle chuckled as the bully gasped loudly for breath. "I've been more patient with you than you deserve," he told the Granom. "That ends here. Where are the people we're looking for?"

"Nowhere you'll ever find them," the Granom replied arrogantly. Then Candle did something and the man started screaming. It was a high wordless scream that tore through Oceanvine's soul.

"What did you do?" she asked Candle fearfully rushing forward.

"I took a page out of my sister's book with some improvements," Candle replied as the Granom's scream became hoarse. "Jollin told you what happened to Kormac of Medda. Well, I just did pretty much the same thing to this one except I made it retroactive. He is currently feeling everything he's done to his victims over the course of his life. He is now feeling empathy in what could be the first time in his life."

"Uncle, that's horrible!" Oceanvine told him.

"It's also justice," Candle told her. "However, I'd better remove the retroactive side of the spell, or he'll be of no use to us." He did so and the Granom fell face-down into the dirt again. "Ready to talk?" Candle asked mildly, "or do you want another trip down memory lane?"

"No!" the Granom gasped hoarsely. "Please, no! I don't know where they are, but the boss does."

"Have you delivered my message yet?"

"No," the Granom replied. "She'll kill me!"

Candle filed that datum away and replied, "She might, but I'll let you live. Which scares you more, Bosko?"

“Please! Not that! I’ll go. I promise I’ll go. Please!” the Granom babbled.

“Do it now,” Candle told him firmly and the Granom stumbled to his feet and ran clumsily away down the street.

“You’re not going to give him another two hours now, are you, Uncle?” Jollin asked.

“No,” Candle shook his head. “These people have already stretched my patience beyond its limits.” Behind him the former gunmen and women started to stir their way back to consciousness. “Now what to do about them?” he wondered, but Sextant was already at work.

Sextant telekinetically lifted the men and women about twenty feet into the air and left them there. “That should hold them for a few hours,” he announced, “although it took all the stored energy in my staff to do it. It’s going to take a while to recharge it.”

“Here,” Oceanvine told him, touching her staff to his and letting the energy flow between them for a moment. “Now we both only have to charge them up half way.”

“I’ve never seen anyone do that,” Candle commented.

“It’s the same thing we sometimes do to get a bit of personal energy, isn’t it?” Oceanvine asked, even as part of her mind worked on recharging her staff.

“Well, I suppose it is,” Candle replied, “but... never mind, it just took me by surprise, is all. Let’s get after our messenger before he starts getting other ideas into his head again.”

“Wait,” Sextant stopped them. “What about all those guns?”

“I’ll handle it,” Oceanvine volunteered. She concentrated on the pile of weapons and they started to groan and shriek as metal was twisted and torn. A minute later they were all wrapped around one another and utterly useless as weapons. “There,” Oceanvine concluded grimly. “Now they’re just a piece of modern sculpture.”

“Not very pretty,” Jollin commented.

“Everyone’s a critic,” Sextant laughed.

“I never said I was an artist,” Oceanvine retorted. “Was sharing the power of our staves all that unusual, Uncle?” she asked as they got back into the vehicle.

“To tell the truth,” Candle admitted, “I don’t know. Remember the mage’s staff was forgotten technology until Wizard Bowstaff rediscovered it. It wasn’t too long after that when enrollment in general magic curricula dropped off, so the technique hasn’t been widely used in the modern world and we don’t really know very much about how they were used by the ancients. Maybe that sort of thing was commonplace back then. He went down that path. Better park the car and proceed on foot.”

They did so and started walking briskly down the winding forest path the Granom had evidently followed. They walked another quarter of a mile until they came to a clearing with a large sprawling house in the middle of it.

“I think that’s bigger than Olen Manor,” Oceanvine noted.

“The local warlords live better than most of the earls of Emmine,” Jollin told her, “and rule more absolutely than the king.”

“More absolutely?” Oceanvine asked her cousin archly.

Jollin rolled her eyes and sighed. “You had to toss that one back in my face, didn’t you?”

“You started it,” Oceanvine laughed.

They continued on toward the house and arrived in the courtyard just in time to see the Granom they had followed being killed, shot to death by a full clip from an automatic rifle, wielded by a tall, dark Orentan woman. Beside her was an elderly Orentan man in a wheel chair and around them another dozen bodyguards, mostly human.

“That was a waste of time,” Candle told them. He was about to add that killing the man would not have prevented him from finding this place, but the guards immediately opened fire on him and the others. Weapons fire lasted two full minutes with bullets splashing against and ricocheting off the triple-thick ward the mages had built. As a young man, Candle might have been tempted to “play” with these attackers for a bit, taunting them with witty banter before finally defeating them, but he was much older now and no longer got quite so much enjoyment out of that sort of word play. A quick flick of his mind, augmented by the staff, put all the guards to sleep, while Oceanvine concentrated on disarming the Orentan woman.

It was quick work and finally Candle turned on the woman and her companion in the wheel chair. “Where are they?” he demanded.

“Go to hell,” the woman spat back at him. The man sat in his chair emotionlessly, staring sightlessly ahead.

Candle used the staff to read their minds. Everything he had told the others about the process was true and it was something he had truly come to hate, but he was done playing and these people deserved no mercy so far as he was concerned. The man’s mind was a blank – he had lost his mind some time earlier and the woman was exploiting him. So he concentrated on her. “The barn?” he asked looking at a large building off to the left. “What’s the matter? Can’t you afford a dungeon? Sextant, Vine, Jollin, go release them. I have something to do here and I’d rather you weren’t around to see it.”

“No, Uncle,” Oceanvine stopped him. “It’s my turn.” Candle was about to argue, but there was a certain look in the journeywoman’s eyes. Once again she reminded him far too strongly of his sister. He was torn between protecting her and seeing what she would do and in the end the latter won, not out of curiosity, but because he realized that this was no longer the naïve and sheltered young woman he had started teaching several years earlier. Protecting her from herself would not be a service.

Oceanvine concentrated on the woman for a moment, getting exactly what she wanted to do set in her mind. When it became time to act, however, it was all over in an instant. Tomalla Syng’s eyes opened wide for a moment as she looked back and forth at the mages and the guards floating around her. Then she suddenly whimpered and sank to the ground.

“What did you do?” Candle asked.

“I gave her a gift,” she replied seriously.

“Last time a mage told me that, her name was also Oceanvine,” Candle replied. “What did you do?”

“I gave her the ability to consider every side of any issue fairly and equally,” Oceanvine replied and started walking toward the barn. The others followed.

“That’s bad?” Sextant asked.

“I kind of made it mandatory,” Oceanvine explained. “If breathing were a voluntary action, she’d still be trying to decide whether or not to do it at the point of suffocation.”

“She’ll never be able to make a decision, no matter how trivial,” Jollin remarked, seeing the implications.

“Oh, I’m sure she’ll be able to decide whether or not she’s hungry or thirsty,” Oceanvine replied, “but she certainly isn’t going to be giving anyone commands again as she won’t be able to decide what orders to give.”

“She’s dead,” Sextant opined.

“She is if she doesn’t start running,” Candle replied.

“You aren’t going to tell me to undo it?” Oceanvine asked.

“Would you?” Candle asked.

“No,” she shook her head, “but I wouldn’t stop you from doing that.”

“If anything, I think you were too merciful,” Candle replied, “but then you didn’t have to wade through that cesspool she calls a mind.”

“Called a mind,” Jollin added as they reached the barn door and Candle willed it to open. “At least she’ll never make it up again. On second thought, Vine, Uncle Candle is right. You were too merciful.”

The four missing Friendship Corps volunteers were lying on the floor of the barn in torn and tattered clothing. The barn didn’t look as though it had been cleaned in years and the smell inside was worse than it looked.

Candle coughed before suggesting, “Jollin, Oceanvine, go into the house and get some food and drink. These people don’t look like they’ve been fed lately.”

“Two days,” one woman croaked, opening her eyes, then finished, “ago.”

Oceanvine and Jollin raced to the house. Oceanvine headed for the door, but Jollin paused to kick Syng in the shin. The Orentan woman yelped in pain and ran away. Finally they went inside and quickly found the kitchen. They grabbed a large pitcher and Jollin filled it with water while Oceanvine rummaged through a gas-fueled refrigerator. “They haven’t eaten in days,” she fretted, “and everything in here is a bit too solid for a first meal.”

“There’s pot of something on the stove,” Jollin pointed out.

“A thick soup, I think,” Oceanvine reported she found a spoon and tasted it. “It’s not wonderful, but

I've had worse."

They returned to the barn to find the four men and women sitting up, just outside. Jollin and Oceanvine filled the bowls and cups and Sextant and Candle handed them out.

"You know that aside from rescuing my colleagues, here," Jollin remarked, "and that's important, we did not accomplish much out here. Okay, so the Syng woman won't be running the show here any longer, but either one of her people will take over or several will fight among themselves. There will be quite a few people killed over the matter, but eventually another warlord will gain a foothold here. I just wish we could have done something a bit more permanent."

"Such as?" Sextant asked.

"I don't know," Jollin admitted, "but there are tens of thousands of people being dominated by a few handfuls of petty dictators here."

"I suppose I could kill all the bosses, if you like," Candle replied, "but new ones will arise to replace them unless the people themselves fight to change this place. Heck! If they were willing to do that, we wouldn't have to wipe out any bosses ourselves because they would have done just that already, but they haven't, and the evidence is that it will never happen. Anyone who manages to take a leadership role here is likely to want all the same things the current warlords have now. It's a cultural pattern and they're the hardest sorts of habits to break.

"It would take a very exceptional person to change that," Candle continued, "or a military intervention from one or more of the major nations of Maiyim. Well, maybe if they actually put together that multinational force His Majesty was talking about, life around here will change. Maybe not. Most changes they would enact here would reverse themselves the moment such a force left, and exceptional people... Well, exceptional people are extremely rare. That's part of what makes them exceptional, isn't it? Well, they are certainly too rare to rely on being where you need them at the right time."

"And this archipelago has no resources the others need that they don't already have in ample supply," Sextant noted. "That's the major difference between here and Wennil."

"There are other reasons," Jollin told him. "Wennil was settled by rugged individualists looking for a place to homestead without government interference. Saindo was settled by people who were not welcome anywhere else."

"Exactly," Candle agreed, "and that's why I don't see any major cultural changes happening here anytime soon."

After everyone had eaten, Candle asked, "Are you up to walking out of here?"

"Try and stop me," one of the men told him.

They all had trouble walking, but with one rescuer each to help, they eventually made it back to the all-terrain vehicle. In their absence, someone had taken several cans of spray paint to the car and covered it with graffiti.

"Well at least they didn't let the air out of the tires," Sextant chuckled. He concentrated for a moment and the spray paint slid off the car and into a large multicolored puddle nearby. Then they all crammed themselves in and drove back to Mati.

Eleven

“Somehow I expected this to have been a lot more difficult,” Jollin remarked as they reached the edge of Mati.

“It took us three days,” Oceanvine reminded her. “And not getting sick in those inns should count as a major task.”

“It’s just that you cast a few spells and poof,” Jollin explained, “we found the people we were looking for, defeated the local warlord and managed to drive straight back in time for dinner.”

“I hardly think of that as defeating anyone,” Sextant told her. “I mean I don’t want to sound full of myself, but it was never really a fight. Not so long as we kept our defenses up, which we did.”

“They’re right,” Candle chimed in. “This may have been an important job, but it was never a difficult one. If there are any true mages on these islands, they likely never got beyond the apprentice level. Not to mention my staff gives us all an unfair advantage. No this was just a matter of search and rescue, although I will admit we got lucky in finding everyone so fast. Had Syng and her people not been arrogant enough to try to ambush us last night, we would still be out there looking and it’s possible we might not have been successful.”

“Given the ability to turn their ambush back on them,” one of the men they’d rescued told him, “it was a foregone conclusion you’d have found us. You said it yourself. They were arrogant. Knowing you were out there looking for us, they were not content to let you look in vain. They had to try to kill you just for being there looking.”

“That’s not just arrogance,” one of the women argued, “but also face-saving. Syng would have looked weak had she merely laid low while you were looking. We overheard her talking a few days ago when the first party came looking for us. She was furious her people hadn’t captured them too, but instead let them go back to Mati.”

“Well, she’s no one’s problem now,” Jollin concluded. “Oh gods! What happened here.”

They had arrived back at the storefront the Friendship Corps had used as a headquarters to find the door hanging open and all the windows broken. They went in to investigate and aside from broken glass, they discovered that the building had been stripped of anything that could have been moved.

“Someone stole the medicine cabinet from the bathroom too,” Jollin reported. “The rest of the team must have been evacuated, but why so suddenly?”

“Maybe something happened that changed Team Leader Starren’s plans,” Sextant suggested.

“Mahk would have left a note,” one of the rescued men disagreed.

“He probably did,” Oceanvine remarked. “Seems to me that anyone who would have stolen a medicine cabinet might have taken a note in hopes of reusing the paper. If nothing else they could use it to start a fire.”

“There is that,” Candle agreed. “It’s equally possible, however, that something else is happening in the world and we’ve just been cut off the last few days.”

“Maybe that multinational force is getting ready to land?” Sextant asked.

“If so, we should be getting ready to leave,” Candle told him. “The entrance of foreign military is likely stir up all sorts of trouble. Besides there’s no need for us to stay here. The boat is going to be crowded, but we’ll manage.”

“Are we going to abandon the car?” Jollin asked a few minutes later when they parked at the foot of the wharf.

“We’re sure as heck not taking it with us,” Candle told her. “Do you have any better ideas?”

“Not really,” Jollin admitted. “Who is that sitting by the boat?” There was a man in a white linen suit sitting on top of one of the pilings of the pier.

“Looks like one of Wrent’s goons,” Candle noted. “Let’s go find out what he wants.”

“Wizard Candle,” the man greeted him respectfully. “Boss Wrent sends his compliments and this note.” He handed a sealed envelope to the Wizard and waited for him to open it.

Candle made a show of turning the envelope over while he scanned it for evidence of a spell or some other trap. Finding nothing, he tore it open and removed the folded paper from within.

Dear Wizard Candle,

I hope this finds you and your colleagues well and that your mission inland was a success.

It is my sorrow to inform you that shortly after you set out, Mister Starren and his people were ordered to leave Mati forthwith. However, before he left, he asked me to inform you that there is a ship from Bellinen anchored off of Winifa to the south. He also asked me to inform you that it would only wait there for another week, so if your mission inland ran longer than expected you may need to hurry to make that rendezvous.

Please be assured that it has been my honor to have met you, sir, and it is my profound wish we will meet again when we might have a chance to talk at length.

Yours,

August Wrent

“Please convey my appreciation to Mister Wrent,” Candle told the boss’s messenger. The man nodded and left the wharf as the others started boarding the *Maiyim Bourne*. “Complex character that Wrent,” he remarked to Sextant. “He kind of reminds me of a crime boss I met back when I was a kid.” He climbed on board and continued. “His name was Adelulf and he seemed to fancy himself more of a businessman than a mobster. Wrent sees himself as a sort of nobleman and is taking pains to act accordingly.”

"I grew up among noblemen," Oceanvine remarked from just inside the boat's cabin. "Most of them don't act any differently than anyone else. A little less crude perhaps when they think someone else is listening, but that's about it. I think Boss Wrent has been watching too many old movies."

"Could be," Candle chuckled.

"There's an extra bed down here!" Oceanvine exclaimed suddenly. "The galley table is gone and there's a bunk for two where it was."

"Good," Candle remarked. "I wondered how we were going to fit everyone in. Why don't you share your cabin with Jollin? Sextant and I will share the master cabin and the others can choose who sleeps in the galley area and who gets the bow cabin."

"Okay," Oceanvine responded. "I'll be right back up to help cast off. I just want to drop my bag into my cabin."

"Aren't you worried about letting some of the boat's secrets out, sir?" Sextant whispered to Candle as they started untying the gaskets that held the furled mainsail to the boom.

"It's a risk," Candle acknowledged, "but His Majesty knows about this boat, so I'm not worried about word getting back to him. Besides they'll only be with us until tomorrow afternoon sometime. They may not even notice some of the special features. It took me years to discover some of them."

"What about the money bags?"

"How much could they take?" Candle shrugged. "The bags won't work if taken off the boat anyway and after what they've been through it won't bother me a bit. Definitely make sure they get a couple changes of clothes, once we clear the harbor, though. They'll feel a lot better in clean clothing and encourage them to use the shower for the same reason. It's not like we could run out of hot water."

Under Sextant's guidance, the *Maiyim Bourne* slipped away from her dock a few minutes later and was soon in the center channel of the small harbor. With favorable winds, the boat was soon up on her hydrofoils and racing away from the island of Meruna.

To Oceanvine's surprise, the closets that afternoon dispensed only a limited variety of clothing. They did include what she had come to think of as "the old school uniform" which had become her signature garb over the last few years. So it was odd to see all four women on board dressed in blouses of brightly floral Orentan silk and cream-colored skirts. The men wore similar shirts and jeans, even Sextant, who rarely wore the vivid prints from the Bellinen Archipelago.

The food box in the galley, however, was still up to its old tricks, but Oceanvine chose to serve a simple meal of steak sandwiches and salad that evening, although she did also offer their guests glasses of dark Granomish ales and the dark red *kamo* biscuits traditionally served with them. In all, she felt it was an ideal evening of relaxation for them all, especially the folks they had rescued, after what had happened on Meruna.

"I notice you're not asking us for the details of how we were captured," one of the captives, a tall woman with short blond hair, asked her near sunset under a red-streaked sky.

"I didn't think you really wanted to talk about that, Alace," Oceanvine replied. "I think we're all just giving you your space. Do you want to talk about it?"

“I’m going to have to, you know,” Alace shrugged. “The Corps will debrief us all when we get back. It will probably start on board that Bellinen ship, in fact. And my family will want to know as well. It’s not a happy adventure I’d want to share, but it could have been a lot worse. Besides, I did a lot of good there too.

“We didn’t just stay in Mati all the time, although some of us did teach in the local schoolhouse. Not just children, but some adults as well,” Alace continued. “I helped a lot of the local farmers. Would you believe they didn’t really understand why crops should be rotated? And we helped build much needed infrastructure buildings in a lot of villages. That’s why we were supposedly off to Nillianto, you know. We were to help build a new schoolhouse there. I wonder now if that was for real.”

“It could have been,” Oceanvine remarked. “Looked like they could have used one.”

“That’s what Mahk thought as well,” Alace replied. “Ah well, it was nice while it lasted.”

“Oh? Is your hitch up now too?” Oceanvine asked.

“No,” Alace shook her head, “I still have over a year to go. We’ll all be reassigned if that’s what we want. Maybe we’ll be sent to one of the really backwater Probellinen Islands or the Inaliands. If we’re lucky maybe we’re off to the Falienas. We do have a mission there.”

“Where are the Falienas?” Oceanvine asked.

“They’re a small sub-archipelago to the east of Lillo in Bellinen,” Alace replied. “The natives there are nearly as primitive as the Merinta were about fifty years ago. Friendly types though, I hear.”

“I’m surprised Bellinen doesn’t take care of their own,” Oceanvine remarked.

“The Faliens weren’t originally a primitive people, like the Merinta. They were mainstream Orenta who wanted to get back to nature, or so I’ve been told. So a couple thousand of them followed a charismatic leader for whom the Islands are named, Faliens Wing. Under her guidance they settled those islands around a century and a half ago with a whole lot of ideas about creating a better life away from ‘so-called civilization.’ Her words, not mine,” Alace quickly explained. “It was not a successful venture, not by my standards. In their efforts to shed the trappings of civilization, they nearly slid all the way back to a hunter/gatherer economy. Fortunately, they were able to engage in a bit of subsistence farming, but they still think slash-and-burn agriculture is a pretty good thing.

“Well in the tropics, where everything grows so rapidly,” Alace added thoughtfully, “I guess that might work so long as your population is not too dense, but most slash-and-burn agriculturalists who come by it naturally, like the Merinta, know enough to only plant in one spot for a few years before letting the farm go fallow for a generation and tearing down another part of the rain forest. The Falienas didn’t know that for some reason. They also didn’t plant the right crops. Not until we started showing them how they could get more food value from manioc and plantains and yams than pineapple and wheat of all things. Wheat doesn’t even grow there very well, but most of their ancestors came from northern Bellinen where that was a staple.”

Alace sighed finally, and added, “I just hoped we were making a difference in Meruna. Well, thanks for letting me talk, Vine. You’re a good listener.” She stood up and went back into the cabin and Oceanvine realized that the woman had actually been speaking about anything except her recent ordeal.

“Vine,” Sextant called to her from the helm, “Candle wants to sail all night to make sure we get our guests to their rendezvous on time. “He’s napping in his cabin and I’m taking the first shift with Mauren, here.” He indicated one of the rescued men who was seated near him in the stern. “Why don’t you catch a few winks now and then you can relieve me around midnight.”

Oceanvine agreed and went back to her cabin where Jollin was already sleeping. “Huh?” Jollin asked sleepily as Oceanvine climbed into the wide bunk with her. “Is it time to wake up so soon? Feels like I just got to sleep.”

“You did,” Oceanvine laughed. “I’m taking a nap so I’ll be fresh for the graveyard shift or whatever sailors call it.”

“Graveyard watch, I think,” Jollin mumbled back at her before lapsing into a soft snore.

It was an hour past midnight, when a knock on the cabin door woke her up. “You don’t usually oversleep, Vine,” Sextant told her when she opened the door.

“Sorry,” she apologized contritely. “Give me a minute to get dressed.”

Closing the door, she discovered Jollin was already pulling on her clothes in the tight compartment. “You don’t have to get up,” Oceanvine told her.

“You need someone to sit the watch with you,” Jollin replied, sounding more like the lively person Oceanvine knew since her arrival in Saindo. “Besides, I’ve been sleeping longer than you have. Hmm, the magic closet is offering us sweaters. Should we?”

“The closet knows all, sees all,” Oceanvine laughed, grabbing fresh clothing and pulling it on as rapidly as she could. However, rather than donning one of the sweaters, she merely slung it over her shoulder as she raced up on deck. “Where’s your helper?” she asked Sextant when she discovered he had been at the helm alone.

“Mauren?” Sextant shrugged. “He went to bed a couple of hours ago.”

“You should have woken me sooner,” Oceanvine scolded him.

“It’s not a big deal,” Sextant replied. “You obviously needed the sleep and I had some things I needed to think about. Back to wearing the hex nut, I see.”

“Any practice is good practice,” she replied, “and you know why I don’t use the pearl on board. You, however, look exhausted. Get below and don’t come back up until you’ve slept yourself out.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Sextant saluted teasingly before going below. He nearly ran straight into Jollin, who was bringing a pizza up from the food box, but managed to swerve in time, wish her a good morning and finally duck into Candle’s cabin.

“You hungry, Vine?” Jollin asked as she came up on deck.

“A bit peckish,” Oceanvine admitted. “Is this what you usually eat for breakfast?”

“I don’t consider anything at this time of the morning to be breakfast,” Jollin shot back. “Besides, everyone knows that if you’re going to eat pizza for breakfast it should be cold.”

“No thanks,” Oceanvine shook her head. A stray breeze lifted one of her long, black locks up and deposited it on her face. She brushed it back and remarked, “I guess I was in too much of a hurry to get up here. I normally tie it back when I’m on board.”

“Want me to get you a ribbon or something? Jollin offered.

“That’s all right,” Oceanvine stopped her, “I can hold my hair in place telekinetically until after we eat. Then again...” she paused and thought about what she wanted to do.

“What?” Jollin asked.

“Shh!” Oceanvine hushed her. Down below a drawer in their cabin slid open and a cream-colored ribbon floated up into the air. The drawer closed behind it as it seemingly slipped itself under the cabin door and then floated through the galley and up to where Oceanvine was sitting.

“Show off!” Jollin accused.

“That’s not showing off,” Oceanvine laughed, taking a bite of pizza. “This is.” The ribbon proceeded to make its way behind her head where her hair seemed to gather itself up within the reach of the ribbon and then the ribbon tied itself, all while Oceanvine continued to eat.

“Wish I could get dressed while eating like that,” Jollin sighed.

“It’s not quite getting dressed,” Oceanvine laughed, but then she got an idea. “Actually the basis of what I did is a beginner’s trick, although doing it to remotely grab a ribbon from the cabin is much harder and requires a lot of practice. I could show you how to do it, if you want.”

“Me?” Jollin laughed.

“You heard Uncle Candle,” Oceanvine reminded her. “You’re a natural mage when working at the forge. It’s just a matter of getting into that same frame of mind in other situations. Or do you have something more important to do after breakfast?”

“Strangely, I seem to be at liberty this morning,” Jollin laughed, “unless you need me to strike a sail.”

“I probably should have checked the weather forecast,” Oceanvine remarked, “but the radio is in the galley and we should let the men sleeping there be, as much as possible. The sky seems clear enough at the moment, so we probably won’t need to shorten sail before dawn.”

When they were finished, Jollin put the left over pizza aside and told Oceanvine. “Okay, I’m ready. What do I do first?”

“Well, the first thing you need to do is learn how to levitate a small object,” Oceanvine explained. “That’s where most of us start and it’s comparatively simple magic although not quite as simple as, say, some of the old housekeeping charms my Mom taught me before Dad forbade it.”

“I know a few of those,” Jollin remarked. “How to loosen dirt and that sort of thing. Comes in handy when I’m cleaning up from the forge.”

“I hadn’t thought about using it on clothing,” Oceanvine remarked. “Nice application.”

“Well, yeah, clothing too,” Jollin replied. “Actually, I meant cleaning myself.”

“That too,” Oceanvine nodded and reached up to pluck the hex nut that had been orbiting her head out of the air. “Okay, you already know that the key to magic is the ability to both concentrate and relax at the same time.”

“That’s what Uncle Candle said,” Jollin agreed. “Come to think of it, Auntie Oceanvine told me the same thing.”

“And now I have too,” Oceanvine grinned. “It’s true and the more you can relax while concentrating the better you will be. Your first assignment will be to make this hex nut float. Once you’ve done that, you can work on making it move around as you will.”

“Like you made it float around your head,” Jollin nodded.

“That’s my peculiarity,” Oceanvine chuckled. “You may borrow it if you like, but be prepared to have people stare at you if you do it in public. However, unless you’ve been holding something back from me, I doubt you’ll be up to that for a few days at least. For now, just try to make the thing float. If you can do that reliably, the rest is fairly simple and just a matter of practice so that you can do it naturally. Oh, it might help if you can believe your eyes.”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Jollin asked, mystified.

“That was one of my early problems,” Oceanvine admitted. “That and what was probably a subconscious fear that I’d get caught. I was still at that phase when we first met.”

“Really?” Jollin asked. “I didn’t realize that.”

“Oh yes, I’d been training for less than a week,” Oceanvine explained.

“But you already had a hex nut floating around your head,” Jollin recalled.

“Practice,” Oceanvine replied. “Besides, it might have looked like I was showing off or trying to get attention when I came out of that back room to meet your family, but actually I had gotten distracted and forgot the thing was still up there.”

“So it’s something you can set up to do automatically?” Jollin asked.

“You can, but it is better practice to do it consciously. That’s what I’ve always done, but after a bit you’ll find it is something you can do, with just a small part of your mind, while doing various other things,” Oceanvine told her. “But now I think you’re stalling.”

“I’m waiting for you to tell me how,” Jollin replied.

“Just relax and concentrate on lifting it,” Oceanvine explained. “Uncle Candle likes us to learn how to work magic with a lot of distractions and even with our eyes open for most spells, but it’s okay to close your eyes to help shut out distractions when trying something new.”

“That’s it?” Jollin asked. “Relax and concentrate?”

“That’s it,” Oceanvine agreed.

“What’s the catch?” Jollin asked suspiciously.

“Only that relaxing while you concentrate is not easy to do at first,” Oceanvine told her. “But you already do that when you work at a forge, so it should come to you easily enough.”

“If you say so,” Jollin replied, uncertain whether she believed that. She closed her eyes for a few seconds, then opened them again. “Um, maybe I should move a bit further away.”

“Why?” Oceanvine asked.

“I keep wanting to stop and talk to you,” Jollin admitted.

“We can talk if you would rather,” Oceanvine told her.

“I’d like to at least try this,” Jollin decided. “Besides we’ll have plenty of time to chat.”

“Then go forward a bit,” Oceanvine suggested. “I like to practice just up by the mast. It keeps me more or less out of the way of the boom, but also leaves me in the right place to walk the jib around should we need to come about. I don’t think we should have to do that tonight, though. The wind is constant, but light, and not suppose to shift around to the southwest until after dawn. At least that’s the way I heard it earlier.”

“The weather in these parts is easier to forecast than back home,” Jollin told her and then went to sit in front of the mast.

Left to her own musings, Oceanvine, reached into the small compartment where they kept the hex nuts and set another one in orbit around her head. Then she checked a small radar screen near the helm. It had not been there on her first trip, but when the mages realized that it was essential for night time sailing in strange waters while on the way back from Sutheria, it had just suddenly been there one evening. This was not unusual on the *Maiyim Bourne*. Sixty-three years earlier when Nildar had first presented her to Silverwind, the boat had none of the instrumentation modern mariners relied on. It did, however, come fully equipped with octants and other navigational equipment that were used in that day, including fully up-to-date charts of anywhere the crew might choose to travel. Sixty years later when Candle got her out of storage, the boat had emerged loaded with a marine band radio, Loran, sonar and all manner of other electronics including a radar screen. The radar, however, was inside the cabin and the mages had never felt the need to have one by the helm since they were able to navigate with their eyes and ears well enough past the light and gong buoys of Emmine’s Inner Seas. When they ventured out on the WenniOcean, there was little nautical traffic in their vicinity so they tended to all sleep at night, relying on Candle’s proximity wards to alert them if anything dangerous got too close.

She studied the screen for a few minutes. In it she could detect Meruna behind them, but there was very little else on the scope except a small blip off the port bow. She watched that blip until she was certain the ship it represented was not on a collision course, and let her mind wander for a bit.

She recalled a number of conversations with Uncle Candle about the use of a mage staff and a few about what the ancients called an amulet. An amulet, he had lectured was an otherwise ordinary object in which a specific spell had been stored and could be released by the performance of an incantation or action. Candle called the words or actions that would invoke a stored spell a trigger, although the ancient word for it meant invocation. Such a trigger could be performed by anyone who did not naturally nullify

all magic in their immediate vicinity. Such people were called magic nulls and were very rare. The only such person Oceanvine knew, in fact, was her Granomish cousin, Ksanya.

Candle freely admitted that he did not know how to produce an amulet although he did have a few notions about how it might be done. The wizard might not have known how to do it, but there were mages on Maiyim who did. Unfortunately they were all members of the illegal organization known as One Maiyim.

When One Maiyim was founded, its goals had been to unite the peoples of the world and so do away with ancient prejudices. It also had an ecological agenda that sat well with university students the world over. A generation later, however, the movement had been hijacked by a secret inner circle, whose ultimate goal was to rule the world. They had attempted to disrupt the governments of the three major archipelagos of Maiyim, by staging a coup in Bellinen and then attempting regicide in Granom and Emmine. Each time they had been thwarted, and then they seemed to disappear from sight for a very long time. The hidden masters of One Maiyim took the long view and continued to work in secret for decades.

Then four years ago a pair of tsunamis struck the island colonies of Sutheria and Candle, along with his new apprentices, Oceanvine and Sextant, rushed to the scene to lend a helping hand. After pursuing several lines of investigation, they discovered that the tsunamis had been ultimately caused by a rogue mage who had learned how to tap into the power of the Demon Xenlabit. The same mage and his own apprentice had also been engaging in the series of murders that Candle later deduced leant a necromantic quality to the destructive spells that mostly involved forms of volcanism. That encounter turned out to be just the first incident related to the new reemergence of One Maiyim.

A year later Candle and Journeymen Oceanvine and Sextant managed to thwart One Maiyim's political wing, the People's Party, first in Rjalkatyp where they had nearly completed their take over of the government and then in Querna where they did succeed, however temporarily, at overthrowing King Ksaveras. Not too long after that, One Maiyim mages attempted unsuccessfully to assassinate the king and queen of Emmine, and then they once more seemed to drop off the face of Maiyim.

In the meantime, Oceanvine and Sextant had continued their studies and Sextant had recently earned his masters degree with a thesis in which he proposed a new class of spells for three-dimensional navigation in space. Oceanvine, in spite of claims she was working on her thesis, was still doing generalized research in hopes of coming up with a subject. She knew that, once she had a topic, her research so far would probably apply, but Candle had not yet approved of any of her proposals because they were too broadly based.

"A masters' thesis should be on some very specific subject," the wizard had explained patiently. "You should consider focusing in on a single class of spells or a specific aspect of magic in general." They had discussed the matter frequently, but Oceanvine's interests were too widely varied and she could not come up with the right specialty.

She shook those thoughts from her head and checked the radar again. The blip she had spotted earlier was closer now, however it was about a mile off her port beam. Peering out into the darkness, Oceanvine spotted the ship's running lights and, through binoculars, decided it must be an oil tanker and that it was likely headed toward the Isle of Fire. The rest of the scope was clear and she soon returned to her musings.

Amulets, she thought to herself. *They don't sound all that hard to do*. She caught the hex nut as it circled past her eyes and looked at it. *I should be able to store magical energy in this just as I can in*

my staff. She did and immediately noticed the change in the nut's aura. It was, however, not a stored spell, just a bit of raw magical energy. It had no agenda or instructions, it just sat there in the steel that made up the nut, so she tried "commanding" it to form a light spell, but also told it to remain as potential energy. It stayed that way until she took her mind off of it. It then immediately activated, forming a soft white ball of light that glowed over her head for the next two minutes.

She tried it again with less power. Then she tried again with more concentration. She tried it repeatedly in various ways and each time all she managed to do was give herself enough light to read by for a short amount of time. Shrugging, she set the nut back in orbit and stepped down into the cabin to get a notebook. The last light was still shining when she returned a minute later, but she had expected as much. There was enough power in that spell to keep the light going for an hour or more.

Then, after another glance at the radar, she opened the notebook and started writing. She accurately described what she hoped to accomplish and the steps by which she had attempted the feat. Once that was done, she started coming up with new ideas and insights. Rather than trying them all out immediately, she forced herself to keep writing, in the fear that she might actually figure out how to produce an amulet, but have the notion slip gently out of her mind as a dozen other notions occurred to her. Writing them all down would preserve the ideas until she had a chance to try them out.

She was nearly finished when Jollin asked, "What are you writing?" Oceanvine paused to finish her last thought on the matter and then explained. "Oh that's fascinating! And do you think you can figure it out?"

"Maybe not tonight," Oceanvine replied. "This is lost knowledge. We know it was done, but not how. But I think if I and others were to apply ourselves to the problem, we'll come up with a solution. Good thing Uncle Candle is taking me to Merinne as soon as we meet that ship from Bellinen. The University library there has all sorts of ancient texts. Maybe one of them, if I'm allowed to read them, will give me a clue. How did you do with the hex nut?"

"I didn't accomplish a thing," Jollin replied, frustrated. "If anything the nut feels heavier now than when I started. Is it possible to increase an object's mass through magic?"

"It's possible," Oceanvine admitted, "but that's a form of creation magic. Uncle Candle says it's one of the most advanced forms of magic. I doubt you're going to stumble on how to do that on your first attempt. So far I've only had a few lessons in it and I can't produce so much as a molecule.

"But don't get discouraged," Oceanvine continued. "Casting your first conscious spell at the apprentice level isn't something that comes easily."

"How long did it take you?" Jollin asked.

"That doesn't count," Oceanvine denied instantly. "I was a prodigy and figured it out for myself when I was still a young girl. Then Dad caught me at it, and I couldn't sit down for a week. I got it almost right off when Uncle Candle started training me, but I wasn't able to do it with the ease I had that first time. I think children can learn such things easier than adults because they don't know it's supposed to be hard."

"No, Vine," Jollin disagreed. "Most children don't have the determined concentration and attention span to do what you did."

"Concentration *and* relaxation," Oceanvine reminded her cousin. "It was my favorite rubber ball and it made me happy. I was very relaxed as I concentrated on it. But I got lucky. Sextant had other problems. He didn't have the control and the closest spell he had ever learned was a basic propulsion spell still used

to demonstrate vectors in physics classes. It only provided a short but intense burst, so his hex nuts kept trying to go to Midbar. He told me it took him at least two weeks to learn that first spell and it took about two days before he could learn to simply make the nut float in a controlled manner. Uncle Candle tells me it took him days before he could even get his first object, a small quartz pebble, to move and when he did, it left a dent in one of the walls of Castle North.”

“Days, huh?” Jollin asked with a sparkle returning to her eyes.

“Maybe a week or two. That sort of time is normal, I think,” Oceanvine told her.

“Well if I can beat his time, maybe I won’t think I’m hopeless,” Jollin laughed. “He really dented the wall?”

“It was a wall inside the castle, not the outer bailey itself,” Oceanvine specified. “The impact also broke the pebble in half and he ended up pleading with my great-grandmother, your aunt, to mend the pebble.”

“Did she?” Jollin asked.

“She did,” Oceanvine affirmed. “That’s another interesting spell. I’ve not tried it, but I know how. It’s a matter of encouraging the molecules of the adjoining faces of the two halves to reestablish the bonds they had before the piece broke. Maybe I’ll try it next time I break a glass. Anyway, next time you try, maybe you should think of things that make you feel good, that help you relax and let down your defenses. Maybe then you’ll manage to lift the nut when you turn your concentration on it.”

Twelve

The *Maiyim Bourne* landed at Winifa just after noon, later that same day. Sextant bought her to dock at a pier in the shadow of the *BSSShiwa* an immense aircraft carrier that looked so new the gray-green paint might still have been a little tacky in the corners. Since Candle had radioed ahead, Team Leader Starren and a dozen other Friendship Corps people were on hand to welcome them.

“I really had intended to stay in Mati until your return,” Mahk explained, “but I received direct orders to evacuate. We had no choice but to leave with the sailors who delivered the orders.”

“Had they waited an extra day or two we would have all left together,” Candle replied sternly. “Colonel Mannet knew we were there and how long it would take us to arrive. There was no need to jump the gun.”

“Mannet?” Mahk echoed. “He didn’t issue the orders. They came from Acting-Director Charles Hollans.”

“Who the heck is he?” Candle asked “And it’s only been a week or so since I met with Mannet. What happened to him?”

“I don’t know,” Mahk shrugged.

“Something else to look into as soon as I get back to civilization,” Candle grumbled. “At the very least His Majesty is going get an earful from me. Another reason to go rushing off, I guess,” he added as the rescued volunteers started making their way to the carrier.

“Jollin?” Mahk asked. “Aren’t you packed yet?”

“I’m not coming,” Jollin replied. “By my calculation my agreement with the Corps expired yesterday. My hitch is up and even if I’m off by a day or two, you’re empowered to release me. May as well do it now since you won’t be going anywhere I’m needed soon enough to matter.”

“But we’ve been called back to Randona,” Mahk explained. “The *Shiwa* will take us directly to Pense where a plane will be waiting for us. I know you’ve said you want to go back to Kern. This is probably your fastest way back.”

“But not the best way,” Jollin explained. “I started something last night I’d like to see through. Besides, Oceanvine and Candle are family and I’d really like to spend more time with them right now.”

“Have it your way,” Mahk told her. “I’ll have to cobble up something to pass for release forms, though. Do you have some paper on board?”

“I have the official forms,” Jollin remarked.

“You planned this, did you?” Mahk asked, surprised. “Well, of course you did. Can’t say I’d have expected otherwise. You always were the most methodical member of the team.”

Jollin led him into the boat’s cabin where the galley table had already reappeared. She reached into the paper drawer and pulled out the necessary documents in triplicate. Mahk filled in the blanks and signed them, handed her a copy and folded up the other two. “It’s been an honor working with you, Miss Smith,” he told her formally. They shook hands, then he took his two copies of the forms and after a few more minutes of discussion left to join the rest of his team.

“When did you decide to stay on board?” Candle asked Jollin.

“Last night,” she replied. “Vine apprenticed me.”

“Oceanvine can’t apprentice you,” Candle replied. “She’s only a journeywoman herself.”

“She’ll be a master soon enough,” Jollin replied.

“Did you make the traditional request?” Candle pressed. “Did you look her straight in the eye and say, ‘Teach me?’”

“No,” Jollin laughed, “nor did she or Sextant when they started. You just decided to make their training a summer school assignment.”

“Well there is that,” Candle admitted.

“Well, maybe Vine didn’t think she was accepting me as an apprentice either,” Jollin admitted. “She just started me on trying my hand at telekinesis.”

“I see,” Candle considered. “Well she is entitled to teach and has done so in both Randona and Querna, so I suppose it’s all right. Besides the old apprenticeship system has pretty much fallen apart these days anyway. Well, if you’re staying aboard I expect you to pull your weight.”

“When haven’t I?” Jollin demanded with a chuckle.

Sextant came aft from where he and Oceanvine had been untangling the jib sheets. “So you’re staying?” he asked. She nodded. “Maybe you and Vine should use my regular cabin,” he suggested as Oceanvine joined them. “It’s slightly larger and has two single bunks rather than a double.”

“But the small cabin has always been mine,” Oceanvine protested.

“And will be again some day,” Sextant assured her, “but we only have the three cabins so you two are going to have to continue sharing.”

“Well it’s not like any of us have much to move, do we?” Oceanvine commented. “Does sleeping feel different in the bow cabin?”

“Different?” Sextant asked. “Not that I’ve noticed. The boat moves the same all over.”

“And less inside than out,” Oceanvine observed.

“I noticed that,” Jollin remarked. “How does it do that?”

Oceanvine started to explain how they believed the spell complex that powered the *Maiyim Bourne* worked, only to be interrupted by Candle. “Time for theory once we’re back at sea,” he told them. “Let’s prepare to cast off.”

“What’s the hurry, Uncle?” Oceanvine asked.

“I don’t like the way Starren’s orders changed so suddenly, but there’s no way to call back to Randona from here,” he explained.

“You could radio Maia,” Oceanvine suggested. “Doesn’t she monitor the special frequencies?”

“She keeps the office radio tuned to the one we used to communicate with Methis on, just like we do here. That frequency, you may recall, is no longer secure,” Candle replied.

“Then call Methis and ask her to relay a message,” Oceanvine argued.

“Have you forgotten the Gods are keeping out of day-to-day mortal affairs? She might relay a message as a friend, but I wouldn’t feel right asking it of her,” Candle countered. “The best way I can see is to make a beeline for the port of Tanne on Semmos and call in from there. Besides, I don’t see anything here worth sticking around for, do you?”

They all agreed and a few minutes later the *Maiyim Bourne* was once more under sail and flying over the water.

Once underway, Sextant, Jollin and Oceanvine moved the few items they had with them into their new cabins. “Is that all you brought?” Jollin asked Oceanvine when she merely picked up her purse.

“We were in a hurry,” Oceanvine explained.

“I’m starting to think you’re always in a hurry,” Jollin chuckled.

“Not always,” Oceanvine shook her head. “But working with Uncle Candle does make it seem that way, sometimes. The biggest problem is that with all the magic closets and boxes on board, there’s nothing that produces undergarments and I haven’t been anywhere long enough to buy replacements since we left.”

“Sounds disgusting,” Jollin wrinkled her nose.

“After living on Meruna for two years, that bothers you?” Oceanvine laughed. “Well if it makes you feel better, the dresser will launder any items of clothing we put in them, so my clothes are always clean, at least, but my bra broke a strap on the way here and my one pair of panties is getting too worn to think about. The dresser may function as a laundry, but it is not a tailor. I tried repairing it myself, but it just wasn’t comfortable when I was done.”

“I hear a lot of women have stopped wearing them lately,” Jollin remarked. “Although I wonder why Nildar and Wenni left that part out when they were designing the boat.”

“Perhaps the Gods don’t wear underwear,” Oceanvine speculated. “Why would they need to? I suppose I could ask Methis next time we meet, but just as likely it could be that it simply slipped their minds. The Gods are not omniscient and Aritos, especially, will tell you they aren’t perfect. Anyway, I’ve been unintentionally fashionable, at least as far as the undergrad set seems to think of it, for nearly a week. I keep expecting Sextant’s eyes to bug out or for Uncle Candle to make some sort of sly remark, but so far I don’t think either of them have noticed. And actually I’m starting to get used to it.”

“Well, you do wear your blouses fairly loose,” Jollin noted, then shrugged off her top and removed her own bra.

“What are you doing?” Oceanvine asked.

“I figure with both of us like this it might not seem as unusual,” Jollin replied, putting her blouse back on.

“That’s nice of you,” Oceanvine told her, appreciating the gesture, “but it isn’t necessary.”

“Well, I have kind of wondered what it was like,” Jollin admitted. “This is a convenient excuse and I’m not as modest as you are, so the men’s reactions won’t bother me as much.”

“Whatever,” Oceanvine shrugged, a blush threatening to spread across her face. “Let’s just get back on deck.” She grabbed her notebook and a pen.

“Yes, time for my next attempt at lifting the hex nut,” Jollin agreed.

They stepped back up on deck and headed for the bow. “Do you really think I’ll be able to spin a small object around my head like that soon?” Jollin asked, noticing the hex nut once more.

“Within a day of being able to float one, yes,” Oceanvine replied. “Doing it unconsciously takes somewhat longer. Why are you so anxious to develop a personal satellite?”

“Well, I have to admit it’s always impressed me,” Jollin replied, “and on formal occasions I could use a piece of jewelry instead. It would be like wearing a tiara, I imagine. Do you have a tiara?”

“Huh?” Oceanvine asked, surprised at the change of subject. “Well, yes, I do. I haven’t worn it very often. I mean, I did for my coming out, but not at any of the other formal parties I attended that season.

And not in public since, either. These days anyone can wear one if she wants, a lot of women do for their weddings, you know, but among the nobility of Emmine usually only married women wear them on formal occasions except for their coming out, of course. Had I not become a mage, I might have worn one to a royal gala, if I'd been invited."

"Why can't you wear one as a mage?" Jollin asked.

"I can do anything I like along those lines," Oceanvine explained, "but traditionally a mage does not, just as it is traditional to enter the royal presence with his or her hands uncovered." She laughed at a memory. "When I was called before the throne to receive the Star of Emmine, it was the first time my hands were ungloved when in proximity to His Majesty. Actually it was only the second time I had been to court, but all my upbringing told me I should be wearing white gloves. Maia tells me I kept trying to pull my hands up into my sleeves. Anyway, mages do not generally wear an inordinate amount of jewelry on formal occasions."

"Why not?" Jollin asked.

"I don't know," Oceanvine admitted. "It wasn't one of those bits of etiquette that came up. Anyway, Queen Orezhda caught me with a hex nut spinning around me on my first afternoon in Querna and gave me a rather magnificent pearl to use instead, so these days I use that on a formal occasion, and around my flat and University as well. I guess it is sort of like a magical tiara. What's all this about tiaras, anyway."

"I don't know," Jollin sighed. "I guess I always wanted to be able to wear one. They look so elegant in the photos and paintings."

"They're not so easy to wear," Oceanvine replied. "At least I had trouble. My hair is straight and very smooth and no matter how you try to put it up, it wants to come right back down again. I must have been wearing my own weight in hairspray for my coming out. Even then it's a good thing I'd had so many classes on posture and comportment, because I only had to shake my head a few times or so to let my hair back down afterward."

"Oh, come on!" Jollin replied skeptically.

"Maybe I'm exaggerating, but not by much. I felt like I was doing a circus balancing act all evening," Oceanvine laughed. "That's not why I like being a mage, but it is one of the benefits. A mage is expected to be an exception to the rules, within polite bounds. But if you really want to wear a tiara, you may borrow mine for your wedding day."

"Really!" Jollin asked, delighted. "Thank you, Lady Cousin!"

"You haven't called me that in years!" Oceanvine laughed.

"I was saving it for a special occasion," Jollin replied.

Oceanvine smiled. "So, are you through stalling for time?"

"I'm more relaxed than when we first came up on deck," Jollin admitted.

"Okay," Oceanvine nodded. "Should I go aft so you can work without me to distract you?"

“I thought I was supposed to work with as many distractions as possible,” Jollin replied.

“The wind and salt spray will be distraction enough,” Oceanvine told her and got up to join Candle in the stern of the boat.

“Are you tired of training an apprentice already?” Candle asked playfully.

“Not at all,” Oceanvine retorted, “but I notice that if I’m in earshot, she’ll put off practice to chat. I figure we can chat this evening when we’re on watch.”

“We’re in the middle of the Nildar Ocean,” Candle pointed out. “We can set out usual Outer Seas watches.”

“We’ll be crossing a major sea lane over-night, Uncle,” Oceanvine countered. “Someone had better be up.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Candle admitted. “Good thing you checked the charts.”

“Six did,” she admitted. “He mentioned it before we reached Winifa. Our planned course is to take the fast route out of Saindo, past Snake Island, and then adjust our course for Lillo. We’ll be in the main lane by midnight.”

“Snake Island,” Candle mused. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Oceanvine nodded. “I notice that’s the only one in this archipelago that doesn’t have an Old Orentan name. Is that significant?”

“Probably not,” Candle replied. “There are a lot of stories about Snake Island, though. Most of them are wrong or at least inaccurate.”

“Such as?” Oceanvine prompted.

“Well, ever hear of Danarawa the Black and Yakkov of Mifde?” Candle asked.

“They were pirates a century and a half ago, weren’t they?” Oceanvine asked.

“Right,” Candle affirmed. “Well sometime a decade or two after they were killed by Commodore Harston of Arnd’s fleet, someone found an odd depression in the ground a couple hundred yards from what was then the shore of the island. Curiosity rules us all and they started digging to see what was there. They found the ground was soft there and after a few feet, there was a sort of floor of loosely fitted flag stones, so they picked that up and kept digging. Ten feet below that there were carefully laid planks of oak. Then every ten or twelve feet below that, they found a layer of various other things; logs, putty, charcoal, coconut fiber and more. The shaft had obviously been built for a reason, but of course, no one knew what it was for certain.

“Then some eighty-five feet below the surface, they found a strangely inscribed stone tablet,” Candle continued. “The tablet’s on display at the Bellinen National Museum, if you’re interested, by the way. The language on it is strange. I can’t say it is like nothing on Maiyim. Actually it seems to be very much like the languages of Maiyim present and past, so some who studied it, believed it was a code. Then someone decided it said that there was great treasure another ninety feet below. For all I can tell, it might have been an advertisement for Merobawa’s Used Swords. I won’t go into all the details, but over the

years a number of different companies were formed to attempt to get that treasure. One of them tripped a booby trap and the whole pit filled with sea water and they had to excavate by drill. Silverwind was there once when one company tried to hire him. He decided it wasn't worth the effort, although some years later I think we all wished he had taken a shot.

"To tell the truth no one really knows if that island is the same Snake Island that those pirates used as a base, but that's the name it has on the maps these days."

"Did anyone ever find the treasure?" Oceanvine asked.

Candle smiled broadly. "Oh yes, and I'd truly call it priceless, but it wasn't what anyone expected."

"So?" Oceanvine prompted him.

"It was eventually excavated by the Demon Arithan and used fairly effectively against us while we were on the quest," Candle told her. "You've seen and used it on numerous occasions, though."

"The Staff of Aritos?" Oceanvine guessed.

"The same," Candle agreed, "though I still think that's a rather sensationalistic name for it. Anyway, when Arithan retrieved it, he created a small volcano on the island, wiping out any trace of the old so-called treasure pit. What are you working on with the notebook, by the way?"

"Trying to come up with a thesis subject," Oceanvine replied. "I had some insights concerning amulets last night and was thinking of trying to pursue them."

"If you can figure out how to make an amulet," Candle told her, "it might be more worthy of a wizard's dissertation."

"I don't think so," Oceanvine disagreed. "It's a very specific subject – how to construct one. It seems to me that a dissertation ought to be broader. It would delve into amulets of many sorts and discuss as many uses and the significances of spells stored within."

"All right, you have me convinced," Candle agreed to Oceanvine's surprise. "So how do you create an amulet?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out," Oceanvine replied.

"That is a rather critical point, don't you think?" Candle pointed out.

"Yes," she agreed, "but I don't intend to waste too much time on it. If I can't make a break-through over the summer, I'll just find another subject."

"Well, I suppose a discussion of what we know about amulets might be a good subject, even if you can't figure out how to construct one," Candle considered. "All right, you may continue your research. So what have you come up with so far?"

"This is what I wrote last night," she told him, handing over the notebook.

"Hmm, interesting," he murmured as he inspected her notes. "Mind if I borrow your pen? Thanks. Okay, I've tried about three quarters of these already. I'll put a check mark next to them. Try them for

yourself, of course. It's always possible I got one wrong. Also, even if it doesn't work, it may give you an idea for something else to try." He handed the notebook and pen back. "I have some notes in a book of my own down below on the research I've done. I'll transcribe them for you later on thaumagrophic paper. Who knows? Maybe you will be the one to figure it out."

"Thanks, Uncle," she replied. "Now do I have time for my next exercise in creation magic?"

"It's pretty late today," Candle decided, "so I think we'll get back to that in the morning. Why don't you work on your amulet ideas? Some of them relate to creation anyway."

Oceanvine nodded and looked at the ideas Candle had checked off as already tried. It was a bit disappointing as all the notions she thought of as most promising had check marks next to them now. The ones that were left represented her more oddball notions. They were ideas that just flitted through her mind as she worked on what she had considered mainstream. When she thought about it, however, maybe that was a good thing. Uncle Candle would have tried most of the same mainstream ideas and he had obviously thought of things she had not. Perhaps the solution did not lie in the current mainstream. Still he had suggested starting with the ideas that did not work for him.

She instantly thought of several new ideas and started writing them down. Finally she started going through the ideas Candle had checked off and was so deep in her work that she failed to notice Sextant when he came back on deck two hours later.

"Vine?" he asked. She looked up to see him staring at Jollin. The sun was near the horizon and the orangey light made everything seem to glow a bit. "Is Jollin..." he paused, evidently searching for the right words.

"Braless?" Oceanvine prompted him. A blush threatened to bloom across her face

"I was going to ask if she was wearing her hair differently," he replied, taking another look, "but maybe that's it. The hair is different, isn't it?" He seemed more interested in confirming his first impression.

"She's tied it back," Oceanvine confirmed. "I'm not sure just when she did that, but it was probably to help her concentrate. It's been hours, though. I'd better get her to eat something."

"She may not have picked up telekinesis as quickly as you did, Vine," he told her, "but when it comes to determination, I can see the family resemblance."

Oceanvine paused to stare at him, wondering if there was more to what he said than it sounded, and then decided she had better get Jollin to halt for the day.

"Time for dinner, cousin," she told her cheerfully.

Jollin opened her eyes. "This is hopeless," she sighed. "Every time I try to concentrate, I end up tensing up."

"That's why not everyone is a mage," Oceanvine told her. "Maybe you should try to imagine yourself back at the forge."

"Okay," Jollin agreed and immediately closed her eyes again.

"Hey wait!" Oceanvine tried to stop her. "You need to eat!"

“One more try?” Jollin asked.

“Just one,” Oceanvine gave in, knowing she was guilty of the same sort of behavior whenever she thought she was close to a break-through.

Jollin took a deep breath, held it, and as she slowly let it out the hex nut lifted off the deck of the *Maiyim Bourne* and hovered just in front of her. Then she peeked out of just one eye and grinned broadly before the nut dropped back to the deck.

“Well, it’s a start!” Jollin announced happily.

Thirteen

“Ready about!” Candle shouted as Jollin retrieved the hex nut. “Hard alee!” he shouted again as he swung the boat’s wheel around and they came about, abruptly turning south toward a small island whose profile was dominated by the tall ash cone of a sleeping volcano.

Oceanvine and Jollin walked the large jib around the mast, then hurried back to the stern. “We’re not landing there, are we, Uncle?” Oceanvine asked.

“We are,” Candle confirmed. “That’s Snake Island, the one we were talking about earlier.”

“I kind of thought so,” she replied, “but the sun is setting. Won’t it be too dark to safely launch again soon?”

“Probably,” Candle told her. “Although you’ll find our charts will indicate any dangerous bars or reefs should we need to leave in a hurry. As it happens, however, we don’t really have a choice.”

“Why not?” Jollin asked.

“An old friend of mine wants to talk,” Candle replied.

They all would have asked how he knew, but the shoreline was coming up fast and there was a lot to do as they prepared to beach the boat. Oceanvine retracted the foils just as they reached the point where the surf was starting to build up. At the same time Sextant raised the centerboard, then went forward to man the jib, while Oceanvine joined Jollin by the mainsail. The waves were not very high that evening and thirty yards off-shore, Candle ordered them to strike the sails. They hauled the sails down and furled them hastily, trading neatness for speed, and the hull of the *Maiyim Bourne* scraped against the white sand of Snake Island’s beach.

Finally Candle used a bit of telekinetic muscle to pull the boat a bit further out of the water while Sextant jumped ashore and set an anchor in the sand above the high water line for a little added insurance. When that was done, the others joined him on the beach in time to see a tall Orentan woman step out from behind a pair of palm trees.

“You rang?” Candle asked.

“I felt it was necessary to talk to you, Wizard,” She replied.

“Hello, Wenni,” Oceanvine greeted her somewhat more solemnly. Unlike Methis, the Goddess Wenni had always seemed more aloof and formal to her, as though She was not actually disapproving of mortals in general, but that She did hold them to a higher standard of behavior than some of the other gods. Sextant greeted Her politely as well, but Jollin just stared open-mouthed at the goddess incredulously.

“Close you mouth, dear,” Wenni told her gently, reaching with her hand to push Jollin’s jaw upward. “It’s not polite to gape like that, you know.” The words might have been harsh, but there was a tone of amusement in Wenni’s voice.

“Mom always said I’d catch flies in it doing that,” Jollin stammered. Wenni smiled slightly.

“So,” Candle interrupted, “if You needed to talk to us so much, why didn’t You just appear in a dream like You used to do?”

“That’s a strange question coming from someone who calls Methis on the telephone to wish Her a happy birthday,” Wenni replied sourly.

“I would have at least sent You a card,” Candle replied, humorously “but You keep moving around and I don’t know Your current address.”

Wenni was not amused, but replied, “If you ever truly need to find Nildar and Me, you will. I called you here because it was necessary to make sure you were going in the right direction and prepared for what you would find when you got to your destination.”

“And where are we supposed to go next?” Candle asked a bit warily, “and what should we expect to find there?”

“You should go to Orent Island, just as you planned, and visit your old friends Airblossom and Waterfall,” Wenni replied.

“That’s all you want?” Sextant blurted incredulously, involuntarily dropping his usual politeness.

“No, of course not!” Wenni told him, showing a bit of frustration herself, “but you all ought to figure it out for yourselves once you’re in the right place. I’m not supposed to directly interfere any more, remember?”

“That doesn’t seem to stop Methis,” Sextant observed.

Wenni sniffed disdainfully and turned to leave, but Oceanvine stopped Her, “Wait! I’m confused. You want us to continue going where we planned to go anyway, and when we get there You want us to do something we likely would have as well?”

“That’s correct, Lady Oceanvine,” Wenni replied. “I just did not want you to get distracted.” Then before anyone else could ask her a question, Wenni stepped back behind a tree and disappeared.

“That took less time than I expected,” Candle remarked. He looked over at Jollin who still had her hand against her face where the goddess had touched her. “You feeling okay?”

“Huh?” Jollin replied, still a bit dazed. “I’m fine. That really was Wenni, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Candle replied, “She’s not as much fun as Methis, but then I think I remind her too much of Silverwind. It’s a bit too dark to set off again safely. You may not have noticed it, but we came in through a narrow break in a shallow reef. Let’s stay here tonight and we’ll leave at first light.”

“Here?” Oceanvine asked. “Is it safe?”

“Oh sure,” Candle shrugged. “The locals think this island is cursed so they avoid it, but the volcano has been dormant for fifty years and the island is full of life, just not sentient life. It should be safe enough.”

“Well,” Sextant considered, “I’ll check the tide charts, but judging from the position of the high waterline, I think we’re either just before or just past the high tide. The next one will be tomorrow morning, and that will be a safer time to leave.”

“Uncle Candle?” Oceanvine asked. “You can use the staff to just pick the boat up and float us out beyond the reef if you want to, you know.”

“True enough,” he shrugged, “but maybe I just feel like camping out on the beach for a change.”

“Or maybe,” Oceanvine suggested, “you just feel like stalling for a bit now that Wenni told us we should be moving on to Merinne.”

“I think you’re starting to know me just a little too well,” Candle grinned. “Well, let’s gather up some driftwood and we can eat tonight by a campfire.”

Two hours later, after dousing the small fire, they climbed back on board the *Maiyim Bourne* to hear a wavering voice coming out of the radio. “Seven.” There was a pause and then the voice continued, “Niner. Seven. Eight. Two. One. Five. Five. Two. Six. Four. Niner. Seven. Two. One. Three...” and so forth. The broadcast went on for a good fifteen minutes while Oceanvine dutifully recorded what they heard in the same manner she had during the last broadcast. Finally the odd-sounding voice paused, then concluded with, “Five. Justice. Bravo. Two. Six. Niner. Five. Crisis. Seven.” After a bit more silence, the same trumpet fanfare they had come to associate with the mysterious broadcasts, played for a few minutes followed by the hiss of an empty signal, which stopped a moment later as well.

“Uncle Candle, do you have my notes from the last message we intercepted?” Oceanvine asked.

“In my cabin,” he responded. “Why?”

“May I see it?” she asked. He retrieved the sheets she had imprinted her notes on and handed them to her. “That’s what I thought. That last bit is exactly the same as last time. It probably started the same as well and if, as I think, all we missed was the opening code, that’s two complete messages in the same code.”

“Or from the same person or to the same person,” Sextant commented. “We don’t really know what any of these are all about.”

“Maybe not, but Aritos will be interested in this anyway,” Candle remarked. “I’ll send him copies when we next make port. This may be the first time we have two broadcasts with the same bracketing codes at the start and finish. And, I think you’re right, Vine. The opening code was probably the same. So far it has always been the same code at the front and back of the message.” Oceanvine was so pleased with herself that she failed to correct Candle’s use of her name. “But right now, we had better get some sleep if you plan to leave in the morning.”

Bellinen

One

In spite of Candle's pretense of stalling for time while on Snake Island, they made their way rapidly across the Nildar Ocean and were soon officially on the Inner Seas of the Bellinen Archipelago.

Once again sea traffic became heavier and they had to keep a close eye on the boats and ships around them. However, now that they were back within the territory of a major archipelago, they were also able to stop each night in a convenient port.

"Shouldn't we be rushing to Merinne, Uncle Candle?" Jollin asked on their first night in a real marina. Their course had fortuitously brought them directly to Fenna port on the island of Kaosa. During the trip from Snake Island, she had managed to master telekinesis well enough to start "wearing" her hex nut in the same way Oceanvine did.

"There's no need to wear ourselves out," Candle told her. "Wenni didn't tell us there was any particular urgency."

"She told us not to get distracted," Jollin reminded him.

"Staying in port each night is not a distraction," Candle replied, "and if we were in a hurry, I'm sure Wenni would have been more direct. She likely wanted to make sure we didn't take a detour by way of the amusement park at Killo or something like that. She and I may not have been as close as I have been to Methis, but I think I understand Her well enough for this. Besides, I understand you and Vine feel a need to do a bit of shopping."

"Uh, you noticed?" Jollin asked, a bit more self-consciously than she would have believed. The hex nut slipped out of orbit and she had to scramble to catch it and put it back in place.

"I may be old, but I'm not dead," Candle laughed. "It's no big deal, actually. A lot of young women are doing it these days, but the truth is, I overheard Vine mentioning it some days ago and while you may not credit it, Six and I need to do some similar shopping."

There were some shops open in Fenna that evening when they went into town to eat in a restaurant for a change, but none of them sold essential clothing. Jollin, however, stopped to look inside a small shop where a wide variety of items were on display. Oceanvine had taken to wearing her pearl again now that they were in port and Jollin decided that was more seemly than having a chunk of galvanized steel whizzing past her eyes. Looking around, Jollin found a tray of large sterling silver beads and selected one in which an interesting swirl of lines had been cast or carved. It was a bit tarnished as was to be expected in a shop like this, but she knew a few drops of polish would make it right, so she decided to buy it. Then seeing how cheap the beads really were, she selected still more and bought a dozen of them.

"I think some of our younger cousins might want to adopt this fashion," she told Oceanvine after paying for her selection and replacing her hex nut with one."

“If it catches on, we may have to find a way to make them work for anyone,” Oceanvine laughed.

“Can you do that, Vine?” Jollin asked interestedly.

“If I can work out this whole amulet problem, I could,” Oceanvine replied. “Then I could store the telekinesis spell within the bead and the wearer would need only invoke it and the bead would start orbiting their head.”

“You make it sound easy,” Jollin remarked.

“For the end-user, perhaps,” Oceanvine laughed, “but it’s a problem that has been bothering Uncle Candle for decades. Besides, it wouldn’t be as simple as all that. The spell would eventually wear out when its energy source was depleted, and there would need to be a way to turn it on and off conveniently. No, it sounds too complex to be readily affordable even if I did work out a way to do it.”

“Just as well,” Jollin shrugged. “It’s not all that hard to do it yourself once you know how.”

They wandered around the town a bit longer but headed back to the marina as the shops began to close for the evening. There was a bar at the marina, however, where a band was playing loud music and people were dancing. “Let’s go in,” Jollin suggested.

“I need my beauty sleep,” Candle told her, “but you kids can go if you like. I plan to stay up just long enough to make a few calls to Emmine. I plan to find out what happened to Colonel Mannet and who this Hollans is. See you in the morning.”

“Better not stay out too late,” Oceanvine advised Jollin. “Well, you can stay up as late as you like, but I’ve been getting too used to the watch we’ve established on board. And normally we’d be off watch in another hour or two.”

“Closer to two, Vine,” Sextant reminded her.

“Well, I haven’t been to a civilized bar in over two years,” Jollin told them. “I could use a decently smooth drink after some of the rotgut I drank on my nights off in Saindo.”

“If you want to keep flying that bead around you,” Sextant warned her, “you’ll have to cut out drinking almost entirely.”

“Why?” Jollin asked.

“Alcohol decreases your ability to concentrate,” he explained. “Get a bit tipsy and your mind will wander too much to be able to maintain even the minor spell that keeps it aloft.”

“Really?” she responded. “I wondered why you two were always drinking sweet seltzer on board when the food box supplied such great beer.”

“If you get serious about magic,” Oceanvine told her, “abstinence starts to become both a habit and a survival trait.”

“My first night in port after we started training, I had a couple of beers and couldn’t do a thing magically,” Sextant admitted. “Good thing Vine hadn’t been drinking because someone tried to hold us up on our way back to the boat.”

“However,” Oceanvine added, “an occasional moderate drink will do no harm. Let’s go. A half-pint of stout sounds pretty inviting about now.”

As they entered the bar, Jollin suddenly noticed, “I think we’re the only humans here.” She was correct. Most of the people in the bar were Orentans, more or less their age, and here and there were also Granomen who looked to be on vacation from college or grad school, but there were no other humans.

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” Oceanvine replied. “It wasn’t in Querna, so it certainly should not be here either.”

“We’re on friendly terms with Bellinen,” Sextant added.

“Your bead is slipping out of orbit,” Oceanvine told Jollin.

“Oops!” Jollin chuckled. “Let’s get a drink.”

“I’ll get a pitcher,” Sextant replied. “Find a table.”

Oceanvine and Jollin squeezed their way through the crowd and eventually found a small round table against the far wall. Sextant met them there a minute or so later. “The barmaid will deliver our drinks in a bit,” he reported. “The place is jumping, huh?”

“Good music,” Jollin opined, swaying back and forth in her chair to the beat, “but loud! I think I’ve been in Saindo too long.”

“scuse me?” the woman at the next table asked. She was an Orent, with dark brown skin and long, sleek black hair that hung down to her waist and slightly pointed ears that poked through that hair. She was seated with a Granomish woman. The Granom, like all Granoms was short and heavily built, with chalk white skin and dark brown hair, which she wore tied back into a short ponytail. “Did you say you had been in Saindo?”

“Just got in,” Jollin replied. “Why?”

“That’s my question,” the Orente replied. “Why would you want to go to Saindo? Isn’t it sort of wild and chaotic there?”

“It’s the worst sort of anarchy,” Jollin confirmed. “The whole place is ruled by dozens of petty warlords of one ilk or another, but I was there as a part of the Friendship Corps mission.”

“Really? What did you do there?” the Granom asked, over the sound of the band.

“Taught the children mostly,” Jollin replied. “There aren’t a lot of formal school houses there so I was trying to teach them their letters, although I did a lot of other things. Last year I helped build a bridge to replace one that had collapsed a few months earlier. Are we really the only humans here?”

“Looks like you are tonight,” the Orente confirmed as the band finally took a break. “It’s not a big deal, though,” she continued in a softer tone now that she did not have to shout to be heard. “We get humans here at the marina bar off and on all the time.”

“Then why is everyone staring at us?” Jollin asked, looking around uncomfortably.

“We aren’t used to seeing anyone with bits of jewelry flying around their heads,” the Granom laughed. “How are you doing that? I’m Yulyana, by the way and this is Merala.”

“Oceanvine,” Oceanvine replied, “and this is Jollin and Sextant. How else? By magic, of course.”

“Oh!” Yulyana gasped. “I’ve heard of you. Weren’t you in Querna three years ago, during the Revolt?”

“Six and I both were,” she confirmed.

“Really?” Yulyana asked. “Sorry, I hadn’t heard of you,” she admitted to Sextant. “But everyone’s heard of Oceanvine’s Girls. How did you ever get the prostitutes of Querna to fight for the Kingdom?”

“They’re as loyal as any Granom,” Oceanvine shrugged, not really wanting to spend the evening telling stories.

“Anyone but the People’s Party, maybe,” Yulyana remarked.

“I’m more interested in that trick with the pearls,” Merala put in. “Can you teach anyone how to do it?”

“It’s pretty basic magic,” Jollin informed her, “but it does take a lot of practice before you can do it naturally. I’ve been working on it for a week and I’m just starting to get the hang of it.”

As they discussed the theory and practice of basic telekinesis, the barmaid finally brought their pitcher over, which they shared with Yulyana and Merala. “So what can you do?” Merala asked Sextant half a glass later.

“I can probably get forty or more fireballs through the mouth of a wine bottle from across this room,” Sextant claimed.

Neither Yulyana nor Merala saw Oceanvine roll her eyes at the boast. It had rapidly become one of Sextant’s favorite bar tricks. Anyone with magical training knew that with the right spell it was impossible to miss such a target, but neither of these two women knew that. “That I’ve got to see!” Merala exclaimed. A few minutes later Sextant was shooting little balls of flame into a wine bottle Merala had placed on its side across the barroom while everyone in the bar applauded with each success.

“I’ll bet he can’t do that one hundred times,” one young man commented to his friends a few tables away.

“I’ll take some of that action,” Jollin told him. “I’ve got fifty crowns Emmine that say he can.”

“What’s the exchange rate?” the man asked one of his friends.

“About seventy-five Rounds,” his buddy replied.

“Too rich for my blood,” the first one decided. “How about ten crowns?”

“You’re on,” Jollin told him as Sextant placed the twenty-fifth fireball into the bottle. “Anyone else interested?” Several men and women voiced their willingness and Yulyana took note of the bets.

“Don’t make it look too easy,” Oceanvine whispered to Sextant as he passed sixty.

“This is getting boring,” he commented back. “Next time I’m going to claim I can do it with my back turned to the target, while drinking water or something.”

Finally, Sextant threw the one hundredth fireball into the wine bottle. Then just to make sure no one would ask him to do it again, he tossed one last one through the mouth of the bottle and then willed the bottle to melt down. The bottle flattened out on the shelf and the neck sagged until it was bent at a right angle to the rest of the bottle. “Sorry, folks!” he told everyone, while Jollin collected on her bets. “I guess that’s as much as it could take.”

Everyone laughed and went back to their drinks. “That was amazing!” Merala told him appreciatively.

“Thanks,” he replied. “You didn’t have any money on that, did you?”

“Not me!” she laughed. “I learned back in freshman year to never bet in a bar.”

“Good policy,” Oceanvine agreed as the band walked back up on stage. “Uh, Jollin, better put the bead away.”

“Why?” Jollin asked.

“Because it looks like you’re about to drop it anyway,” Oceanvine laughed. “How many glasses have you had?”

“Two,” Jollin replied as the bead bounced on to the table top. She concentrated and it floated backup erratically, made two more orbits and then started falling again. This time Oceanvine caught it with her mind and held it for Jollin to retrieve it and put it in her purse.

“Drinking makes a difference?” Merala asked, over the band.

“Absolutely,” Oceanvine shouted back. “You have to both relax and concentrate at the same time. A good beer might help you relax, but it’s disastrous to the ability to concentrate. That’s why you’ll rarely meet a mage who will have more than one drink, and to tell the truth, I drink sweet seltzer in a bar more often than I have beer.” After that it was too noisy to talk conveniently until after the band’s final set and by then it was time to wander back to the boat.

Two

“Mmm!” Jollin purred the next day after they had left Fenna far behind. “I think I really like Bellinen. Warm weather, friendly people, and pretty good beer too.”

“Topless beaches too,” Candle told her. “You sure you’re ready for that?”

“If I could adapt to life in Saindo,” Jollin replied brashly. “I can get used to taking my shirt off in public.”

“I’ll pass,” Oceanvine remarked from the helm. They had just rounded Cape Paa at the northern tip of Lillo and were headed through the Lillo Strait for Orent, the capital island of the Bellinen Archipelago. “I’d bet that’s something even my great-grandmother wouldn’t have done.”

“You would lose that bet,” Candle chuckled.

“You’re joking again?” she asked incredulously. Somehow the idea of public nudity some sixty-some odd years earlier seemed absurd. Some of the more *avant garde* sorts might wear the occasional see-through blouse at a night club and among the newly rich, attending Orentan beaches had become the thing to do, but did anyone really do that back in her great-grandmother’s day?

“Not at all,” Candle shook his head. “I was much more prudish than she was back then and remember telling her to put her top back on several times before I finally got used to it myself. She never did, though; put her top back on, that is. Not at the beach anyway. She was right, however. She would have attracted more attention by remaining covered back then. These days the Orenta are more acquainted with what they see as the odd customs of foreigners. Do you still want to learn how to surf?”

“Do I have to do it topless?” Oceanvine asked.

Candle laughed, “Only if you want to.”

“Then, yes I still do,” she replied. “Did you find out what happened to Colonel Mannet?”

“That’s a problem,” Candle told her. “Nothing’s happened to Colonel Mannet. He’s hale and whole and still in charge of the Friendship Corps.”

“And Charles Hollans?” she asked.

“Nobody’s ever heard of him,” Candle told her. “Since we left Randona the intelligence boys and girls have discovered that someone has been working toward destabilizing Saindo.”

“We already know that,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“We didn’t know it was an organized conspiracy to do so,” Candle told her. “We don’t know who’s behind it, though or why they’re doing it.”

“Granom?” Oceanvine wondered. “No, that doesn’t make sense. I really doubt Veras would order such a thing.”

“No, if he decided he had a gripe against Emmine that required action, he would just declare war and attack,” Candle replied. “Besides, the Granomish people in Saindo are being similarly harassed from what Ksanya told me. It wouldn’t be Bellinen, the Isle of Fire or Ellisto either. None of them have anything to gain.”

“Who then?” Oceanvine asked. “One Maiyim? Should we turn around and go back?”

“No,” Candle shook his head, “Wenni was very clear about that. We’re supposed to go to Merinne. The gods are doing their best not to interfere with mortal life and sending us in the wrong direction would be a major interference. It is probably just one or more of the local warlords seeking to gain more power from the resulting chaos.”

“We’re leaving disasters in our wake again,” Oceanvine observed sadly remembering her experiences in Sutheria, the Isle of Fire and in Querna.

“No, we’re heading to areas of trouble because there’s trouble already there,” Candle corrected her as

Sextant came aft.

“My turn at the helm,” he told them.

“And my turn at building an artificial world,” Oceanvine remarked. She looked around at the shore of Lillo. “For a group of islands known for surfing, though, I don’t see a lot of large waves.”

“Not on the Inner Seas,” Sextant told her. “Not on any archipelago.”

“He’s right,” Candle confirmed. “Only on beaches that directly face one of the oceans will you see any appreciable surf, and sometimes not even then depending on conditions. There are a few exceptions, mostly during storm conditions, but for relatively dependable surfing conditions, you need to face an ocean. The best surfing conditions in Bellinen can be found on the southern beaches of As, Orent, Garad and the other islands that border the Wenni Ocean.”

“So maybe we can take lessons in Merinne,” Jollin suggested cheerfully as Oceanvine climbed forward toward her favorite practice spot before the mast.

“Sounds like fun,” Oceanvine decided. Then she closed her eyes and sank herself as deeply into a trance as she could. It had taken several sessions to get used to this. All her early training had conditioned her never to block out the world so utterly completely as she was doing now, but as her last connection to the outside world faded, she felt Candle keeping his eye on her. She knew she was safe.

The world around her was black and she wasn’t really sure what she had wanted to do this time. Previously she had created a vast forest to walk through, and then a great ocean to swim in. Another time she had created a strange desert with rainbow-colored sand and odd, four-winged birds over head. This time she had another problem on her mind and she had hoped to be able to think about the amulet problem while working on this exercise, but what conditions would suit such a double task best?

Her subconscious did the creative work for her this time and even as she considered amulets, she found she seemed to be in deep space. It was not outer space as she knew it to be from the recently televised manned missions from both Emmine and Granom, however. It was closer to something she might have found in some of her favorite cartoons, although all this looked amazingly real. Then she realized what was truly different. In this fantasy world she was disproportionately large. She was impossibly large, in fact.

She sat down on Midbar and swung her legs back and forth over the edge as it orbited around Maiyim. She reminded herself that Midbar ought not have an edge and it became a sphere about the size of a beach ball. She looked around and saw the stars and the other planets in Maiyim’s system. She also watched as a comet flowed sedately past her and circled the sun and then was flung away, back into the outer reaches of the system.

Having enjoyed that illusion, she set her mind more firmly on her other problem. She wished she could have brought her notebook with her and she discovered she had it in her hands, but on opening it, she found the pages looked more like a window into yet another universe. Interesting as that might have been to explore, she berated herself for letting her mind wander and tossed the notebook away.

She thought about all the failed attempts she had made at making an amulet and also of those made by Candle. She had been amazed to see how imaginative he had been in his experimentation on those lines, but while he had learned a lot about the nature of magic, he had not discovered how to construct an amulet. It was frustrating for both of them as this was considered a basic part of magic in the ancient

world. It was so basic, in fact, that none of the ancient writers, who had described some of the most mundane crafts and subsistence activities, had not thought it was remarkable enough to do more than mention that such things existed. There were higher, more advanced magical constructs that those same writers did not completely understand, but which they described to the best of their abilities. A simple thing like an amulet was beneath their notice.

Having read Candle's notes, Oceanvine knew that Methis had once told him that She would have charged such an object up with the requisite potential energy and then impressed Her instructions on it. It sounded simple, but when Oceanvine and Candle had each tried it, the magical energy had instantly gone from potential to kinetic and had not stayed in the stored condition at all.

Okay, she thought to herself, let's review the hypothetical steps to making an amulet again . First she needed an object; the mages of One Maiyim had seemed to prefer rings, but the shape of the object should not have had a bearing. Rings were just a convenient and unobtrusive means to carry a stored spell around. That was probably why most ancient amulets were pieces of personal adornment, although she recalled reading that some of the really ancient people of Maiyim treated small pouches with one or two items of personal significance as an amulet too. Was that the same as what she was working on? She was not sure and decided that for the purposes of her experimentation it really did not matter. Later, when she had worked out amulet manufacture, she could experiment to determine if an amulet was more effective when it was a single physical item or a conglomeration of smaller ones, somehow united for the purposes of the spell.

That thought gave her pause. Most jewelry could be described that way as well. The rings of One Maiyim, for example, were gold inlayed with two different colors of blue enamel. Could even those small inlays be enough? *Possibly* , she decided.

So regardless of the object, what else must go into an amulet? she wondered. *Magical energy, of course .* That was obvious. As Methis would have it, you needed to charge the object in question and then give that energy instructions. Oceanvine wondered if Methis was right about that. She had certainly been around during the period in which amulets were common, but according to Candle's notes, Her suggestion had been made as though She had been considering the problem for the first time. Methis did that a lot, however. She was a natural teacher and tended to guide rather than merely instruct. Further, while not as reclusive as Wenni, Methis did not make a habit of interfering with day-to-day mortal life, so perhaps Her phraseology was just a verbal convention? Oceanvine did not know. Candle had been careful, however, to note what Her exact words had been.

Magical energy and instructions, Oceanvine reminded herself. But merely doing that would activate the spell, something had to hold the magic in place until the user wanted to trigger it.

She could construct a ward that could act as the trigger mechanism. Of course, normally the trigger was merely coming into contact with the ward, but it could be something else; a specific series of words, for example, or a gesture, or both. The more complex the trigger was, the less likely it was to go off before you wanted it to. Could a ward hold the spell energy in the amulet? Perhaps, but this was starting to get very complex.

If an amulet was built that way, you would need to implant energy in the object of your choosing, impress your instructions on that energy so that it would be released as a specific spell, enclose it in a ward that would be programmed to dissolve when a certain trigger was performed. Would that work? She did not think so. In fact, she was fairly certain that the stored energy would become active the moment it received "instructions."

Those instructions, as far as she had observed so far, were all it took to turn potential magical energy into an active spell. An impermeable ward might shield one from the effects, but it would not hold the spell in stasis, would it?

The only way she could conceive of such a thing working would be to store the basic energy of the spell, then cast a ward that would go ahead and impress your instructions on the energy when triggered. Could it be that simple? Was it really just another case of applied ward technology? Wouldn't Uncle Candle have thought of that?

She opened her eyes, instantly surfacing from her trance and grabbed the hex nut as it circled past her forehead. Cautiously, she charged it up with a bit of energy, then set about casting a ward around the entire object. The ward lay just on top of the surface, like an additional layer of plating. Then she realized that in her haste she had failed to have the ward do anything, she removed the ward and paused to consider the spell the ward would cast and the trigger ritual. She made her decision and cast the spell. It was not a simple thing at all. In fact, she was fairly certain it was master-level magic, but she had been doing things like it under Candle's guidance for years.

Next she studied the nut. It had a complex aura. She could see the plated-on ward and the pulse of stored energy below it, and yet she could touch the ward without setting it off. Touch was just part of the trigger. Out of the corner of her eye she caught everyone on board watching her intently as she raised the nut over her head and whispered, "Now."

A small, but intense fireball flashed upward into the sky and exploded high overhead both visibly and audibly. For a moment, she just stared at the fading flash of light, then suddenly she let out a whoop of excitement.

"Uncle Candle," she shouted a moment later. "Did you see that?"

"Sure did," he nodded, obviously impressed. "It was hard to miss even on a bright day like this. Sounds like you have a thesis. So how was it done after all that?" She told him. Candle slapped his hand to his forehead. "No wonder I never figured it out," he laughed. It was just too simple. Take a lesson from this, all three of you. Look for the simplest solution to a problem and don't assume that just because you don't know how to do something that it must be hopelessly difficult."

"It's not exactly apprentice-level magic," Oceanvine remarked, feeling the exultation start to drain away.

"No, but it's something any senior journeyman or woman should be able to accomplish," Candle replied.

"I thought it was master-level," she told him.

"It probably is," Candle replied, "at least its level of complexity is, although I doubt any of the old laws would prohibit a journeyman from using that sort of magic. It is not inherently dangerous, just difficult. However, as I keep repeating, master-level magic is what journeymen learn and this is exactly the sort of thing I would expect a graduate student to work on."

"So I created an amulet," Oceanvine remarked, "but is that how the ancients did it? Is it how One Maiyim did it?"

"I don't know," Candle replied honestly. "It's a solution to the problem, but it might not be the only one. You might try discussing it with Methis or Aritos. I doubt anyone in One Maiyim would be willing to take time out and talk shop, however."

“Not hardly,” she laughed. “What time is it? I’m hungry.”

“I’m not surprised,” Sextant laughed. “You were ‘out’ for hours and it’s nearly time for dinner. Do you want to eat in or out tonight?”

“Both!” Oceanvine replied enthusiastically. “I’ll get something light out of the box now and we can celebrate on shore this evening.”

Three

Airblossom and Waterfall were elderly Orenta. Airblossom had been the first Oceanvine’s roommate while in the University at Randona, but Orentan life expectancies were such that they both expected to have another good ten or twenty years ahead and assured their guests they were enjoying their retirement.

“When we’re allowed to be retired, that is,” Waterfall admitted on their first meeting, a pleasant dinner in their Merrine beach house. “I get called on to investigate one or two new forest diseases each year and Blossom still teaches at University.”

“Seminars only,” Airblossom denied and took a closer look at Oceanvine. “So you’re Vine’s great-granddaughter?”

“Oceanvine,” Oceanvine corrected her automatically. Except for Candle she rarely corrected anyone these days, but it seemed different when discussing her ancestor.

“Don’t you, ‘That’s Oceanvine’ me, young lady,” Airblossom laughed. “I knew her years before she developed that particular idiosyncrasy. She mentioned you in some of her final letters, you know.”

“Did she?” Oceanvine asked. “I think she did to Madame Blizzard as well.”

“No doubt,” Airblossom nodded. “She was very proud of you. She never made the Dean’s List, but you did.”

“But I thought she was at the top of her class,” Oceanvine argued.

“She was,” Airblossom confirmed, “but she was even more of a troublemaker than this scoundrel.” She indicated Candle. “Both of us were on probation more often than we weren’t although it was Vine who got me into trouble more than the other way around.”

“That doesn’t seem much like her,” Oceanvine admitted.

“You didn’t know her when she was your age,” Airblossom laughed. The doorbell rang. “Now who could that be? Excuse me, please.” She got up and left the room, while the others continued to chat.

“We ran into your youngest, Merika, at Tonalapark a few years ago,” Candle remarked to Waterfall. “She was there with Hasawa and the kids.”

“She mentioned seeing you there,” Waterfall confirmed. “So what have you been up to lately, Candle?”

“Well, I was getting tired of the quiet life,” Candle replied off-handedly, “so a few years ago I managed to run afoul of One Maiyim again.”

“Yes, that’s made headlines everywhere,” Waterfall chuckled. “I hope you weren’t planning on a quiet life.”

“I had that for a couple decades,” Candle laughed. “It was boring. That’s probably why I took Six and Oceanvine on as apprentices. I always did like teaching back at the Renton School and University wasn’t quite the same, especially after they dropped the general magic curriculum.”

“You’re taking apprentices?” an Orentan teenager asked anxiously from the doorway. He was just over six feet tall, which was actually short for an Orente, so Oceanvine guessed he was about fifteen and still growing.

“This is our grandson, Leotawa,” Airblossom introduced. “Fall and I have been teaching him some of the old apprentice exercises.”

“I want to be a wizard!” Leotawa told them enthusiastically.

“Let’s see,” Candle thought out loud. “You would be Grenawa’s son? Right? Still in high school, I’d imagine.”

“I’m a sophomore,” Leotawa confirmed.

“Well, I’ll tell you what,” Candle offered. “Keep studying with your grandparents and if you choose to matriculate at the Randona University, I’ll accept you as an apprentice. Although I have heard the University here has reinstituted a general magic curriculum.”

“They have,” Leotawa confirmed, “but it is geared to biological and especially oceanographic studies.”

“Those are the strongest points of science in Bellinen, Leo,” Waterfall reminded him.

“Yeah, but I’m more interested in astrophysics so it’s either Querna or Randona.” Leotawa argued

“Astrophysics?” Candle chuckled, “That’s more up Sextant’s line. Maybe you should apprentice with him instead.”

“I’m sure I’ll see you in the classroom or lab one way or the other,” Sextant replied, smiling. “It’s still a fairly small department so you aren’t likely to graduate without taking classes from each of us.”

“Leotawa just stopped in to say hello after surfing,” Airblossom told them all.

“Oh?” Jollin asked interestedly. “You surf? Vine and I were planning to take lessons while we were here.”

“I’ll show you how,” Leotawa told them enthusiastically. “Just meet me here tomorrow after school.”

Oceanvine spent the next week alternating between mornings in the Merinne University library, early afternoons with Candle and Sextant working toward being able to actually use magic to create a physical object, late afternoons with Sextant, Jollin and Leotawa where the teen taught them how to use their rented surfboards and evenings on lessons for Jollin and Leotawa from her and Sextant and for her and Sextant from Airblossom and Waterfall.

The library work was essential for her thesis, although she also discovered through cross references that there were some unique texts she would need in Querna, so she sent a letter off to Doctor Southgate requesting copies of the works she would need. There were still more in Randona, but she knew they would still be waiting for her on her return. She even managed to make a rough outline of her proposed thesis and an initial draft of the first two chapters.

Creation magic exercises progressed well beyond the relatively simple scenarios Candle had started them out with although nothing they did created so much as an atom. Everything Candle had them do developed their mental discipline to a peak they had never before attained. "Creating something," he told them, "is a fairly simple process and so long as you know precisely what you are doing and can keep your mind exclusively on what you mean to create for the time in which it takes, you will be able to accomplish it. However, the mind is a strange thing and we actually think many thoughts at once under normal circumstances, so while you are both more disciplined than almost anyone on Maiyim, you need to reach an even higher level than you can probably even imagine."

"Do you have any idea how long it will take, sir?" Sextant asked.

"Most mages would never be ready, Six," Candle told him, "and so far I only think the two of you are up to this. We won't know for certain until you actually create something. However, I know how careful Silverwind was with me, so I am being equally careful with you.

"Silverwind had a theory about it, you see," Candle continued. "He believed that so many of the cautionary tales concerning the deaths of wizards back during the Age of Faith may have come about because they tried Creation magic and were disastrously unsuccessful, or perhaps they did not create what they thought they were creating."

"I would imagine the possibility of creating radioactive materials could be fairly high," Sextant considered.

"To say the least," Candle nodded, "and that's just one danger of not being adequately trained. Some things explode, you know, and some of those ancient mages were intentionally trying to create explosives."

Surfing was something Oceanvine took to more than either Jollin or Sextant. "It's as much fun as the large roller coaster at TollaPark !" she enthused after she had finally managed to stand up on her board for a few exhilarating seconds before wiping out. None of the three had time to hone their skills, but both Jollin and Oceanvine ordered boards to be shipped back to Emmine.

"What would either of you do with them?" Sextant asked incredulously. "There's no sufficient surf in either Randona or Kern."

"I'll keep mine in the office," Oceanvine told him. "There is some surfing along the southern Rallena coast."

“And I can take mine to Mifde,” Jollin told him. “I don’t think anyone there actually surfs, but there are some pretty good waves coming in off theMethisOcean .”

“It’s your money,” Sextant shrugged.

During that next week they covered basic illusions with both Leotawa and Jollin. Leotawa gained proficiency at illusions more rapidly than Jollin did although Jollin seemed far better at manipulating material objects. “Well, you’re obviously more comfortable with things you can actually touch,” Oceanvine observed as Jollin started telekinetically turning a spool of wire into something that looked like the mail armor worn centuries earlier.

“Illusions just don’t seem real to me,” Jollin replied.

“Of course not,” Oceanvine laughed. “That’s the whole point of illusions. They aren’t real. They’re not supposed to be. Maybe we should move you on to wards or fire magic instead. Wards first, I think.”

“Why wards?” Jollin asked.

“Well, fire is pretty simple when you get right down to it,” Oceanvine replied, “and as Uncle Candle told Sextant and me when we were just starting, if you make a mistake while practicing on the*Maiyim Bourne* , well, who knows what might happen? Right?”

“Well, I’m already pretty good around fire,” the experienced blacksmith admitted. “It’s very simple, right?”

Lessons from Airblossom and Waterfall were many and varied. Airblossom’s greatest strengths had been in epidemiology and Waterfall continued to be Maiyim’s foremost expert on trees and forests. However, while they did give Sextant and Oceanvine new insights in those fields, they also showed them little tricks that had been common when they were young, but which most of the remaining mages had forgotten all about. Even Candle sat in and made notes on the spells the two elderly Orenta demonstrated, mentioning often how he had completely forgotten some of those techniques, not having needed them in decades.

In all it was everything Oceanvine and Sextant had hoped for during their working summer vacations. Sadly it only lasted one week.

Four

“Are you the Wizard Candle,” an Orente in a dark gray suit asked one morning as the crew of the Maiyim Bourne were enjoying breakfast on the deck. There were two of them. One had stopped two boat lengths down the pier and stood there almost as motionlessly and he did emotionlessly. His clothing was utterly the opposite of normal Orentan garb with the only nod to the preferred floral prints existing on his thin tie.

“Guilty,” Candle replied lightly, “Who’s asking?”

“Agent Tarabawa Kinsoo of the Security Service,” the man replied. The position held by the Security Service of theRepublicofBellinen , Candle knew, was a combination of Granom’s Royal Bureau of Investigation and Emmine’s Royal Intelligence Agency. They both investigated crimes and collected

intelligence on the other governments of Maiyim. To date Candle had always avoided working with them directly. Partially because he did not like the idea of assisting their spying activities but mostly because he felt it would have violated his political neutrality. He did not mind working with the police and investigative agencies of any country, but drew the line at abetting activities that would have military implications. Even the kings, he knew, would not ask that of him. There were too many cautionary tales concerning those who forced mages to go to war. There had been many notable mages in the military, of course, but they had volunteered. Candle had spent too much of his career working to keep countries from going to war.

“All right, Agent Kinsoo,” Candle shrugged. “I guess what I meant was who you were asking on behalf of?”

“I’m here to bring you to a meeting with the President of the Senate, sir,” Agent Kinsoo replied stiffly.

“The president doesn’t seem to think it was necessary to call ahead for an appointment, I see,” Candle replied and took another deliberate sip of coffee, “and this is neither Emmine nor Granom so Senator Jiroshi does not have the power to summon me to appear before him.”

Agent Kinsoo started reaching into the left side of his suit jacket where Candle had noticed a visible bulge and without bothering to let the agent complete the move Candle translocated the hand gun from its shoulder holster to a spot some twelve feet above the dock where he kept it floating in mid air. Teleporting is never a silent or undetectable process when done by a mortal and the agent immediately froze at the sharp snapping sound and odd feeling as air suddenly rushed into the space where his gun had been. “Go ahead,” Candle told him comfortably. Further down the dock, the other agent had drawn his gun, but Oceanvine had surrounded him with a visible and impenetrable ward.

“Sir, I was merely delivering a letter from President Jiroshi,” the agent replied, reaching into his suit pocket and pulling out a small tan envelope.

“You’ll have to forgive me, Agent Kinsoo,” Candle told him, not entirely sincerely, “but I just arrived from Saindo where it is best not to let an armed man reach for his gun first.”

“If you say so, sir,” the man replied with deadly seriousness. “May I have my gun back now?”

“Of course,” Candle replied calmly. While he allowed the weapon to drop gently into the man’s hand, Candle added, “Vine, you may let the other one go now.” He reached forward and accepted the letter from the agent. “You probably should not have made it sound like we were under arrest,” Candle admonished Agent Kinsoo. “I would not have been quite so ready to defend myself.”

“You were never under attack, sir,” Agent Kinsoo told him with cold politeness.

“It was not that obvious from this side of your buddy’s muzzle,” Candle replied in a similar tone. “Try working on your people skills and we’ll make our own way to the president’s office, thank you. Tell him we’ll be there in an hour.”

“Sir, he instructed us to drive you there,” Agent Kinsoo replied.

“And I instructed you to go on ahead,” Candle told him stubbornly. “Go on. He’s only going to keep us waiting anyway. We may as well finish our meal.”

“You’re not being particularly agreeable this morning, Uncle Candle,” Jollin observed.

“I’ve never liked that agency,” Candle replied, “and it would not have been the first time one of them had pulled a gun on me. Call me paranoid, but I’m not entirely convinced he would not have this time either.”

“I didn’t like his attitude, Uncle,” Oceanvine told him, “but I think you may have over-reacted as well.”

“It’s a possibility,” Candle agreed easily enough, “but we did get to finish breakfast at leisure and that little visit probably just brought our vacation to an abrupt end. That by itself would have been enough to irritate me today.”

After breakfast, they used the marina’s phone to call for a taxi to take them to the Galana Narao SenatorialOffice Building where, on the top floor, President Tamanawa Jiroshi enjoyed a three hundred and sixty degree view of the city and the ocean beyond it.

Contrary to Candle’s prediction, the president did not keep them waiting and had, in fact already been in conference with several other men and women as Candle and his party were escorted into the large office. “Thank you for responding so rapidly, Wizard,” President Jiroshi told him, by way of greeting. “I had heard you and your team were here in Merinne and had hoped I might be able to interest you in a perplexing problem Bellinen has suffered from of late.” The President of the Senate was about seven feet tall, average for an Orente, but his skin was lighter than most and appeared to be splotchy. On a whim, Candle examined the man’s aura, wondering if his color was a recent medical condition or one he had been born with. It was an old injury, Candle decided and one that had left a deep mark on the man’s aura, which was splotchy-looking as well.

“No one ever seems to just invite us in to tea,” Sextant noted.

“That’s not fair, Six,” Oceanvine told him. “King Hacon Ancel invites us frequently.”

“He invites you, Vine,” Sextant replied wryly. “I’m just your date.”

“Behave, children,” Candle told them. Then he turned toward President Jiroshi, “So what seems to be the problem?”

“It’s a double threat, Wizard,” Jiroshi explained. “There has been a mysterious illness in Nimda onGaradIsland . The local doctors are calling it an epidemic, but I am sure that’s a bit alarmist. There has been a worse problem in the sugar cane plantations on that island, however, resulting in crop failure wherever it has hit. I believed we had it well in hand, but just this morning, we received similar reports from Cewen. I am aware that you have dealt with similar problems in the past, so it was natural to call for your assistance.”

“Plague and crop failure?” Candle considered. “It does have a familiar ring to it, although not in Bellinen and not in a very long time. What else can you tell me about either of these outbreaks?”

“Perhaps it would be best to hear this from my Secretaries of Agriculture and Health, Wizard,” Jiroshi, suggested and turned to the two gentlemen in question. Both had come with thick folders filled with reports, and it took much of the rest of the day to get through those reports, although not in the presidential office. Having thrown them all together, Jiroshi suggested they might want to continue in a different conference room several floors down. It was an obvious dismissal, although Candle assumed these matters could not be the only ones on the president’s mind at the moment.

“There are many diseases that affect sugarcane,” Secretary of Agriculture Gaoni informed them. “At first report we believed we were dealing with gumming disease, which has bacterial origins, but local experts report the symptoms differ and it spreads faster than their treatments can be applied.”

“What sort of treatments?” Oceanvine asked.

“The infected plants are removed or else quarantined by the introduction of more resistant varieties,” Gaoni replied.

“So this disease seems to affect all strains of sugarcane equally?” Candle asked. Gaoni nodded. “I’m hardly a botanical expert of any kind. Is there someone on hand I can consult with before leaving?”

“All my department’s best people are already on Garad and Cewen,” Gaoni informed him.

“All right,” Candle sighed, “we’ll have to try to get up to speed in the field. How about this epidemic?”

“We thought at first it was an influenza-like disease,” Secretary Wakamala of the Department of Health replied, “but as the disease has progressed, it seems more like one of the many wasting diseases we see from time to time, except this seems to be spreading faster.”

“Any idea of its vector?” Sextant asked. “Is it spread by insects, perhaps, or spores or...” he trailed off.

“We don’t know,” Wakamala replied.

“We should probably bring Airblossom in on this,” Candle noted. “She has a lot more experience in this sort of thing than I do.”

However, Airblossom was not able to make neither heads nor tails of the list of symptoms she was handed when Candle consulted her later that day. “None of this makes much sense to me, Candle,” she admitted. “It’s a hodgepodge of symptoms, many of which ought not to exist together. The closest I’ve ever seen to this, you saw as well was about seven decades ago and I believe we discovered that case led back to the Demon Arithan.”

“He’s about the only cause we can’t blame on this one,” Candle replied, “but you may be right.”

“Well it doesn’t sound anywhere near as complex as that disease,” Airblossom considered, “and it’s certainly not as original as what you dealt with in Rjalkatyp and Querna. But without any proof one way or the other, this could be related to the Bond of Aritos.”

“It’s possible,” Candle admitted. “We have found rogue mages making use of the Bond of Aritos in the last few years. It’s been quiet for a while and I was hoping the People’s Party was One Maiyim’s last gasp.

“Not very likely, Uncle,” Oceanvine replied. “There are still too many people at large who are known sympathizers. My grandmother is one of them, you know.”

“Myrrha was never one of the Inner Circle, however,” Candle replied. “That Agate Cooper – the one who Ksanya and Maia recorded giving Petrana Hawakamala her briefing before the attempt on Their Majesties’ lives - might have been one. Too bad she died before they could bring her to trial. We might have gotten a lot of information on the rest of One Maiyim if we had.”

"If One Maiyim had let her live," Sextant replied coldly. "I doubt they would have if she knew anything damaging. And as it happens she died of a sudden heart-attack and there was no autopsy to find the ultimate cause. Very mysterious, I thought at the time."

"There wasn't a lot we could do about that," Oceanvine reminded him.

"Uncle?" Jollin changed the subject. "Why did you refuse the offer of the president's jet to take us to Nimda?" The offer had come as they were leaving the office building.

"That could have left us stranded in Nimda," Candle replied. "The president is a busy man and could well have needed his airplane back before we were done with it. Also we're going to be island hopping for a while between Garad and Cewen. The *Maiyim Bourne* is more suited to that sort of thing and not likely to be in use by someone else.

"Too bad the gods didn't give you a magical airplane for your quest," Jollin remarked lightly.

"At the time they gave it to us," Candle reminded her, "there had been no sustained motorized flights. Believe me, we made enough of a commotion whenever we made port, but that would have been nothing had we come flying in."

Candle continued talking to Airblossom and Waterfall for some hours after dinner, but at one point, Oceanvine noticed that Sextant had left the room. Looking around she found him outside on the veranda that overlooked the beach.

"Getting a bit of fresh air?" she asked.

"Maybe," he replied. "Actually I was just thinking, 'Here we go again!'"

"Six, that's usually my morbid thought," Oceanvine reminded him.

"You're just the one who speaks it out loud," Sextant replied. "I think it almost every time these days."

"We have been moving around a lot the last couple of years, haven't we?" Oceanvine asked, unthinkingly slipping herself within Sextant's arm and leaning comfortably against him. She had been doing that sort of thing off and on for the last few years. They were friends and often gave each other a comforting cuddle, but nothing else had come of it and Oceanvine never understood why not. Neither of them was dating anyone else. Neither of them had the opportunity most of the time and she, at least, was not so inclined. She was too busy working on her degree to worry about a social life.

"Even during the academic year, we've barely had a chance to catch our breath," Sextant reminded her. "Why do you think it took me so long to finish my thesis? I should have had it done over a year ago. You should have graduated this year too."

"I just finally found a thesis subject," she reminded him.

"So you would have found something else earlier if we had the time," Sextant told her. "Of course it may not have been anywhere nearly as revolutionary and somehow I can't see you wanting to just do a safe little paper based on a few months in a library basement."

"No," Oceanvine laughed, "I suppose not. I've changed a lot, haven't I, Six?"

“Not in any way that counts, Vine,” he replied instantly. “We’ve both grown somewhat since we started our magical studies. Time does that to people.”

“It wasn’t Time that did it,” she told him, “although I suppose it would have had we been living more normal lives. It was our experiences.”

“You don’t think our lives are normal?” Sextant asked, a bit surprised.

“I used the wrong word,” Oceanvine decided. “Expected is closer to what I meant. It would have happened eventually had we continued to live the lives we expected to. You would have gone on to a career in astrophysics and I...” she trailed off. It was not a thought she cared to dwell on. As the daughter of an earl there were certain things that had been expected of her, responsibilities she had been brought up to fill, duties she had turned her back on by choosing to study magic. She stepped away from Sextant’s comforting arms and silently stared out to sea.

It was an eternity later that she heard Sextant ask, “Vine, will you marry me?”

“What?” she asked, completely taken by surprise.

“Marry me,” Sextant repeated. “Will the Lady Oceanvine, consent to marry Sir Sextant?”

“I,” Oceanvine began then stopped. “Where did that come from?”

“I’ve wanted to ask for a long time,” he admitted. “I mean, we’ve spent a lot of time together the last few years and haven’t managed to run out of things to talk about. We’ve been through a lot together, good and bad, and have rarely been at odds, you laugh at more of my jokes than not and we’ve even gone out on any number of occasions all of which I thought were wonderful and somewhere along the way I fell in love with you. So will you marry me?”

“Six,” she tried again, but the words wouldn’t come, lost in her confusion. She turned and looked back out to sea, trying to compose an answer; the right answer.

Sextant waited patiently for an answer, but after several minutes he prompted her, “Well?”

She did not answer immediately but she turned toward him slowly. “I... I don’t know, Six,” she replied at last. “We’re related.”

“Not very closely,” he replied, “Your great-grandfather was my fourth or fifth cousin. It’s not a connection most people would even have been aware of. It’s not one you would have been aware of if you hadn’t made me go with you to the museum the day of your great-grandmother’s funeral.”

“And we’re friends,” she argued lamely.

“That’s a plus in my book,” Sextant chuckled. “I wouldn’t have asked if I thought you hated me. Of course, I probably would have asked sooner had you ever responded to my advances.”

Oceanvine was about to ask, “What advances?” but she realized that was his point. Besides, who was he to talk about advances, when she had tried to get him to notice her on numerous occasions over the years. It seemed to her that it was just proof they had little in common, and yet... “Six, do you mind if I think about it?”

Sextant laughed, "Vine, I'd be even more surprised than you were if you didn't."

"What do you mean?" she asked suspiciously

"Vine, you are one of the most deliberate people I know," Sextant told her fondly. "I don't think I've ever known you to just jump into anything without thinking it through first. That's probably what makes you such a great mage."

"Great?" she echoed. "Hardly. I'm still just a journeywoman."

"The best one on Maiyim," he pointed out.

"The only one on Maiyim, Six," she retorted, then realized what their argument was about and started laughing.

"You'll think about it then?" Sextant asked when they had both finished laughing.

"Of course," she replied softly and turned back to contemplate the reflection of Midbar on the sea.

"Are you out of your mind?" Jollin demanded back in their cabin on the *Maiyim Bourne*. "You're completely in love with him and you tell him you'll have to think about it?"

"It's complicated," Oceanvine defended herself.

"It's love!" Jollin told her. "Of course it's complicated."

"I still have to think about it," Oceanvine replied, rolling over to go to sleep.

"You're hopeless, Lady Cousin," Jollin replied half frustrated, half amused. "You know that?"

"I know," Oceanvine replied. Just then there was a soft thumping noise from outside. "What's that sound?"

"Sounded like someone just came on board," Jollin replied just as someone started knocking on the outer cabin door.

"I'll go see who it is," Oceanvine remarked, getting out of the bunk and reaching for the closet door. She reached in and pulled out a dressing gown just as the knocking started again.

"Yeah, okay!" they heard Candle grumbling. "Wonderful timing. I'd just fallen asleep." Oceanvine peeked through her cabin's door in time to see Candle open the outer hatchway. "Oh, this is a surprise. Come in, lad. Come in."

"Uncle Candle?" Oceanvine called from her cabin door, spotting a heavily built man whose identity was concealed by a hood.

"It's all right, Vine," he told her. "Why don't you get coffee and pastry out of the food box?"

"That's Oceanvine," she corrected him even as she hurried into the galley. When she got there Candle was already seated at the table with an imposing Granom with light brown hair and about the same age as her father. The hood had been lowered as soon as the cabin hatch had been closed behind him.

Oceanvine thought it was just as well being that it was really far too warm out to be going about hooded.

“No,” Candle corrected her in turn, “That’s His Grace, Duke Xander of the House of Granova and the Granomish ambassador to Bellinen.”

“Oh!” Oceanvine gasped softly. “Uh... hi, Cousin.”

“An honor to meet you too, Cousin” Xander replied, nodding his head courteously. “I’ve heard a lot about you from Ksanya. My house owes you more than we can ever repay.”

“Nonsense,” Oceanvine scoffed, “I only did what any decent person would.”

“I fear there has always been a shortage of decent people in the world, then,” Xander told her. “And who are these?”

“Sir Sextant,” Candle performed the introduction as Oceanvine brought a heaping plate filled with the tiny, round Sahrenese pastries and coffee to the table and went in search of mugs to drink it in. She turned to discover Jollin was already pulling those mugs out of the cabinet.

“Ah, another hero of the kingdom!” Xander exclaimed. “I had not realized over half the living Companions of the Silver Stay were on board this small vessel.”

“Just luck of the draw,” Candle chuckled.

“And this,” Oceanvine added, indicating Jollin, “is another mutual cousin, Miss Jollin Smith of Medda.”

They greeted each other as Jollin poured the steaming black coffee into mugs and Oceanvine passed them around. Finally Candle asked, “So what brings you here tonight, lad.”

“I could say I was feeling put out because you had yet to visit Dora and me, but sadly I have more serious business tonight,” Xander replied.

“Must be very serious if you felt you had to sneak on board,” Candle observed.

“How did you know I had to sneak?” Xander asked, showing surprise.

“I only had to look at the clock, lad,” Candle replied.

“Lad,” Xander mused. “It’s been a long time since anyone called me that.”

“You should have seen the reaction when he called Veras that,” Oceanvine laughed.

Xander joined her and added, “I’ll bet. If the courtiers didn’t take royalty so seriously, I doubt those of us in House Granova would be so eager to shock them. Don’t believe anything the tabloids say though. Ksanya came by her wild streak genetically.”

“I never thought she was all that wild,” Oceanvine admitted.

“You missed her late teens,” Xander replied, “but I am glad you two met. Knowing you has done my daughter a world of good.” Oceanvine wasn’t sure what to say to that and merely shrugged. “And that brings me to why I’m here. Candle, there’s been a lot of strange goings-on all over Bellinen.”

“We’ve heard about the plague and crop diseases on Garad and Cewen,” Candle informed him.

“Yes,” Xander agreed. “Garad and Cewen. Also Rishanda, Othisl, Semmas and Tissa. It’s not all disease though. Some of it is an uncharacteristic upswing in the crime rate, odd sightings, and those are just the islands I’m aware of. Bellinen’s being amazingly mysterious about it too.”

“I imagine the government is somewhat embarrassed by all the strange occurrences,” Candle speculated. “Governments are like that.”

“The current administration, you mean,” Xander disagreed. “This is much more than anything I’ve experienced since I was posted here. If we were in Granom or Emmine, I’d probably agree with you. It would be typical, but Bellinen has traditionally been very open in its dealings. They have secrets in the military sense, oh yes, but they have never tried to make a secret of diseases, plant or animal, and they’ve never hidden or suppressed scientific research.”

“And you’ve been dealing with Bellinen for how long, Xander?” Candle asked.

“It will be a decade next month,” the ambassador replied. “I’ve presented my credentials not only to this government, but the last two as well.”

“This government?” Oceanvine asked.

“Yes,” Xander nodded. “Well, perhaps I should say ‘this administration.’ Bellinen is not a constitutional monarchy like Emmine and Granom. The Senate is not a parliament as we think of it either. For a parliamentary government to fall in either of our nations is not unheard of. It’s just common enough that no one panics. On Ellisto it happens all too often lately, although in their case it isn’t a strictly administrative matter.”

“No,” Candle agreed. “They’ve fallen apart five times in the past twenty years.”

“Quite,” Xander nodded. “If it were not for their strong economy, I fear they’d be another Saindo.”

“It’s not just their economy,” Candle argued. “Their culture is not as chaotic as Saindo’s. The people there are not used to being ruled by whoever the biggest bully on the block might be. I doubt they would put up with that sort of thing for very long.”

“You would be surprised what liberties people would cheerfully give up just to feel safe for a little while,” Xander countered. “Well the state of Ellisto is not what I came to discuss. This current President Jiroshi is. He’s only been serving for a bit under a year. He was voted in during a special election that was held when President Meonawa was forced to resign for health reasons.”

“What health reasons were those?” Candle asked.

“Cancer,” Sextant supplied. “He was diagnosed with lung cancer. Funny thing, though. It turned out the diagnosis was in error. The spots they saw on his lungs were scar tissue from a repertory illness he suffered as a child. By the time that was learned, however, it was too late. Jiroshi was in office and his people were in control.”

“Uncle Candle,” Oceanvine told him gently, “you need to keep up with these things. It’s been in all the papers and on the news programs as well.”

“I’ve been out of touch,” Candle argued.

“No, Uncle,” Jollin disagreed. “I’ve been out of touch. You just haven’t been watching the news.”

“I doubt being up on Bellinen’s recent politics would have made much of a difference today,” Candle decided.

“It might have,” Oceanvine argued. “Remember that little incident with Jiroshi’s chosen representatives this morning.”

“I doubt I’d have been more careful when that thug started reaching for his gun,” Candle told her.

“We don’t know he was doing that,” Oceanvine told him.

“But he might have been,” Xander sided with Candle when he had heard the story. “Meonawa would never have sent out the secret police to deliver an invitation to his office, nor would he have sent two messengers to deliver something so innocuous. There is something very unpleasant about that man and the people around him.”

“Is that an official statement from the Granomish ambassador?” Candle asked.

“Officially,” Xander replied, “Bellinen and Granom are still enjoying a cordial relationship. I just don’t know how long that is likely to last if the current administration continues to behave as it has.”

“Something we should know?” Candle prompted him.

“I may have spoken too much,” Xander admitted. “It is not uncommon for the representative of a foreign government to protest, officially or not, over a minor incident that happens within the boundaries of the land to which he has been posted if he feels the repercussions could affect his own nation.

“Until this past year, I had only delivered such a protest, unofficially of course, twice to past administrations,” Xander continued. “They were minor matters really and my protests were received gracefully and the issues quickly resolved. This past year I have been in Jiroshi’s office no less than five times over violations of civil rights and voting fraud incidents. Each time I was told it was none of my business and threatened with the possibility of Bellinen breaking relations with Granom.”

“Perhaps you’re losing your touch, lad,” Candle grinned.

“I would like to think not, Wizard,” Xander replied calmly. “I’d like to think that after nearly a decade as a diplomat I’ve managed to learn a bit more about diplomacy than I did growing up in the WurraPalace.”

“Where you learned far more than most career diplomats,” Candle agreed. “Well, then. Maybe this Jiroshi is more sensitive than his predecessors.”

“Or up to something,” Oceanvine added.

“Up to something, Cousin?” Xander laughed. “He’s a politician. Of course he is up to something. Have you ever known a politician who did not have an agenda of some sort? Your father sits in the House of Lords, does he not?”

“He does, but he is not often one of the leading voices,” Oceanvine admitted.

“He has been a bit more outspoken these past three years than before,” Xander countered, “or so I have been informed. Granovas do keep track of our kin, you know.”

“And Ksanya’s no slouch when it comes to political observation,” Oceanvine admitted. “Yes, Dad’s star does seem to be rising lately.”

“That could be due to your own popularity in the palace, Vine,” Sextant opined.

“Popularity?” she laughed. “I occasionally dine or have tea with the royal family and His Majesty seems to delight when I disagree with him, not that I do very often, but none of those discussions ever went beyond the rooms they were conducted in.”

“They wouldn’t have to, my lady,” Xander shook his head. “Merely seeing you attend the palace and being welcomed into the private sectors would be enough for any number of political games to circle around. Keep in mind that reality sometimes has little to do with politics. Perception is key.”

“I have noticed that,” Oceanvine replied, “but I do prefer to deal with what truly is than what people think it ought to be.”

“That is your privilege, of course,” Xander agreed, “but it won’t stop others from using those perceptions for their own gains or to the benefit of the ideals they wish to put forward, perhaps. However, from what I hear, I seriously doubt your father is intentionally capitalizing on your friendship with King Hacon Ancel. Most of his sudden rise to prominence is because the other lords see you and hope that your father’s support will benefit their own goals.”

“I never did like politics,” Oceanvine sighed.

“That is because you are a well brought-up lady who has been taught not to play in the mud,” Xander laughed. “Well, I think I’ve said all I meant to here this morning. Do please come by the embassy next time you are in Merinne.”

Five

Jollin woke up the next morning to find Oceanvine had already left the cabin. She opened the closet door and found it completely empty. “What?” she asked the boat. “Do you think I’m planning to sail in the nude?”

She closed the door and tried again. “Vine’s school uniform?” she shrugged. “My subconscious is playing tricks on me. Oh well, so long as it’s in my size.” She grabbed a silk blouse and a cream-colored skirt and dressed quickly. Passing through the galley, she grabbed a large mug of coffee, took a deep swig and finally stumbled up on deck.

“Why are we leaving now?” she asked Candle, squinting against the bright tropical sun.

“Yes, good morning to you too, Jollin,” Candle replied dryly.

“Sorry,” Jollin apologized, flashed a smile that was slightly too bright to be believable and tried again,

“Good morning, Uncle Candle! Why are we leaving against the tide?”

“The *Maiyim Bourne* is a sloop, not a bark,” Candle replied, “although some might think the autopilot device makes her look like a yawl. In any case a small boat like this does not need the tide to assist her in exiting a harbor, just a push away from the dock and so long as you have even a slight breeze you can sail away.”

“Our sails are still furled,” Jollin pointed out. Oceanvine and Sextant were standing by their stations, ready to hoist the sails, but one grommet was still securing the mainsail against the boom, “and we don’t have an inboard engine.”

“We don’t need one,” Candle replied. “Any decently advanced apprentice can use a propulsion spell to push a boat through the water. It’s called piloting. My sister and I made a sport of it, in fact, while we were students at the University here in Merinne. It was quite popular for a while. A journeyman should be able to pilot a full-rigged ship. I saw Silverwind and Oceanvine bring a ship in against the teeth of a blizzard once. Compared to that, this is an afterthought.”

“An apprentice?” Jollin asked curiously. “How long before I can do that?”

“Ask your teacher,” Candle shrugged toward Oceanvine.

“Well, Teach?” she asked.

“You could probably do it now,” Oceanvine replied, “although we should work on the ability to tap into external power sources first. Otherwise you’ll wear yourself out in no time. We can work on that this morning, once we’re under sail.”

“Speaking of which,” Candle told them. “It’s time. Stand by to hoist sails.”

Jollin rushed to assist Sextant at the mainsail and at Candle’s command both sails were raised. A stray breeze caught and filled the canvas even before the lines could be secured, and the boat was already racing toward the mouth of the harbor as they secured the lines.

“Ready about!” Candle shouted at the harbor’s mouth. “Hard allee and prepare for flight!” The *Maiyim Bourne* came about as Candle set their course westward, then Sextant deployed the boat’s hydrofoils. A moment later only those foils and boat’s deep rudder were still touching the water.

Sailing on the *Maiyim Bourne* while on her foils was an exhilarating experience and also a wet one with salt spray being kicked up everywhere whenever the foils bit into the least little wavelet. Doing anything magical under those conditions was difficult at best but Oceanvine believe her own skill had come so far because Candle had rarely allowed her to seek a quiet refuge in which to practice. It had, however, become her habit to practice wherever she happened to be when the appropriate time came. So when at home or in a hotel, practice time was usually just after rising. At home she attempted to create as many distractions during practice as she could. On board the proper time was just after sail had been set unless it was her watch to sit at the helm and she rarely needed to worry about added distractions.

“Orders, Uncle?” she asked.

“Set Jollin to today’s lesson,” he suggested, “then I want to see how well you and Sextant duel.”

“Not very well, I’m afraid,” Oceanvine laughed. “I fear we work better in concert than we do when

pressed to compete against each other.”

“I’ve noticed,” Candle replied, “but the time may come when you will need the skills this exercise brings. I’m just sorry I did not get you started on it sooner.”

Oceanvine let that go and got Jollin started on a basic exercise that would train her toward using external power sources, the real difference between a mage and someone capable of using what had once been called common-level magic. However, once Jollin was at work she returned and asked Candle, “Why?”

“Why what?” Candle asked.

“Why might I need to know how to duel? I thought it was an exercise that both parties had to enter willingly,” Oceanvine remarked.

“There have been times when I have used an enemy’s pride against him by tricking him into challenging me,” Candle reminded her.

“Adamant in Silamon,” Sextant recalled.

“That’s right,” Candle replied. “I was winning that one too, but I forgot about the little weasel of a sidekick of his. What was his name?”

“Roges Fuldon,” Oceanvine replied coldly. “He was Sir Henric’s second undersecretary. Good riddance.”

“Yes,” Candle nodded. “I wasn’t particularly fond of him either. However, I have thought of a few ways in which a mage could force someone to duel that way, so it’s best if you get used to it. Anyway, I’m not asking either of you to wipe each other’s minds out. The point is to dominate the illusion whether you created it or your opponent did. I know the last few times you tried this; you kept trying to help each other reinforce the illusion. What I need you to do is to hijack the illusion and make it your own. Then when one of you has complete control over it, the other gets to try to wrest it away.”

“So what should be the rules?” Oceanvine asked Sextant amiably.

“No!” Candle stopped them. “There you go again.”

“What?” both Oceanvine and Sextant asked.

“You don’t agree on that in advance,” Candle replied. “You don’t even decide who goes first. That would never happen in a real contest.”

“You said you almost always let your classmates go first because you found it more challenging,” Oceanvine countered.

“None of my classmates were in your league,” Candle told her.

“I’ve only been a practicing mage for four years,” Oceanvine reminded him.

“And you’re already doing some things better than I did when I earned my master’s degree,” Candle informed her. “I don’t think you understand how far you have come in these past four years. I doubt your great-grandmother could do as much as you can right now when she was your age.”

“Could she create stuff?” Oceanvine asked.

“Not when she was only twenty-three,” Candle replied. “I didn’t even know her when she was twenty-three. She was still just an over-serious grad student working as a lab assistant for Silverwind in Renton, at least I think she was. At the time I was just another street-rat in Tarnsa. For all I know she might have still been haunting the library at University in search of a thesis. Look, Vine, stop worrying about what my sister could do. She was who she was. Yes, she did eventually learn creation magic and about at the same time I did. She didn’t use it very much except to demonstrate in class. She didn’t have much reason to, not once she turned to her post-wizard studies.”

“I never thought of that,” Oceanvine noted.

“What?” Sextant asked.

“It never really stops, does it?” Oceanvine asked. “The learning, that is. Maybe someday I’ll be a wizard, but even then I’ll still have so much to learn. No wonder Methis never stops reading!”

“So are you ready to learn today?” Candle asked.

There were a number of old traditions in magic. The act of a potential apprentice asking a master, “Teach me,” was one such. Candle had told them that a duel should begin with the words Oceanvine now spoke to Sextant as she faced him eye-to-eye. “Try me!”

He took her at her words and immediately she found herself standing in the desert of Ellisto. They had taken time to visit the red sand desert in the hope of spotting a sandwalker during their recent job there. The great reptiles, however, were an endangered species and almost never came to the edge of the desert anymore. At their request, the guide had driven out into the desert for a while but while they were able to see some of the smaller creatures of that arid land, they never actually spotted a sandwalker. Oceanvine suspected that would not be the case this time.

Sextant was nowhere in sight and in complete control of the illusion. Worse, Oceanvine did not know the rules of this game yet. Candle had described his encounter with Adamant several times, so Oceanvine knew that Adamant had chosen to ban all magic in the world of his devising. She wondered if Sextant had done the same and tried to levitate.

Instantly she floated upward and hovered several feet above the desert floor. “Neat!” she thought and experimented to discover she could fly if she so desired. So she flew a thousand feet upward and then looked down. There was something moving just over the nearest dune. A closer look told her it was a tall bipedal and red reptile. It had teeth the size of daggers, she knew, and it could run for a short distance at speeds up to forty miles per hour. In short, it was a sandwalker.

This was obviously the trap Sextant had set up for her, but unless there was something else she failed to notice it was not a particularly difficult trap to avoid. She wondered if Sextant had left too many details of this world unestablished. It could account for why she was able to fly so easily here. And where was Sextant, for that matter? She kept an eye out for him, but decided to do something about the sandwalker. *Sand?* She thought to herself, *“How about quicksand? Can I do that here?”*

She tried it and the large creature was immediately mired in a small, but deep morass of dark red mud. The edge of the desert stared wavering before Oceanvine’s eyes, and she realized that the sandwalker was really Sextant in an illusory disguise. “Oh, Six,” she sighed, “That’s just too easy.”

Oceanvine tried to take over the illusion, changing it to a rich tropical rain forest, but was only successful at the edges of the illusion. Sextant, although stuck in the mud, was still in control of half the area she could see. Suddenly a mere rainforest did not seem to be enough and she allowed it to go back to looking like the desert of Ellisto, although she added her own twist to it.

Next she allowed Sextant to get free as she flew down to the edge of the area he controlled. "I'm over here, Six!" she shouted out and waited for him to find her. Finally he came around the dune and charged her. At the last moment she shot straight up in the air and Sextant the sandwalker shot right past where she had been standing and off his section of the illusion. That's when Oceanvine sprang her trap.

The moment Sextant was off his section, he fell through Oceanvine's illusion and into an endless abyss. A moment later, Sextant's desert winked out and she heard him say, "You win, Vine!"

She opened her eyes to see him seated in front of her. His skin had turned pale and he was looking more than a bit shaken. "I'm sorry," she told him immediately. "I didn't mean to play that hard."

"No, no," he told her. "It was fair. You just turned the tables on me. We can try again later if you want."

"Only if you do," Oceanvine replied.

"Not really, but if we might find ourselves in that sort of situation, we need to be able to deal with it," Sextant decided.

"Why did you give up so easily?" Candle asked him.

"Vine had not only surprised me twice," Sextant explained, "but she completely wrested control of my illusion from me."

"So?" Candle asked. "You had left all forms of magic working in that world and Vine was still using it. You could have simply flown out of there and tried to figure out where she had left an opening."

"I didn't think of that," Sextant admitted. "I just thought that if she had taken over, it was time to stop."

"If you were fighting a rogue mage you wouldn't have given up so easily, would you have?" Candle asked.

"Well, no."

"Then you shouldn't give up so easily when dueling with Oceanvine," Candle told him. "Think of it as a game of chess. When she wins on one board it's time to set the pieces up again. Only in this case you can change the rules as you go along."

"You can?" they both asked in chorus.

"Of course you can," he told them. "It's part of why you want to be in control. Of course you don't want to change them too rapidly or your opponent will catch on. The only fixed rule is that whatever is true for you is true for your opponent."

"Could I set rules that are gender-based?" Sextant asked. "Something a man can do, but not a woman?"

“You can,” Candle replied. “I tried it once, but it’s not as big a stumbling block as you think. For one thing, no matter who is in charge, you can control everything about yourself. That includes the perception of your gender. You don’t even have to think about it really. If I were to create a world in which, say, only men could cast spells, Oceanvine, on attempting magic would instantly appear as a man. You might put her off balance for a few seconds the first time you try it, but she may not notice it right away. In an unreal world she would still feel the same, regardless of her appearance.

“Another danger, and this is why the one with the greater mental control will tend to win, is that your subconscious mind may occasionally trip you up by setting up loop holes your opponent can discover and use against you. It’s bad enough that you need the mind of a god to invent an entire world – actually you need the mind of several gods if you want something as complete and whole as Maiyim – but even if you only devise a relatively simple one there are bound to be details you overlook.”

“That’s why Vine beat me,” Sextant admitted.

“True,” Candle nodded. “You allowed her an even greater mastery of magic than she already has and that’s saying something! Next time, however, try to be a bit more creative.

“Most of my classmates only had one or two worlds they would play the game with. Generally, before they got to University, they had been the best apprentices in their village and they had each devised a world in which none of their playmates stood a chance. It was bit of a shock to get to college to discover they were no longer the best,” Candle added.

“Oh, Uncle?” Oceanvine asked. “How did you handle that?”

“Actually,” he replied without false modesty, “in most cases I was the best. Not at absolutely everything, but at most of what counted. Anyway, they each played with their own pre-made worlds and the main strategy was to be the first to control within the contest. I usually let them do just that, at least after the first few weeks. The first couple times I played the game the same way, trying to be in control from the start. The thing is, my sister, while she taught me the game, never let me get away with using the same world twice. Once she knew how to get around whatever blocks I placed in her path, she would take me and my world apart systematically, so I didn’t realize my classmates couldn’t do the same until the second semester or so. I just thought my worlds were better constructed. Well, maybe they were at that, but after a while I got bored with what I thought of as being under siege, so instead I let them get control, then I wriggled my way through whatever rules they devised. Too bad you two don’t have more competitors. You learn more from experience in all things, and this game in particular.”

“I was worried about moving around too quickly within the fantasy,” Oceanvine commented. “Could I have fallen overboard or kicked Six if I wasn’t careful?”

“It’s not impossible,” Candle told her, “but it is not something you can do without extreme concentration. It’s also considered cheating if you’re only playing for drinks or fun, but Silverwind managed to win such a duel once by swinging his fist and knocking out the other mage. It takes a lot of mental discipline, however, to be able to move physically when you’re in the game’s trance. If you can manage it, you’ll always have a secret weapon, although it is not one you’ll be able to use more than once, I don’t think.”

“Well, no hitting in practice,” Sextant decided, “but I suppose we can learn to reach out and tap each other’s shoulders to stop a game.”

“Not until after at least two different worlds, though,” Oceanvine told him. “It wouldn’t do us any good to just start out that way. Is that fair, Uncle?”

“Fair is whatever you two decide it is,” Candle told them. “It’s still early in my watch. Why don’t you two try again right now?”

They tried twice more, in fact, stopping after each match to compare notes to see if they had adequately understood each other’s rules of play, when those rules had changed and what gaps they might have left to be exploited. By their third game, it truly had become like a game of strategy and tactics to them and not entirely unlike a very long fencing match.

Sextant had the second watch that afternoon, so Oceanvine spent the time between her thesis and helping Jollin understand how to play the illusion game. Jollin turned out to be a formidable player. Her imagination was wide and varied and reflected her own experiences which had been so different from those of Oceanvine and Sextant. Her main weakness was in her lack of experience as a mage, so her control was not as great, but her imagination stood her in good stead to find ways to work around the illusions she was forced to face.

Finally, during the second hour of Oceanvine’s watch, they rounded Cape Nimda and before the sun had set they were tied to a pier in Nimda port.

Six

Having radioed ahead they knew the city offices had closed for the day long before their arrival, so instead Candle led the mages into town for dinner, but rather than allowing them to stay up late again, he herded them back to the *Maiyim Bourne* directly afterward. “None of us got much sleep last night,” he explained, “not even Sleepy-head Smith here,” he pointed at Jollin. “Tomorrow is going to be a long day, if I’m any judge, so it will be best to get to sleep early.”

Nobody argued.

They headed for City Hall directly after breakfast where, after waiting half an hour for the mayor to put in an appearance, they were redirected to the Boards of Health and of Agriculture.

“Both problems sound important to me,” Candle told the officials in charge after finally managing to sit down with all of them at once, “but it seems to me we should start by looking at the disease victims.”

The Director of Health, a tall woman named Hira Bimiralda who wore the traditional floral silk robes most history books in Emmine still depicted Orenta in, drove them immediately to the hospital in which most of the strangely ill people were being kept in relative quarantine.

“One hundred and twenty victims?” Candle asked. “That’s a fair number, although not for a plague, fortunately. Any deaths?”

“Thank Merinne, no!” Hira replied. “But there have been no recoveries either and quarantine procedures are not effective. Last week we only had fifty known victims and the week before, maybe a dozen. Worse, the doctors and nurses are contracting it and so far we have found no inoculation or other form of treatment that has any positive effect. Some, in fact, made the symptoms worse.”

“I’m not surprised,” Candle replied after only a few moments of study.

“The Bond of Aritos,” Sextant agreed, after a quick glance of his own. “It appears on each victim’s left wrist. I’m surprised nobody mentioned this to us before in fact. It’s kind of hard to miss.”

“The Gredac variant, I see,” Oceanvine noted clinically. “No, Jollin, don’t look. This is a bit beyond you just yet. Sorry. We’ll make it a priority to protect you against it, however.”

“Gredac’s bond is singularly ineffective against people, though,” Candle explained. “It just doesn’t adapt well to any form of animal life and I perceive this particular curse is incapable of infecting any people besides Orenta. Granomen and humans are, well, I was going to say perfectly safe, but that’s never a phrase one can use safely when discussing any form of the Bond of Aritos. However, this disease cannot be communicated to anyone by another Orente. I’m not certain it was even designed to do that. It’s more likely the mage who cast the spell was not entirely in control of what he was doing. I hate dealing with amateurs!”

“What makes you think he or she was an amateur, Uncle?” Jollin asked.

“I doubt anyone got paid to do this,” Candle snapped back, “but this is just such a simple and clumsy job I can’t imagine it was cast by anyone of talent and experience. Odds are our rogue mage is one of these victims. Who were the first ones in, Ora?” he asked Hira using the Orentan form of address.

“I’ll get you a list of names, Wizard,” she responded, “but most of them were cane farmers, except for this man over here.”

“Oh, you know him then?” Candle asked.

“My assistant, Nonawa Grentoa,” Hira explained.

Nonawa was an Orente still in his thirties and like most Orenta, tall and dark-skinned with pointed ears. All the victims were unconscious but most of them appeared to be resting comfortably at the moment, Nonawa was in some sort of discomfort, however, and was squirming against his restraints.

“Had to tie them to their beds, I see,” Candle observed.

“Sometimes they thrash about,” Hira explained. “It is safer this way.”

“What was he doing out in the sugarcane?” Jollin asked.

“How did you know that?” Hira countered.

“It sounds like there’s a connection between the first victims and the sugarcane disease,” Jollin replied, “and all the other early victims were planters. It stood to reason he must have been in the fields.”

“Oh,” Hira nodded without replying.

“Hmm, what this on his hand?” Sextant asked, spotting a massive gold ring.

“I think we have a suspect,” Candle remarked after just a glance.

“You can tell without looking?” Hira asked incredulously. “Many men wear rings.”

“Not like that one, I’ll wager,” Candle told her then turned to Sextant. “Is it...?”

“It’s a One Maiyim ring,” he confirmed.

“I knew they had been too quiet lately,” Oceanvine remarked. “Is it safe to touch?”

“The ring, maybe,” Sextant replied, “but this man still has the Bond disease.”

“I don’t understand,” Hira told them. “Why does that ring make Nonawa a suspect?”

“By itself, it makes him a member of an outlawed organization,” Candle replied. “Being a member is a capital offense even here in Bellinen. What makes him a suspect is wearing that ring and being one of the first victims. I’ll have to examine the ring to know for certain, but I believe we will find the original curse was stored in it and that Nonawa released it and then got caught up in the backlash as the curse spread.”

“Why would he do that?” Hira asked.

“I don’t know yet, Ora,” Candle replied. “For now, however, we’ll need to release these other victims from the curse. Nonawa can wait until we’re done.”

“Why?” Hira asked.

“If he’s just some fool with an enchanted ring who followed someone else’s orders it will do no harm to make him wait. If he’s a mage, I would rather put off his release from the curse until I’m certain he can be held long enough to stand trial,” Candle explained.

“None of the other One Maiyim mages have stood trial,” Oceanvine remarked coldly.

“None of them were taken alive,” Candle reminded her. “I’ll admit that made it easier for everyone, but we might have learned more about One Maiyim had it been otherwise.”

He stopped to study the spell and then without bothering to explain what he saw, he quickly dissipated the curse. “That’s what I thought,” Candle reported when he was finished. “That spell was cast so incompetently, it practically falls apart by looking at it.”

“So it *was* as easy as it looked?” Oceanvine asked. “Will we need the staves?”

“Not really,” Candle replied. “This Bond of Gredac has very little energy tied up in it, although just for safety sake, you should use them anyway. Just drain the power and let the whole construct collapse.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Jollin asked.

“The victims will need help as we cure them,” Candle told her. “Better let the members of the hospital staff know they’ll be needed.”

“I meant magically,” Jollin explained.

“I know you did,” Candle replied, “and by next week or so, you might really have been able to do something more than be a message bearer. You’re close, but you are not quite ready to deal with the Bond of Aritos.”

“I’m sorry,” Oceanvine apologized, “I never thought we’d be running into this sort of thing or maybe I

would have pushed you a bit faster.”

“No, no,” Jollin shook her head. “It’s not your fault and it’s fine, really. I shouldn’t be jealous. I know that. It’s just that after my hitch in the Friendship Corps I’m not used to feeling so useless.”

“You’re not useless, cousin,” Oceanvine assured her. “This is just the sort of thing no apprentice ought to be exposed to.”

“We were,” Sextant commented.

“We were, weren’t we?” Oceanvine remembered.

“You were both slightly more advanced than Jollin,” Candle told them. “I had been pushing you a little too hard so you were a bit further along by the time we encountered the Bond the first time. Vine, work with Jollin on wards next. It will go well with this morning’s lessons and with some hard work, Jollin, you’ll at least be able to watch and understand what’s going on.”

“If you say so,” Jollin replied a bit wistfully.

There was not much time to sooth Jollin’s feelings at that moment and the mages went to work, rapidly dispelling the curse from the victims. In Rjalkatyp a similar illness took each of them several hours to cure for each patient, but this bore only a vague resemblance to that curse and they soon discovered that as they worked on a few of the victims, the curse was already lifting from others in the same ward so that it was still too early for lunch by the time they had visited every ward in which there were affected people.

While it was unintentional, Nonawa Grentoa was cured in the first batch of victims, but Candle removed the ring and bound him up in a ward to hold him until they could return.

“This one’s no mage,” Candle pronounced once they had returned to inspect Hira’s assistant director. He had used the staff to probe the man who was still bound to the bed by the leather restraints and even without trying to probe the man’s thought, he found none of the mental discipline that even a rank beginner like Jollin had. Nonowa did not have the ability to make a ball roll downhill if gravity hadn’t already been at its back.

Candle pressed the man for answers, but came up dry. “Don’t worry,” Hira told him. “I’ll make sure the police get answers out of him for you.”

“Good,” Candle replied. “I know your agricultural counterpart is anxious to have us take a look at some sick sugarcane.” They left the hospital and headed off for an early lunch.

“Jollin,” Candle told her as they got away from Hira, “you did very well, indeed, in there.”

“I did?” she asked. “What did I do?”

“You pointed out the connection between the victims and the disease we’re about to go investigate in the sugarcane,” Candle told her, “and did it in a way that made it seem even more obvious than it is without having been on the plantations. It isn’t at all certain just yet, but it is a good working hypothesis and when you asked Director Bimiralda about it, I realized you were probably right. You have a good knack for jumping to the right conclusions, I think.”

“Thanks,” Jollin replied. “I was starting to feel like a fifth wheel.”

“Fourth,” Oceanvine corrected her. “There’s only four of us and no spare tires.”

Agricultural Regional Director Larbawa Minao was a short man for an Orente. He was a mere six feet tall and had a much heavier bone structure than most. Unlike Hira Bimiralda, he was quite interested in the mages themselves and asked question constantly during the ninety minute drive into plantation country. “So how did we get lucky enough to catch you in Bellinen just when we needed you?” he asked.

“Vacationing mostly,” Candle replied. “Vine here was doing research in the University’s library, but the rest of us were just enjoying a bit of time off.”

“Merinne is a good place for that, then,” Larbawa replied jovially. “Otherwise you should have been here on Garad. The surfing is much better.”

“You surf, Or?” Sextant asked.

“I’m only sixty years old,” Larbawa replied. “It’s not like I’m an old man.”

“Serabawa was still surfing when I studied with him over sixty years ago,” Candle commented.

“You studied with Serabawa?” Larbawa asked. “I’m jealous! He was one of the greatest philosophers on Maiyim,”

“And a great surfer,” Candle told him. “He taught me how, in fact.”

“Too bad we won’t have time for that while you’re here,” Larbawa replied. “The people who live inland just don’t understand. Even my Uncle Meadow never really understood the thrill.”

“Meadow was your uncle?” Candle asked. “I knew him too. Interesting character, but I don’t think he ever learned how to use contractions in his speech.”

Larbawa laughed. “Uncle Meadow was always very precision-minded and felt he should speak accordingly. It made him sound stuffy and formal to those who did not really know him. What are you ladies doing in the back seat?”

“Magic training,” Sextant supplied. “Vine’s trying to help Jollin produce an effective ward.”

“It’s too soon,” Candle predicted. “Vine’s forgetting she had a head start on that technique. Are you keeping an eye on them?”

“I am, but Vine knows what she’s doing,” Sextant replied.

“I don’t like her using cooperative magic this early in Jollin’s training,” Candle remarked.

“It’s nothing she and I didn’t do together from almost the start,” Sextant pointed out.

“I didn’t like that either,” Candle told him, “but it did seem to help.”

“Sometimes new techniques really are improvements,” Sextant pointed out.

“And sometimes, the old ways work because they really are better,” Candle told him. “Just what is she

trying, anyway?"

"Well, they're both in a self-hypnotic trance, you realize," Sextant explained, "and that means Vine's heard all your grumbles."

"I haven't said anything I wouldn't have said to her," Candle pointed out.

"I know, sir," Sextant replied. "Anyway all she is doing is showing Jollin how to cast a ward from within a sort of dueling fantasy."

"They're dueling to make a ward?" Candle asked.

"No, sir," Sextant shook his head, "but it seemed to us that it was a good way to make a virtual laboratory and one in which we could demonstrate all sorts of techniques without actually casting dangerous or complex spells. We think it will give beginners the confidence they need when they try them for real the first time."

"You've done this before?" Candle asked.

"We just learned how to achieve this state the other day, remember?" Sextant countered. "But the application seemed obvious. We plan to use it in lab sessions next semester."

Candle thought about that a while. "It's not a bad idea," he admitted at last, "and of more potential use than winning bar bets. Okay, I'll go along with that, but first see how well it works for Jollin and then try it out on the seniors before using it at all levels. If it works, we'll have a new training tool and if it doesn't, at least we won't have subjected every student in the department to it."

"Why?" Sextant asked. "What harm would it be?"

"Some of them, a fair number probably, will be teaching others in the years to come," Candle replied. "And take it from me, most teachers have a tendency to use the same methods they learned by, whether the methods worked well for them or not. Your so-called virtual lab sounds like a good idea, but anyone you try it on is likely to try it in turn on his or her students. If it turns out not to be effective, there will be that many fewer future teachers likely to use it for themselves."

"I'm fairly sure it will work," Sextant replied, "but you're the head of department. We'll do it your way, of course."

"Yes, there!" Oceanvine said suddenly, her eyes still closed. "That wasn't hard was it?"

Candle turned around and saw a small red ward floating in the air a few inches in front of Jollin's face. "Did I do it?" Jollin asked uncertainly.

"Look for yourself," Oceanvine suggested, opening her own eyes for the first time in nearly an hour.

Jollin peeked out of one eye at first but when she saw the sheet of red light she broke out into a wide smile. "It's real!"

"Sure is," Oceanvine agreed. "Now let's see you dissipate it."

"Won't it just go away on its own?" Jollin asked.

“In a day or so,” Oceanvine told her. “It’s a low-power ward, but you attached a moderately large power source to it. But congratulations! That’s something Baron Wollono apparently never learned how to do.”

“The People’s Party leader who tried to usurp the throne of Granom?” Jollin asked.

“That’s him,” Oceanvine confirmed. “He knew how to throw a lot of power around and was one of the toughest mages we’ve had to battle. He was calling himself Wizard Victory by that point and he had erected a large, high-power impenetrable ward around the palace, but he maintained it strictly by will power, the same way we float those hex nuts and pearls around our heads. Uncle Candle, for a powerful mage, he had at least one major hole in his education. Is it possible the mages of One Maiyim do not know how to use external power?”

“He couldn’t have constructed such a ward or fended off the three of us solely on his own internal power,” Candle told her. “He’d have used himself up in short order, but you are correct that nothing we saw him do except for the use of the Bond of Aritos involved a long-term source of energy and the Bond is a special case. It comes with such a source automatically. Come to think of it, most of his big and powerful spells were fueled by the Bond. He certainly didn’t think of using a power source to maintain a long term spell. I’ll bet he and his wife were taking turns holding that big ward up. Adamant, since you bring it up, in Sutheria did not use magic that involved a long term use either. Interesting, but is that because the One Maiyim mages don’t know how or they just don’t feel the need?”

“They certainly know how, Uncle,” Oceanvine pointed out. “It’s an essential part of constructing an amulet.”

“It is the way you do it, Vine,” Candle replied only to hear her automatic correction. He ignored it and continued, “But it’s possible there is more than one way to make one.”

“Such as?” she prompted him.

“If I knew that,” Candle laughed, “you probably would not have found the solution you did.”

“Oh heck!” she sighed. “I thought I had a thesis, but if this is not the only way...”

“You still have a thesis, Vine,” Sextant told her. “You figured out something no mage, except for the rogues of One Maiyim, has figured out in over a thousand years. Just present it *asa* solution, not *the* solution.”

“But if there are other ways, Six,” Oceanvine argued, “maybe some of them are better than my solution.”

“Well you could always ask Methis,” Sextant suggested, “or better yet, ask Aritos. He’s always up for a discussion about magical theory.”

“Ah, but would either of them answer my questions?” Oceanvine asked.

“Now that you have accomplished what you have, they will likely freely discuss its merits and faults,” Candle replied, “and even if they won’t describe how, they will probably also let you know if there are alternatives. However, your solution is relatively simple, and the simpler a solution is, the more likely it is to be the right one.”

A few minutes later, Larbawa turned the car off the highway and on to a much narrower country road that threaded its way up and over a hill and then down into a wide, lush valley. "We're there," he announced shortly thereafter as he pulled up to a cluster of buildings including two barns and a fair number of houses. One of those houses looked somewhat nicer than the others and it turned out to be for the plantation manager. The owner, it turned out, was a Senator who almost never visited.

Most of the plantation workers were among the victims the mages had cured earlier that day. The manager's wife came out to meet them and was overjoyed to hear that her husband and the others were recovering from their illness and was eager to show the mages some of the infected sugarcane.

"Someone is not being very subtle," Jollin remarked sourly a few minutes later.

"What do you mean," Oceanvine asked.

"Look at the canes," Jollin replied. "Each one has a copy of the Bond burned into it, just as all the victims had it on their left wrists. I'm surprised anyone even tried to use this."

"It would not have been immediately recognized as a disease," Candle told her, "and be careful not to dwell on the shape of the Bond. All it takes to be snared is to contemplate it for a few moments, although this plague was spread by physical contact. The Bond of Gredac may have been ill-suited to affect Orenta, but it appears to be ideal for ruining this crop. Well, let me take a look at what is going on."

"I've already looked, sir," Sextant replied. "Each cane is attached to the others in the area by a web of spell strings, mostly underground. Would that mean it spread through the roots?"

"Could be," Candle replied. "And you will have noted that the leaves are all discolored and wilted too. Yes, I see what you mean about the way the Bond spread itself. That's good actually. This is actually all one curse, not a multiple of smaller, independent ones. I can dispel it all at once."

He pulled the golden pen out of his pocket and as it had on so many occasions in the past, it rapidly grew in size until it was a tall, golden walking staff. He was already at work, even as it continued to return to its default shape and a large complex symbol formed in the air over the infected cane.

"That's the Seal of Aritos," Oceanvine whispered to Jollin. "In many ways it is one of the highest forms of magic because it can only be used with the consent of Aritos Himself."

"Just as the Seal of Methis can only be used with Her consent?" Jollin asked in return, remembering Oceanvine's pendant.

"Right," Oceanvine nodded. "The difference is Uncle Candle has permission to use both seals."

"But Methis must intend to give you permission some day," Jollin replied. "Why else would She have given you that pendant?"

"Maybe She just wanted to give me something pretty?" Oceanvine countered. "No, I know she wants me to study her sign and become intimately acquainted with it. The only reason I would need to know it that well would be to use it eventually. Well, I've been studying it for three years now, but the interesting thing is it's always a bit different when I look at it. That may be the real reason She gave this to me, because it is constantly changing and to use it properly, I need to know its exact properties at the moment. Well, that is neither here nor there. Candle studied Aritos' seal for decades before being granted permission, so I doubt I'll get a similar dispensation any time soon."

“Well that was a little too simple,” Candle said suddenly. “It was as if the curse was just waiting for me to get here so it could turn itself off.”

“Maybe it was, Uncle,” Oceanvine told him.

“What?” he started. “No that’s ridiculous. What would be the point?”

“What’s the point of casting such a curse in the first place?” Larbawa asked.

“Okay, you have me there,” Candle replied. “The Bond of Aritos is all about power and dominance. At least that’s the promise rogue mages become ensnared by. The whole thrust of the Bond in any of its forms is toward complete control of its victims and, eventually, of the foolish mages who choose to use it. It’s actually a way by which the demons would trick people into delivering up the demons’ favorite meal, which of course was people. Using it to construct a curse that is dispelled so easily is moronic, if you ask me. The mage is in ever-increasing danger of his life and soul and for what gain? I don’t get it.”

“Well, you’ve already said this curse was set by an incompetent, Uncle,” Oceanvine reminded him.

“And it seems to have been set in this ring,” Candle replied, holding up the golden circlet he had retrieved earlier in the day. “And we now know it does not take an advanced mage to store a spell in a ring or other form of amulet. But the Bond of Aritos? Is One Maiyim so desperate that even their apprentices are being set to use it?”

“Or maybe they just want us to think that,” Sextant replied.

“What will happen to the crop now?” Larbawa asked, breaking into the discussion once more.

Candle looked around. Most of the canes had blackened as the Bond of Aritos was drawn out of them. “The curse is broken on this field, but it’s possible any product from what’s left here could be poisonous. That’s assuming there’s anything remaining that is worth collecting. My recommendation is that you handle it like any other blight.”

“Most often that means pulling out all the affected cane and replacing it with a more resistant variety. That happened about four years ago when the fields were infected by cane smut,” Larbawa informed them.

“We’ll need to visit all the other infected plantations,” Candle told him, “but once we have, this particular disease will not be coming back unless One Maiyim sends out another agent to do it all over again. If that happens I doubt any variety will be more resistant than another and if not, it won’t matter which variety you replant with.”

“It may be a good time to encourage our sugarcane farmers to move to the more modern varieties,” Larbawa commented thoughtfully.

“If they’re forced to replant their fields anyway,” Candle told him, “I can’t think of any reason why they shouldn’t. Or. I imagine new varieties are more resistant to conventional diseases and yield more sugar?”

“Some do,” Larbawa told him. “Sometimes it’s a tradeoff.”

“Well, let’s move on to the next field,” Candle suggested, “and see how quickly we can clean up this

mess.”

Seven

They stayed on Garad another five days before Candle was convinced they had eradicated all traces of the Bond of Aritos, but even so he warned both Hira and Larbawa, “Call us back if any further outbreaks appear. Even though we’re island hopping by boat, I can always fly back here if I’m needed.”

“Thank you for all your help, Wizard,” Larbawa told him, reaching out to shake his hand.

“You’re welcome, Or,” Candle replied formally. “It’s a shame about that Nonawa, though. Are you sure it was a heart attack?”

“That was the official pronouncement by the coroner, Wizard,” Hira confirmed.

“Too bad,” Candle replied, privately unconvinced but refusing to show it, “I had really looked forward to finding out who had ordered him to cast that spell.”

“I’m sure there will be others,” Hira told him.

“I certainly hope not, Ora,” Candle replied. “I’d rather know he was the only one, but I suspect you are right.”

It had been a productive week for Jollin as well. Once she had displayed an ability to cast a simple ward, it was a short step toward casting the spell to protect her against the Bond of Aritos although she was a fair way off from making it impermeable. The upshot was that now at least she could watch what the others were doing and help spot a few isolated cases of the Bond the others had missed on their first inspections.

That success prompted her to try to emulate Oceanvine and she started “wearing” one of the silver beads at all times and not just during practice although, unlike her cousin, she was unable to keep it up all day without dropping it at least once an hour. “Don’t get discouraged,” Oceanvine told her as they sailed toward Cewen Island. “I didn’t start floating something around my head all day for quite a while. It was mostly just for an hour or two and even then Sextant kept trying to snatch it out of the air. He claimed it was making him dizzy, but I think he was just annoyed that I was showing off while he was still having trouble.

“Jollin,” Oceanvine continued, “you have to keep in mind that I was using telekinesis at a fairly young age and, even though I had not been allowed to practice, it’s pretty much like riding a bicycle. You don’t really forget how to do it.”

“Perhaps,” Jollin agreed conditionally, “but I do seem to forget to keep doing it.”

“Uncle Candle says that most master mages would forget after a while,” Oceanvine laughed. “I guess I’m just too stubborn to know any better. You know, if you’re just intent on wearing that bead for dress-up you can always cast the spell with enough power to keep it in orbit for a few hours. That way you won’t have to keep thinking about it all the time.”

“But that’s not as good practice as maintaining the spell consciously,” Jollin replied.

“Are you planning to stop drinking beer?” Oceanvine countered. “You’ve already seen what two drinks do to your concentration and you’ve made no secret of what you think about sweet seltzer when everyone else is drinking alcohol.”

“There is that,” Jollin laughed. “So maybe I’ll never be a great wizardess.”

“Wizardess?” Oceanvine laughed right back at her.

“The feminine form of wizard,” Jollin replied, “or at least it should be.”

“No,” Oceanvine shook her head. “I use the title Journeywoman because my great-grandmother did, but even she used the masculine forms ‘Master’ and ‘Wizard’ when they became hers to claim, although unlike Uncle Candle she eventually allowed herself to be called ‘Doctor.’”

“Why was that?” Jollin asked.

“She told me that after Silverwind died the whole matter of what term of address she should use lost any real meaning to her. When the rest of the faculty referred to her as Doctor Oceanvine, she just went along with it. Uncle Candle, though, insisted on being called a wizard. He didn’t get all those degrees to be mistaken for a physician, or so he says, and he was the last person to be tested in the traditional manner on one of the Five Demons.”

“What sort of test was it?” Jollin asked.

“Three wizards traveled with the candidate by ship, of course,” Oceanvine replied. “Along the way the wizards could test the candidate at any time of day and in almost any manner they so chose. Sometimes it was just a matter of being woken up in the middle of the graveyard watch to be asked a question involving the descent of the Granovan Dynasty. Other times a candidate might have been asked to demonstrate a certain type of magic. Mostly it was a long and involved defense of his dissertation, but the questions could have been about anything from simple arithmetic to Onestone’s Theory of Relativity.”

“Doesn’t sound like a lot of those questions had much to do with magic,” Jollin commented.

“They all did,” Oceanvine corrected her. “Magic is a part of life as we know it, even if most people don’t realize it these days. There is nothing to which magic does not relate.”

“Nothing?” Jollin asked skeptically, trying to think of an example to prove Oceanvine wrong.

“Don’t believe me?” Oceanvine challenged her. “I’ll give you Methis’ phone number and She can tell you Herself.”

“Vine, my religious upbringing featured quite a few stories involving mortals who annoyed one or more of the Gods with useless questions,” Jollin replied. “Somehow it never turned out well for the mortal involved. I’ll pass.”

“I doubt Methis would mind the question,” Oceanvine told her.

“I’d rather not take the chance,” Jollin shook her head. “Besides, I think you’re right. On the other hand, next time you have Methis over for a pub crawl, you’d better invite me too.”

The city of Wenta on Cewen was a traditional Bellinen city. None of the buildings stood over ten stories tall and the few that reached that height were all in the business district, a small area that only covered some twenty blocks. Beyond that most residences stood only one or two stories tall, although, as in the rest of the archipelago, the most fashionable houses were along the beaches. Those beach houses were all built on stilts to keep them at least fifteen feet above sea level, but while that seemed odd to Oceanvine and Jollin, both of whom grew up accustomed to having a basement, they did admit that the construction permitted the residents to park their cars in the sheltered area directly beneath their houses.

There were fewer people afflicted by the curse on Cewen and Candle, having determined that it was, indeed, the very same curse as they had encountered on Garad, allowed Oceanvine to cure the Orentan victims in Wenta and then instructed Sextant to do the same at a small hospital just outside of town. Having cured the people, they once again traveled to the fields in which the people had been working.

“This isn’t sugarcane,” Sextant commented when the car stopped by a field of tall green grass that waved gently with the wind.

“No, Sir Sextant,” Hanawa Min, the regional agricultural agent, told him. “This is alfalfa. We don’t grow sugarcane at this end of the island. Why did you think we were having a problem with the cane?”

“That’s what the curse affected on Garad,” Candle explained. “Well, the Gredac variant of the Bond of Aritos will adapt to any plant easily and whoever cast this here does not appear to have been caught up in the backlash like Nonawa on Garad.” He turned toward the agricultural agent. “Does anyone in your office commonly wear a heavy gold ring with blue enamel inlays?”

“Not that I’ve ever noticed,” Hanawa replied.

“Too bad,” Candle replied. “The last one was an inside job, apparently by the Regional Assistant Director of Health out of Nimda. I don’t suppose he had been here recently?”

“I could not say that he has ever been on Cewen,” Hanawa remarked.

“Well, it was a shot,” Candle shrugged.

“This grass looks pretty healthy to me,” Jollin opined.

“Oh, this isn’t the affected field,” Hanawa replied, “That’s just over this rise. Come on, I’ll show you. Single file now.” They all got out of the car and followed him.

He led them through the field between rows of alfalfa, although the gap between rows was so narrow they could not help but trample some of the grassy stalks as they went.

“Aren’t we damaging the crop?” Oceanvine asked as she followed.

“Not very much of it,” Hanawa replied, “and if you can keep any more of the field from going bad the farmers will be more than willing to consider it a price well-paid.”

As they started on up the hill, Oceanvine was glad to have her staff with her, she might not need the energy she had stored within it, but it was performing as an excellent walking aid. She made a mental note to find something for Jollin to use. Her cousin was not yet up to being able to use the staff with optimal effectiveness, but even a bit of extra power at a key moment could be of help.

A few hundred yards later they saw exactly what he meant. As they finally climbed to the top of the long and gradual rise, they saw large and irregularly shaped brown area of dead vegetation that sprawled all over the valley. In the center of the dead brown grain was a complex, twisty little symbol that had been burned black into the crop.

“The Bond of Aritos again,” Sextant identified it. “Can’t say I’m surprised to find it, but this is a different application from what we saw on Garad.”

“While some forms of magic are more effective in specific situations than others,” Candle lectured, “you already know how adaptable any technique or spell can be. The Bond is no different. The way you can use any form of magic is limited only by your imagination. Remember what I told you about Silverwind tickling that pirate mage? It was a simple tactile illusion, and most mages might have thought of it as a mere party trick, if they even knew how to cast such a spell. But he knew how to use that normally harmless spell in a manner that was devastating. So the Bond too can be used in any number of ways.

“It’s also possible,” Candle continued, “that the spell’s nature caused it to affect the alfalfa in this manner whereas it worked on the cane differently. However, whatever the case, the fact is this is a progressive condition and it will only continue to spread if we don’t stop it.” He studied it for a moment then held out the golden staff to Sextant. “Want to take a shot at it, Six?”

“Am I up to it?” Sextant asked, but then quickly answered himself. “Well obviously you think so, sir.” He accepted the golden Staff of Aritos and handed his wooden one in turn to Candle. Now it was time for Sextant to study the landscape below him.

On Garad, Candle had only used the Seal of Aritos on the first infected cane farm they encountered. After that, he had simply drained the energy from the Bond and into the staff and then allowed the structure to collapse. Sextant realized he did not have the Seal of Aritos to use even if he wanted to, but decided that Candle, having already studied the cursed field below them, was certain that the Seal was not needed. For a moment Sextant wondered how Candle could be so certain, but he recalled Candle’s stories of how he, along with Silverwind and the first Oceanvine had faced the actual demons, not just their signs and none of them had Aritos’ permission to use his Seal at the time. He made a mental note to ask Candle an important question about that, but then turned his mind back to the Bond of Aritos burnt into the crops beneath him.

Spinning a thick spell string down into the afflicted area, he used that string to siphon energy out of the Bond. A normal staff held energy in reserve to be used when the mage needed an extra boost for his or her spells at a moment’s notice, but Candle’s staff did so much more. In Sextant’s hands, the staff behaved like a living entity, a well trained pet, perhaps, that when ordered to “fetch” ran eagerly ahead before Sextant could finish the command. The staff rapidly sucked up anything powering the Bond of Aritos and did nothing more than glow warmly for a few minutes afterward. The mark left by the Bond, however was still visible and Sextant telekinetically scattered the burnt material so that the demon symbol was no longer distinguishable.

“A little flashy for my tastes,” Candle remarked, smiling, “but very well done. Vine, it will be your turn at the next farm.”

“That’s Oceanvine,” she responded.

“There are only two others,” Hanawa informed them.

“You know,” Oceanvine noted, “the bond looked like it had been pressed into the field with a branding

iron.”

“Effectively, it probably was,” Candle told her, “without the iron, of course.”

“It looked a bit like those circles we saw in the crops of Kern,” Sextant agreed. “Somewhat more complex, but the stalks looked to have been pressed flat in the same way.”

“Those circles were the talk of the town for a while,” Jollin remarked. “The Earl is still trying to catch whoever is making them, but so far he’s not having much luck.”

“I’m not surprised,” Candle remarked. “His people stalking the fields are hard to miss, so anyone trying to make another circle will just go somewhere else. That does, however, bring up an interesting thought. What if this spell was cast by pressing the mark into the alfalfa?”

“Wouldn’t that be doing it the hard way?” Oceanvine asked.

“Certainly it’s a dangerous way,” Candle admitted. “I would have said using the ring was safer and yet the one who set that curse got caught anyway. So far as we know this one got off safely, or as safely as anyone can who uses the Bond.”

“Couldn’t he have been drawn to the demon while using it?” Oceanvine asked.

“Possibly,” Candle admitted, “but only if he had used this spell too often. Of course, he might have. We have several more islands to visit yet and I can’t say what we’ll find there. Something seems very odd about this, however.”

“What’s that, sir?” Sextant asked.

“It’s too easy,” Candle told him. “Did you have any trouble dispelling the curse?”

“None whatsoever,” Sextant agreed as they started walking back to the car, “I thought that was the staff’s doing.”

“The staff does make it much easier,” Candle admitted, “but you could have done it without the staff. It would have taken a bit longer and you would have had to be more careful, but this is not the sort of problem we had with the Bond elsewhere. This is much closer to what we dealt with when on the quest. I’ll show you what I mean at the next farm.”

“I thought that was my turn,” Oceanvine protested.

“Then I’ll show you and you can try it on the third one,” Candle told her.

The second such field was only a few miles away and could be seen from the road. Candle got out and without the staff to aid him, cast a great healing spell over the withered alfalfa. As they watched, Oceanvine, Sextant and Jollin could see the aura of Candle’s spell make contact with that of the Bond. At first the two spells appeared to be fighting one another, but then much more slowly than it would have had he used the golden staff, the Bond of Aritos began to shrink back and into the symbol that, here too, had been burned into the grassy stalks. Finally, the Bond collapsed completely and dissipated. As it did the blackened ashes in the field turned white and blew away on the wind.

“See what I mean?” Candle asked.

“That took you over an hour, though,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“Is that all?” Candle asked. “It felt like minutes, but I honestly expected it to be even longer than it took. It’s hard to tell when you’re doing that sort of magic.”

“So it’s just like how we healed those people in Rjalkatyp,” Oceanvine concluded.

“Very much so,” Candle agreed, as he turned back to the car once more. “That was the Bond of Gredac too, wasn’t it? Someone in One Maiyim must take a great delight using that particular Bond.”

“Or it’s the one he knows best,” Oceanvine countered.

“Or the only one,” Candle commented. “I do wish Ksanya hadn’t managed to get that particular bit of information out of Aritos.”

“What information was that?” Jollin asked, closing the car door as she got in. Hanawa started the engine and drove on to the next field.

“It appears that One Maiyim ranks their mages by the version of the Bond of Aritos they learn to use,” Oceanvine explained. “The one who cast this particular curse would, within their membership, be called a Gredac. Adamant, the mage who caused those tsunamis a few years ago, was a Xenlabit. There are also mages who are styled Pohns and Kewalats. But in spite of the fact our Uncle Candle thought for a long time that no one could learn two or more versions of the Bond of Aritos, it turns out he was wrong.”

“Hey!” Candle protested. “I’m entitled to be wrong every once in a while.”

“Omniscience would be boring,” Oceanvine replied.

“I like that,” Jollin told her.

“Methis likes to say it,” Oceanvine told her. “Anyway, they eventually found out that the Bond of Arithan doesn’t work any longer.”

“Why not?” Jollin asked.

“Using the Bond taps directly into the power of the related demon,” Oceanvine explained. “Arithan is dead. My great-grandmother killed him over sixty years ago.”

“Actually she didn’t,” Candle corrected her. “Vine incapacitated Arithan. Anyone but a god or a demon would have been killed, but Arithan was on his own island. He had already started to regenerate when the Elder Gods put a final end to him.”

“But Aritos told me Oceanvine killed him,” she argued.

“Aritos was very much impressed by your great-grandmother that day,” Candle explained. “He told his brothers and sisters that she had done most of it and it’s true. Vine used the power that was contained within her master’s stone and used it to leach away Arithan’s energy and substance until all that was left was a disarticulated skeleton. However the skeleton was starting to rearticulate when Aritos delivered the final blow that made it so the demon could never regenerate. All the Elder Gods were surprised, however. None of Them realized just how far mortal mages had come. The Younger Gods did, but they

had always been in closer contact with us.”

“So, the mages of One Maiyim who tried to conjure with the Bond of Arithan quickly discovered there was no power to that symbol,” Oceanvine returned to her explanation. “So they reserved the title of Arithan for those mages who mastered more than one of the Bonds.”

“I doubt there are many of them,” Candle told her. “That is probably the title used by those of the Inner Circle. I don’t think we have encountered anyone of that rank.”

“I know, Uncle,” Oceanvine replied seriously. “And that thought is why I lose sleep some nights. It’s also why I never stop trying to improve my own abilities with magic. Sooner or later we will encounter an Arithan.”

“The number of Bonds a mage can use is no gauge of his or her level of mastery,” Candle told her. “I keep telling you this, but what really counts is what you do with what you have learned.”

“But the more I learn, the more I can do,” Oceanvine insisted. “And the more I learn the more I realize how much more there is to learn.”

“Welcome to my life,” Candle chuckled. “I can’t deny that there is always more to learn and in magic, especially, knowledge is power, but it’s imagination that will take you well beyond the basic lessons I’ve been teaching you.”

“And there I thought we were beyond the basic lessons,” Sextant commented.

“Speak for yourself,” Jollin laughed, “I’m still working my way up to the apprentice level.”

Sextant was about to assure her that she was definitely that far at the very least, but Hanawa stopped the car again alongside the final field. This time Candle allowed Oceanvine to dispel the curse, but insisted she do so without the golden staff.

“You think I’m up to this without it?” Oceanvine asked uncertainly.

“A year from now Jollin would be ready,” Candle told her. “Just don’t get cocky. Take it slowly if you need to.”

It took her nearly two hours and by the time she was done the sky had turned from a tropical blue dome to a star-sprinkled black. She had also managed to exhaust herself so much that Sextant had to catch her before she fell to the ground, but a few minutes later she had recovered and by then they were on their way back to the boat.

Eight

They did not leave Cewen for another two days because Candle needed to be certain they really had dispelled all traces of the curse. They spent the next day driving all around, stopping frequently to inspect the fields until Oceanvine had a better idea. “Why don’t we hire a helicopter?”

“Why?” Candle asked distractedly.

“Is there any reason we cannot spot the curse, if it still exists, from the air?” she asked by way of explanation.

“From the air?” Candle echoed. “No it should be easier to spot an infection from the air. That’s a good idea, Vine. I should have thought of that.”

They were unable to arrange a flight until the next morning, but then they spent the better part of the next day flying over every part of Cewen. Oceanvine and Jollin were so thrilled by the experience that Sextant secretly suspected Vine had suggested it merely because she wanted to try it, but even so it allowed them to cover the entire island quickly and efficiently, enabling them to sail on to Rishanda.

The weather was ideal, but the prevailing wind came from the southwest, precisely the direction they were trying to sail. Consequently they were forced to tack back and forth all the way to Direford, a journey made all the more difficult because of the large amount of commercial traffic in the same waters. They made such poor progress that Oceanvine, Jollin and Sextant were able to convince Candle to continue sailing all night so that by the time the sun rose the next morning, Direford was in sight.

Direford was a large city with a long history of inter-archipelago contact. So much so, that it looked more like a typical Emmine city than one of Bellinen. Here the buildings were taller and there were fewer beach houses. The architecture looked more like that of temperate Emmine than tropical Bellinen as well. The port of Direford was also one of the largest seaports on Maiyim.

Millennia earlier, the island of Rishanda had been the place in which the ancient humans and Orenta had first signed a treaty of peace. As trade between the archipelagos grew, Direford grew from a small town on the outskirts of the Orentan civilization to a city through which most of the business between both countries would pass.

The harbor area stretched for several miles along both sides of the Dire River, but the channel into the harbor was so narrow that when one of the modern large tankers needed to enter or leave the port, only traffic going in the same direction was allowed. Such restrictions were common in canals such as the Quarna Canal on Randona, but very few ports were still important enough to the larger ships to visit without a wide access. Quite a few outer ports, in fact had built hurricane barriers during the previous two decades only to discover that the openings they had built, more than sufficient to accommodate any ship afloat at the time, had soon become antiquated and doomed the ports they protected to deal only with the older and smaller ships.

Direford’s location, however, continued to be ideal for both international trade and the fishing industry, so even though it was inconvenient, the large tankers continued to frequent the port of Direford.

The channel was fortuitously open to two-way traffic as the *Maiyim Bourne* entered the mouth of the River Dire and the boat was able to find a berth before the port had completely awakened.

“We need to find the authorities in this city,” Candle told the others. “Unlike in Nimda and Wenta, there’s no one expecting us here.”

“Maybe we should have called ahead,” Jollin suggested.

“Possibly,” Candle nodded, “but I got the impression from Xander that there was some reason the President maybe didn’t want us to know the full extent of the problems in this archipelago.”

“Or possibly the locals didn’t want anyone else to know?” Oceanvine offered.

“Maybe that too,” Candle agreed readily, “but that’s what convinced me we should just sort of stop in and offer to help here.”

“We don’t even know just what’s gone wrong here,” Sextant pointed out.

“We know there have been more sick Orenta here,” Candle told him. “We know that just like in our last two ports, they have some mysterious disease that their doctors don’t know how to handle. So we’ll find the local health officer and ask him or her how life’s been lately.”

They ate a quick breakfast on the boat and then headed into town using directions from the clerk at the marina where they had docked the *Maiyim Bourne*. City Hall was somewhat smaller than Oceanvine had expected for a city the size of Direford. It was an older building, only five stories high surrounded by others that boasted forty to sixty floors, but looked all the taller when compared to their shorter neighbors.

It also looked quite different from any other building in the city. Most of the tall buildings were modern-looking structures of steel and glass, although a few were pinnacles of steel-reinforced concrete. City Hall had been mostly built of an oddly-hued yellow-orange brick, although the builders had used brightly colored glazed bricks to insert a floral pattern similar to those printed on many Orentan silk products. The shape of the building was classic Emmine architecture of the previous century, but the outward appearance was pure Bellinen.

Inside the garishly clad building, male and female Orentan clerks rushed back and forth between offices while citizens stood in lines in front of some offices but left others unvisited. In short it was just like any other city hall on Maiyim. One of the offices where there did not appear to be a line was the Board of Health. As the mages entered that office, they decided that perhaps it was just as well there were no citizens with business here today as everyone here was so busy working – talking on telephones, running back and forth between the front office and the one in back labeled “Director” or tensely talking among themselves that the presence of four humans was not noticed for several minutes.

Finally, a young Orentan woman in a floral silk blouse, similar to the ones Oceanvine and Jollin were wearing, and a navy blue skirt noticed them and asked almost breathlessly, “May I help you?”

“We were hoping that might be the other way around,” Candle replied and explained why they were there.

“Wizard Candle?” a male voice issued from the back office. “That was fast! I just got off the phone with the president’s office.” A relatively short male Orente, standing only six feet tall came out of the back office. Unlike most of the others he was wearing an Emmine style business suit and not even his tie bore any traces of the typical Orentan sense of color coordination. “He promised he would ask you to come here, but I did not expect you for a week or more. Benerawa Hei, at your service, sir.”

“Candle at your’s, Or,” the wizard replied and introduced the others. “We may have anticipated the President’s request. We were on Cewen and having heard about your problems here with a disease that may be the same as they had, we thought it best to get here as soon as we could.” He went on to explain what they had found on Garad and Cewen.

“Well we certainly do have sick people with a strange mark on their left wrists,” Director Hei replied, “but I’m not aware of any local crops having problems. Well, we can ask the agricultural and environmental offices while you are here.”

The victims, it turned out, were not being kept in a single hospital, but were spread out over several all over the city so it took the mages four days to visit all of them. Then, even though they were assured that there had been no problems with any of the local plant life, Candle hired another helicopter to scope out the region around Direford, but to no avail.

As they got off the helicopter, the President of the Senate finally managed to get ahold of them and the agent of the helicopter tour agency ran out to tell Candle he had a phone call.

"Candle here," he spoke into the phone.

"Wizard Candle," the president greeted him smoothly, "I'm glad to see you anticipated the problem in Direford." He went on to describe similar problems on Othisl and Semmos.

"I've been led to understand there is something of the sort on Tissa as well," Candle replied.

"If that's the case, your sources are better than mine, Wizard," President Jiroshi replied. "Perhaps I had better make sure there is no outbreak on Killarn and other islands as well. Damned functionaries are feeding me the bad news in small doses." They spoke for another few minutes before bidding each other a "Good day."

On their sixth day in Direford, Candle decided it was time to take a break. "We've been working hard," he told the others. "I know we need to move on to Othisl and beyond. I half expect to find ourselves getting dragged back to Lillo, but we do deserve a break."

"What did you have in mind, Uncle?" Jollin asked.

"Well as it happens, Direford is the home of Mayim's largest marine aquarium and it seems to me it would be a shame if we did not make the time to visit it."

The Direford Aquarium had been within their sight throughout most of their stay in Direford. It was a collection of low, round buildings directly across the river from their marina, in fact, and had been hosting fireworks displays every evening since their arrival so it had been rather hard for them to miss.

Oceanvine was fascinated by the exhibits the moment they reached the entrance. There were large sea water tanks surrounding the entire complex where seals were kept. According to a sign these were all animals that had been found in the harbor suffering from various ailments. The large perimeter tanks were actually open to the harbor itself and the seals were free to come and go seasonally, although since having been nursed back to health many of the animals had returned each year and when they did, often stayed in the aquarium's tanks. Other sea life native to the harbor had found homes within those same tanks and were viewable through large glass windows inside the aquarium complex.

"They originally tried to introduce a patch of oceanvine to the perimeter tank," Candle told the others. "That's why the tank is so large, but it turns out that it was not large enough for a viable patch. Evidently, when oceanvine falls below a certain size it eventually starves to death."

"Then where do little oceanvine patches come from?" Oceanvine asked.

"When a healthy patch reaches a certain size, it divides into two or three separate patches," Candle replied. "Of course large storms will also break a patch into smaller pieces. If such pieces are too small they will starve, but they might also join up with other small patches. It's an interesting form of seaweed if

you can keep it from trying to eat you.”

Inside the aquarium were many exhibits from shark tanks to a visible reef. The builders of the aquarium had done their best to obtain as many different species as possible to populate their watery museum, but the crowd-pleasing favorite was always the dolphin tank at the center of the complex. After strolling through the rest of the complex, Candle and company eventually found themselves heading there to watch the latest show.

The show was filled with all the flips and splashes they expected as the dolphins were put through their paces, leaping through hoops and playing ball games, balancing on their tails in formation or just jumping for fish. However, not all the cetaceans in the tank were performing. The few who did distracted most of the audience, but Oceanvine noticed that two trainers were trying, unsuccessfully, to coax several dolphins to perform, but they stayed in one corner of the tank resisting any attempts to get them to move.

Curiosity drove her to take a second look and when she did she saw the reason why those dolphins were not in the mood. “They’re infected,” she told the others.

“What?” Sextant asked.

“Those dolphins at the far end of the pool,” Oceanvine pointed them out. “They’re suffering from the Bond of Aritos. It’s the same as the rest we’ve seen, I think.”

“It is,” Candle confirmed. “The Bond of Gredac again. It’s even more unsuitable for affecting water mammals than it is for land animals and people.”

“Then why use it at all?” Jollin asked.

“It is probably the most virulent curse the mage who cast it knows,” Candle replied. “Even in a situation that is not optimal, the Bond is a powerful force, it’s just that there is very little in common between the powers of Gredac and animal life. Now had this curse been focused on seaweed the results would have been quite different. As it happens the Bond of Gredac is the least adapted version of the Bond to affect Dolphins. Xenlabit or Kerawlat would have been devastating, however.”

“Is it possible One Maiyim’s mages really don’t know that?” Sextant asked. “This isn’t the first time they have used inappropriate versions of the Bond. Baron Wollono in Granom tried to use the Bond of Pohn to sabotage the Gran 4 spacecraft.”

“It was clumsy,” Oceanvine agreed, “but it did work.”

“It did, but not in the manner he had wanted,” Sextant reminded her. “He wanted the ethernauts to die a slow agonizing death, but the Demon Pohn is all about power.”

“And he has the same reasoning capacity as a worm,” Oceanvine agreed.

“He’s not quite that stupid,” Candle corrected her, “but you have the idea.”

“But since Pohn is raw power without any trace of subtlety,” Sextant continued, “the first part of the planned disaster went off but failed to trigger the subsequent parts. I’ve been thinking about that. Is it possible, that first explosion, rather than tripping the next component of the curse in line, just blew the spell string off before it could transfer instructions?”

“It could be,” Candle agreed, “but I still think it is more likely that the spell modules were not properly connected in the first place.”

“What about those poor dolphins?” Oceanvine asked.

“We’ll talk to the trainers after the show,” Candle assured her. “Hmm, they don’t seem to have contracted the curse. I wonder why not.”

“They may not be transmitting it,” Sextant replied. “perhaps there is something else that the victims, Orenta and dolphins alike, have in common.”

“I can’t think what it might be,” Candle replied. “It’s just as likely the mage in question cast the spell twice. Perhaps one was supposed to be a diversion. I have to admit it was pure serendipity we discovered this.”

“Neither spell was very effective,” Jollin pointed out. “I think Sextant is right, whoever cast the curses we’ve seen so far, doesn’t really understand what he is doing. He may know more spells than I do, but he doesn’t know how to use them.”

“Don’t be certain he’s more knowledgeable,” Candle replied as the show came to an end. “He may be a one-trick pony and this is all he knows.”

“Is that possible?” Oceanvine asked.

“Well, I don’t think it’s likely,” Candle replied. “He can probably do other tricks, but he isn’t showing much imagination. Let’s go. Enough of the crowd has gone.”

He led the way down to poolside where one of the trainers was still looking concerned as she tried to comfort the cursed dolphins.

“They aren’t looking very happy in spite of their grins,” Candle commented to the trainers.

“It’s very odd,” the trainer, an Orentan woman in a brightly colored wetsuit, told them. “They’ve been getting weaker and weaker for the last few weeks and nothing we try does them any good.”

“That’s because this is not a normal disease, Ora” Candle replied. “I hate to sound old-fashioned and melodramatic, but it’s a curse.”

“I could almost believe that,” she replied sadly, reaching to pat one of the dolphins, “but I’m just not the superstitious type.”

“Neither am I,” Oceanvine told her, simultaneously lifting a small sphere of water from the tank and causing it to orbit the woman’s head.

“Huh?” the Orente responded. “How are you doing that?”

“There is still magic in the world,” Oceanvine chuckled. “We even teach it in the Universities again these days.”

“I always thought that was just a study of old technology.”
the Orente replied. “Sort of like Anthropology.”

“Well, it’s that too,” Oceanvine shrugged, “but it’s also a physical science and except for theory class, most of it is hands-on.”

“More like hands-off,” the dolphin trainer smiled. “But how can you say these poor creatures are cursed?”

“We can see the curse,” Sextant replied. “Part of our training is in learning to see and diagnose auras. And fortunately we can cure this curse as well.”

“You can?”

“I just did while the kids were talking,” Candle told her. “You seem to be okay as well.”

“Was that in doubt?” she asked.

“There was a chance that you might have contracted the curse through contact with your charges here,” Candle explained. “Evidently not. Good news for you, but a mystery for us.” He turned back to the trainer and explained, “They’ll recover rapidly now. Give them an hour or so and they’ll be screaming to eat and by tomorrow or the next day they’ll be back to their old tricks... literally, I guess.”

“Uncle Candle,” Jollin told him, “you missed one.”

“What?” he asked, startled, “I can’t have.”

“Well it looked like you cured it,” she admitted, “but as soon as you stopped the aura of the curse came back.”

“Hmm, a tough one,” Candle remarked and worked on it again. This time he concentrated on his task for over ten minutes. As he worked the dolphin in question became increasingly agitated until it suddenly reared up on its tail, jumped back into the water and vomited a greasy gray-green cloud of something into the water.

“I think I see something,” Jollin reported as they all looked into the pool below the dolphin which had become suddenly calm once again. “There was a flash of gold, just beneath whatever it was he vomited.”

“Gold?” Oceanvine asked, then extended her mind down into the water. She probed to the depths of the tank and found several pebbles on the bottom, a plastic cup, evidently dropped by one of the audience members, a deflated beach ball and a heavy gold ring. “Well spotted, cousin!” she told her, floating the ring a bit closer, while depositing the junk on the rim of the pool. “Uncle, I believe you’ve been making a collection of these things.”

“I have,” Candle nodded, “although these days I have far too many of them. I’m really kind of tired of looking at them, however.” He accepted the ring and in a few seconds, managed to dispel the curse within it. “This was just plain malicious. There was no good reason why these dolphins needed to be affected. And yet merely throwing an enchanted ring into tank should not have been enough to activate the curse.”

“That dolphin swallowed it, though,” Jollin pointed out. “I’ve heard some people say dolphins are amazingly intelligent. Maybe they are just smart enough to invoke the spell stored in the ring?”

"I don't see how," Candle replied, "unless the ring was enchanted to activate when swallowed. Of course that argues I'm right about this being a willful and malicious act."

"It still seems so senseless," Oceanvine replied. "What's the point?"

"Well," Candle shrugged, "it could also have been unintentional. We already know whoever cast this spell was using proxies. The proxy who started the curse around Nimda got caught up in the spell, but whoever did it in Cewen may have gotten away cleanly."

"Or else he or she ditched the ring when done," Sextant commented. "Then we would have cured whoever it was along with the rest of the victims."

"You have a point there," Candle admitted. "It could be that once activated, those rings would infect whoever or whatever they were in contact with. I should have thought of that sooner. The proxies who used them were probably supposed to get rid of them quickly, but Hira's assistant in Nimda got greedy. Here, whoever did it, decided to hide the evidence in the dolphin tank, only one of the critters got curious and tried to eat it."

"That could be just as well," Oceanvine told him. "Since we're just speculating about a spell you've already stopped, I think it is also possible that the ring was supposed to infect the water and thereby every creature in contact with it."

"That would have been every creature in the aquarium," the trainer gasped. "The water from all the tanks share a central filtration system."

"Even the perimeter tanks the seals live in?" Jollin asked.

"To a lesser extent," the trainer replied. "It's not as clean as our internal tanks but we do make it somewhat cleaner than the rest of the harbor. We think that's why the seals and other marine life do so well in there. Oh my Gods! Do you mean this disease could have spread beyond the aquarium?"

"As Oceanvine said," Candle told her calmly, "all we're doing is speculating. I dispersed all the energy that might have been left in that ring in the process of getting it out of the dolphin so we won't know for certain what the intention was here. In any case, all the animals in this tank appear to be healthy."

"We'll have to check the others," Jollin pointed out.

"True enough," Candle agreed, "So much for our day off."

Nine

"That was strange," Oceanvine remarked as the *Maiyim Bourne* slipped out of the harbor the next morning before breakfast. She was at the helm, piloting the boat to a location from which it would be best to set sail, but paused to look back at the aquarium.

"What do you mean?" Sextant asked from his perch on top of the cabin.

"Other than the ring, there was no connection between the disease that affected the dolphins and those

the Orenta suffered,” Oceanvine replied.

“I’m just glad none of the other creatures there were infected,” Jollin remarked.

“But shouldn’t the Orentan trainers have been affected as well?” Oceanvine asked. “We know the disease affects them too.”

“I’m afraid that will have to remain a mystery,” Candle told her, “at least for now. I think you convinced me with your speculations yesterday, however. I’m tending to believe the person with the ring just tried to toss it into the tank. The thing is the dolphins are used to having people throw food to them. If he or she really wanted to make life difficult that ring could have been dropped into the seal tank or even directly into the harbor.”

“Thank the Gods he didn’t do that, then,” Jollin replied. “This is going to be a long hop to the next island, isn’t it?”

“The winds are with us this morning,” Sextant pointed out. “We won’t be tacking all over the map if we head back the way we came, but once we round the northeastern tip of Rishanda, we’re going to have to sail due west for a while and then it’s a matter of which side of Othisl we sail along to reach the Othisl City.”

“We should follow Othisl’s western shoreline,” Candle suggested. “It will keep us in the sheltered waters of the middle Falienas chain, but because the water is relatively shallow there it is not a preferred commercial route. We’ll be able to sail at night a bit more safely.”

“Stand by to hoist sail!” Oceanvine commanded. She paused while Sextant and Jollin got into position then called, “Hoist the mainsail!”

With the mainsail raised, they were soon out of the harbor and once clear of the river mouth, Oceanvine set a northeasterly course that ran with the wind so they raised the spinnaker for the first time in a while and soon the boat was flying along at top speed.

The journey up the coast of Rishanda went by pleasantly fast. When flying the spinnaker, they had learned that it was best for all hands to be available and ready to attend in case the large sail needed to be lowered. It was also necessary to keep an eye out for hazards not visible to the person at the helm, so magic lessons and practice were suspended until late morning when they finally turned west and replaced the spinnaker with the Granomish jib.

With a light quartering breeze, the *Maiyim Bourne* could no longer stay aloft so Candle, now on watch at the helm, ordered the foils be left in the retracted position. They still made way at a respectable rate, but after the exciting speeds they had been cruising at, they all felt more relaxed and the younger mages could return to their daily practice exercises.

“We did our basic exercises this morning before we left,” Oceanvine remarked to Jollin, “but you’ve noticed Six and I usually start any session with telekinetic juggling. Would you like to join us this afternoon?”

“Am I up to that?” Jollin asked hopefully.

“You tell me,” Oceanvine replied, unconsciously mimicking the way Candle had said the same to her on many occasions.

Oceanvine and Sextant did not normally have to discuss their routine before starting. Over the years they had come to know each other well enough that they instinctively knew when and how each would move when working together. They had become so proficient at it, in fact, that Candle had nearly stopped warning them of the dangers of cooperative magic in the last year. However, Jollin did not have their experience, so Oceanvine showed her what they were about to do in detail and explained it several times before they started.

The explanations helped because Jollin was able to join in a three-way juggle with only a few false starts and even when Sextant unthinkingly threw in an unplanned variation, Jollin was able to adapt quickly without losing concentration. They kept at that exercise longer than normal to give Jollin the extra practice but eventually fell to their own individual projects.

When Sextant broke off to take his watch at the helm later that afternoon, Oceanvine went into the cabin to work on her thesis and Jollin went astern to sit with Candle.

Oceanvine spent the rest of the time before dinner working on the third chapter of her thesis, and then spent another two hours afterward until she realized that she should have been on watch at the helm.

“Don’t worry about it, Vine,” Jollin told her. “I don’t mind taking part of your watch and Six was in the bow in case I needed him.”

“Where’s Uncle Candle?” Oceanvine asked.

“He went below just after dinner,” Jollin replied, moving aside to let Oceanvine take the helm, although the boat was under autopilot at the moment. “Didn’t you notice?”

“I guess I was too caught up in my work,” Oceanvine grinned.

“I’ve noticed that about you,” Jollin grinned back. “You attack every task with such one-minded ferocity, it’s almost frightening.”

“Probably a bad habit I should break,” Oceanvine shrugged.

“Maybe,” Jollin shrugged back at her, “but maybe not. It seems to work for you, but it has shown me that I’ll never be a mage of your caliber.”

“You have a lot of talent,” Oceanvine told her earnestly. “More than some of my students.”

“Thanks,” Jollin smiled at the compliment, “but I don’t have your drive. Magic is fun for me, but for you it’s your life. What magic is for you, the smithy is for me.”

“Then just imagine how you’ll use what I’ve taught you when you get back to Medda,” Oceanvine suggested. “Uncle Candle says you’ve always used magic when working at the forge. Now it will be a conscious process and who knows what new ways you may find to use it?”

“Not just at the forge,” Jollin remarked. “Now that I’ve come to recognize it, I’ve been doing the same sort of thing throughout the smithy, the entire machine shop. All sorts of little things that came so easily to me, but Will sweated over. I wonder how he’ll feel if I start forging steel without benefit of a hammer.”

“Now that would be fun to watch!” Oceanvine laughed.

“Strange, I thought I might go into local politics like Granddad did,” Jollin remarked.

“What’s stopping you?” Oceanvine asked. “Women have been allowed to hold office for thirty years, even the House of Lords has had two female members this past decade.”

“Auntie Oceanvine did that, didn’t she?” Jollin asked.

“Well, she didn’t pass the suffrage laws herself, but she was a leading campaigner for them,” Oceanvine replied. “For someone who absolutely abhorred politics, she was certainly involved with the process anyway.”

“Granddad always says you have to be a politician to truly hate the business,” Jollin laughed. “I suppose I could eventually run for the City Council or the School Committee. Then if the whole thing doesn’t teach me to keep my hands out, I’ll consider the Mayor’s Office.”

“You’re thinking too small,” Oceanvine told her. “You could also sit in Parliament.”

“Our current MP is very popular,” Jollin replied. “It could be a few more terms before he is ready to retire. He might not want to retire at all, for that matter,”

“Were you planning to run next week?” Oceanvine countered.

“Well, no,” Jollin admitted. “I guess that would be silly. The Smiths and Coopers are fairly influential around Medda, but I don’t think anyone is influential enough to put someone my age and without experience in Parliament. You sure I ought to set my sights on that?”

“You’re the one who was talking about a career in politics,” Oceanvine told her.

“I guess I was, but you’re the one who suggested Parliament,” Jollin pointed out.

“It seemed like the right way to go if you ever wanted to be Prime Minister,” Oceanvine shrugged.

“What is this?” Jollin laughed. “Do you have my entire career planned now?”

“Isn’t that what a good manager is for?” Oceanvine teased her. “We’re just talking, you know. The hard part doesn’t start until you get home and decide what to do for the rest of your life. What’s that sound?”

Inside the cabin the radio was once more making funny noises. This time it was not a trumpet fanfare. Instead it sounded more like an air-raid signal. The eerie sound continued for over five minutes before being replaced by a man’s voice, “One. Five. Eight. Three.” He paused before continuing, “Salve. Effort. Gone. Theater. Bucket. Eel. Portend. Grave. Was. Normal. Venture. Indifferent. Tower. Beyond. Run. Dignity. Minute. Happenstance. Quarter. Library. Oak...”

Voice droned on speaking seemingly random words for the next fifteen minutes while Oceanvine kept track of them on thaumagraphic paper until Candle came out of his cabin and took over the note-taking chore. Finally the broadcast signed off with a different series of numbers, “Three. Seven. Four. Niner,” followed by the siren-like sound.

“Well that was different from all the others we’ve heard,” Candle commented when it was over and they had returned to the deck.

“Must be a new code,” Oceanvine remarked.

“Or a new group sending messages,” Candle replied.

“Would two groups have chosen the same frequency out of sheer chance?” Oceanvine countered.

“Probably not,” Candle admitted. “So someone out there has a new code. It’s probably a good idea. It was only a matter of time before someone broke the other code.”

“I think they’re pretty stupid,” Jollin remarked. “Why don’t they just start out by announcing, ‘This is a secret message. Please set your magic decoder rings to setting fifty-nine?’ It would accomplish the same thing.”

“No doubt whoever it is takes themselves too seriously for that,” Candle chuckled.

“Has anyone tried to find the transmitters for those coded messages?” Oceanvine asked.

“I know Ksaveras’s RBI has tried, but you know it does not take much to be a broadcaster these days. Everything they need can fit into a milk crate. It can be set up in minutes and torn down even faster, especially if they leave the antenna behind. It’s probably just a hundred feet of wire or something similar. Heck, I knew a radio enthusiast one who used a tree outside Randona for his load to talk to some friends on Kif. He did it just to see if it could be done.

“The broadcasts are barely long enough to triangulate in on,” Candle continued, “and then only if you happen to be in the right vicinity. So far by the time the communications officers show up, there aren’t even discernable tire tracks to investigate.”

“And they never broadcast from the same location twice?” Sextant guessed.

“When you can use a car battery for power,” Candle replied, “there are no shortages of locations to work from.”

They sailed on. At midnight, Candle and Sextant came on watch, allowing Oceanvine and Jollin to get some sleep, although they were awake again four hours later to take the next watch.

Once they entered the passage between Othisl and the Falienas, they had the wind at their backs again and they raced up the coast toward Othisl City. They were still an hour away from the city, when Jollin spotted something neither she nor any of the others had seen.

“Looks like someone attached a sail to a surfboard,” she remarked. “Interesting idea.”

“Pretty clever,” Candle agreed. “It allows them to surf even in relatively calm waters so long as there’s a breeze to propel them.”

“Looks like fun,” Oceanvine remarked, “and it might solve the dilemma of what to do with my board in Randona.”

Several wind surfers came out to attempt to race with the *Maiyim Bourne*. They were left in the boat’s wake, but before speeding on away, Jollin remarked, “I think we’re going to need special boards for that. Besides, I like the one I bought just fine. I don’t want to have to drill holes in it to mount a mast.

Better to see if we can buy one of these instead.”

“Agreed,” Oceanvine told her. “Besides, there are likely a lot of mistakes to make in building such a contraption. Buying one outright will avoid that.”

“And leave you with all the mistakes to be made trying to use it,” Sextant commented from just inside the cabin. “Really, Vine, it can also be very dangerous, especially without someone to teach you.”

“Maybe I’ll have time to take a lessons here,” she retorted. “Why? What bothers you about these sailing surfboards?”

“I don’t know,” Sextant admitted, “but I remember all the warnings Leotawa gave us in our surfing lessons. You can get badly hurt if you aren’t very careful on a normal surfboard. I can’t imagine these would be any easier to master.”

“Well, I’ll have to keep that in mind,” Oceanvine shrugged, “but someone has to be the first, you know.”

“Maybe,” Jollin nodded, “but Six is right. This could be dangerous if we aren’t careful.”

“See?” Sextant told Oceanvine.

“So we’ll just have to be careful,” Jollin concluded, taking the wind out of Sextant’s sails.

“Thrill-seekers,” Sextant muttered disappearing once more into the cabin.

Ten

Othisl City was similar to Nimda although it was obviously smaller and, as the mages had heard, was more geared toward the tourist trade than most of the ports they had visited in Bellinen so far. This was, in fact, the center of elite tourism in Bellinen and it drew the rich from all over the world to enjoy its white sand beaches and palm-shaded parks.

Finding a marina to dock the *Maiyim Bourne* at was child’s play, but even Oceanvine was shocked at the cost. “You would think we were using His Majesty’s private slip!” she exclaimed when Candle admitted how much he had just paid.

“Actually, they probably would not charge him,” Candle pointed out. “Besides, why are you complaining. You know I paid them from the boat’s money bags. I don’t recall you complaining about that before.”

“I don’t recall anyone asking a king’s ransom for a marina slip before either,” Oceanvine retorted.

“How much did it cost you to stay in Harbingtonport the summer before we met?” Candle asked.

“I don’t know,” Oceanvine admitted, “Dad was paying for it... Oh. I never thought of that. Was it this expensive to stay that night in Truwich?”

“Not quite,” Candle shook his head, “but I think the town got taken by surprise when the nobility suddenly descended on it that year. It wasn’t cheap, however.”

“I guess I’d better fill my purse then,” Oceanvine commented. “It sounds like a burger on a bun might require a line of credit.”

It was late afternoon by the time they were ready to go into town, but Candle decided it would be a good idea to find the Office of the Board of Health, even if it was too late to see anyone there. However, they were happily surprised to find two people were still working in that office when they finally found City Hall.

“The President’s office told us to expect you,” Deputy Director Gillia Hu, a middle-aged Orentan woman, told them after introductions.

“I wish he would have told us that,” Candle grumbled.

“You did tell him there was a problem here, Uncle,” Jollin reminded him.

“Perhaps,” Candle agreed, “but I still don’t know what the problem is and I doubt I mentioned I was coming here next. However, we are here.”

“We have a journeyman-candidate mage working here as an intern this summer,” Gillia told them, “but he has gone home for the evening. I’ll be glad to introduce you in the morning.”

“Sounds good,” Candle agreed, “but for now could you give us a quick run-down as to what has been happening here?”

“Of course,” Gillia agreed. “The problem appears to have started with a herd of dairy cows a few miles to the south of town. They seemed healthy enough at first, but anyone who drank their milk became quite ill. Soon after that the cows themselves became too ill to give milk, but by then the disease had started spreading from person to person.”

Candle asked about symptoms and they sounded the same as those that had been reported at their previous ports of call, however she did not mention a strange marking on the left wrists of the victims, so Candle asked about that too.

“Funny you should mention that, Wizard,” she replied. “Yes, there is a strange, symbol-like mark that appears on the left wrist of the victims. How did you know?”

“It’s pretty much the same as has been occurring on other islands,” Candle told her. “Don’t any of you talk to your counterparts in other cities?”

“Only if we know to ask,” Gillia replied. “This is the first I’ve heard of this anywhere else. Wouldn’t that make this an epidemic?”

“It sounds like it to me,” Candle agreed, “and it’s one that has been started by someone intentionally.” He went on to describe their experiences so far.

“That’s horrible,” Gillia reacted. “Who would do such a thing?”

“While I would never ask a lady her age,” Candle replied, “you may conceivably be old enough to remember an organization called One Maiyim.”

“They were outlawed decades ago,” Gillia pointed out.

“That hasn’t stopped them anywhere else,” Oceanvine told her. “Four years ago in Sutheria one of their people was using a similar spell to kill people and spawn tsunamis.”

“I heard about the tsunamis,” Gillia admitted. “Can magic really do that?”

“It can,” Candle confirmed, and then added dryly, “though I tell my students not to try. It’s the sort of thing that can give mages a bad name.”

“Then three years ago the People’s Party On the Isle of Fire and in Granom turned out to be a front for One Maiyim,” Oceanvine continued.

“They were?” Gillia replied. “I never heard that.”

“For their own reasons none of the governments have wanted that widely known,” Candle replied. “Can’t say I agree, but then I’ve never been one for secrets.”

“Then not too long after that, there was an attempt to assassinate the king and queen of Emmine,” Oceanvine added, “so I suppose it was only a matter of time before they tried something here. You know I always wondered why the People’s Party didn’t try starting up here too. Given what I know of Bellinen politics, they would have fit right in. Some of the promises in their platform weren’t all that different from that of the Populists here. Considering the Populists have a plurality in the Senate at the moment, it might have made politics rather interesting.”

“Too interesting, if you ask me,” Gillia opined. “Just as well they never came here.”

“Well, as a political party they didn’t, but they do seem to be here now,” Oceanvine replied. “Keep an eye out for someone wearing a heavy gold ring with a blue enameled wave on it. That’s the sign for One Maiyim, but because very few people know that, they can use it as a recognition signal. The Deputy Director of Health in Nimda was found wearing one.”

“I’ll keep an eye out for it,” Gillia replied, “but I hope I never actually see one.”

“Especially among your own people,” Jollin added.

“I don’t suppose you’ve been keeping all the victims of the curse together in an isolation ward?” Candle asked.

“We have,” Gillia informed him, “but what we have not been able to do is recall all the affected milk, so new patients are still being brought to the hospital.”

“Only one hospital, Ora?” Candle asked.

“There’s only one with the resources for this sort of disease,” Gillia replied, “or for what we thought it was. Why? Do you want to go there immediately?”

“The sooner we cure the patients they have now, the sooner they can be moved to normal wards,” Candle told her, “although if you give them a day or two, they’ll be well enough to go home.”

“That quickly?” Gillia marveled. She drove them to the hospital herself where after a short wait they

were able to meet with the doctor in charge of the isolation ward.

“I will not allow my patients to be subjected to a load of superstitious nonsense!” he told the mages.

“Is it superstition if it can be proven absolutely true?” Candle asked him mildly.

“What? That some great international conspiracy is raising demons to cause some strange disease?” Doctor Salmawa Tau laughed harshly. “It sounds like a bad historical movie about the Age of Faith.” Unseen by the doctor, Oceanvine and Jollin took their pearl and silver beads from their purses and put them in orbit about their heads.

“And yet you have no trouble putting your faith in all the forms of tech magic I see all around us,” Candle replied. “Do you have any notion how the electricity you use is generated? Can you explain to me why a telephone works? Most of your modern diagnostic equipment is based on tech magic that I, among others, pioneered decades ago, Doctor.”

“That’s different,” Doctor Tau argued, catching sight of the two women with the objects floating around them. He stared for a moment, then caught himself and tried to stare Candle down.

“In what way?” Candle countered. “The only difference I’m aware of is that tech magic is accomplished by teams of technicians working on modules that other technicians eventually connect up rather than a spell being cast by a single mage on the fly.”

“Tech magic devices are produced in a quality-controlled factory,” Doctor Tau told him.

“And I think you would be surprised at how many failures get taken off the assembly lines,” Candle replied. “Whereas I have had almost no failures since my days as an apprentice.”

“The word ‘almost’ does not fill me with confidence,” the doctor replied.

“Have you ever lost a patient, Doctor?” Candle asked seriously.

“I have,” Doctor Tau admitted reluctantly. “I’m only mortal after all.”

“I haven’t,” Candle told him confidently. “I don’t deal with most medical problems, of course. But in cases in which a person has been infected with a disease associated with the Bond of Aritos, I have never failed to cure a patient. If you don’t believe me, feel free to call your colleagues in Nimda, Wenta and Direford. Of course their replies will take a day, I’m sure and I would feel better if I did the job immediately.”

Doctor Tau thought about it for a few minutes before turning toward Gillia. “Are these people for real?”

“Senate President Jiroshi sent them personally,” Gillia replied. “They have been curing people elsewhere.”

“Very well,” Doctor Tau decided, “but I will hold you and your people personally responsible if anything goes wrong,” he warned Candle.

“Sounds fair,” Candle replied and allowed Doctor Tau to lead the way to the isolation ward.

Once again the mages made quick work of dispelling the curse and less than an hour later the victims

had all been cured.

“I still have trouble believing it,” Doctor Tau admitted later as they sipped coffee in the cafeteria, “but I must admit that you may have been right. Those odd marks on their left wrists have disappeared and some of the first ones you worked on are already showing signs of improvement.”

“I understand, however, there may still be victims who have not yet been brought here,” Candle remarked.

“Yes,” Doctor Tau agreed. “Just today we had two more people brought here. The problem seems to be getting the word out about the tainted milk. Once a person has been infected he or she does not immediately develop symptoms, but an infected person does seem to become a carrier almost immediately. That’s why so many victims have been children.”

“Well, of course,” Candle nodded. “They drink the milk then pass the curse on to both family and friends. You seem to have been getting whole families and that’s not surprising. If it had not been for your use of the isolation ward, I’m sure everyone in the hospital would have been affected as well.”

“Yes, that was a problem as well,” the doctor admitted.

“Well, we’ll be staying in town until we’re certain everyone has been cured,” Candle replied. “If even one victim is left, all this will just start over again. This is not a normal disease and no one will develop antibodies against it. We’ll still have to see to the affected cattle and make sure whatever milk and other dairy products are left have been destroyed.”

“The milk has been recalled,” Gillia informed him, “and the cows have been ordered to be destroyed.”

“That’s a waste,” Candle replied, “but I suppose it is standard procedure. We’ll still have to inspect the site where the remains were disposed. I seriously hope you did not cremate them. That won’t dispel the curse and it is all too likely to spread it all over the archipelago.”

“Merinne!” Gillia swore. “I didn’t realize that. Nobody did. Excuse me, please. I’d better make some phone calls.” She left the cafeteria in a hurry, but returned a few minutes later looking relieved. “The order to destroy the beasts was sent out by my superior this morning, hours before you arrived. The animals are still being brought to the slaughterhouse and none have been killed just yet.”

“Good,” Candle replied as all the mages sighed with relief. “We’ll look at them in the morning.”

Gillian gave the mages a ride back to the harbor district, but rather than going back to the boat, they decided to eat dinner in town. They walked around the touristy district until they found what looked like a nice quiet restaurant. It was obviously one of those few in any tourist area that catered more to the locals and rather than placing a large and flashy sign out front, there had been a small and tasteful plaque on the door itself that quietly proclaimed this was a place to buy food.

“We can go to one of the louder places on the block,” Candle told them, “but it has been my experience that the joints like this have better food and drink.”

“I don’t think any of us are in the mood for a party tonight,” Sextant spoke for all.

The restaurant was not small, but it was narrow and appeared to stretch back along the length of the block it went on through a series of rooms. Each of the rooms bore an Orentan floral pattern on the

walls, but the predominant color varied from room to room. They were seated in the third room which seemed to have been decorated in shades of red.

The moment they had been seated, however, Oceanvine heard a high, feminine voice, “Elie? What are you doing here? I haven’t seen you anywhere in years!”

She turned to see an old friend, Lady Jane Terrun, seated at the next table with a tall, good-looking man. “Hi, Janie. I think the last time we saw each other was in Truwich. Hello, Ted,” she greeted the man next to Janie after introducing the others. She recognized him as Lord Theodore Wensley, whom Janie had been dating four years earlier. She wondered if they had actually gotten married in the meantime. She had not received an invitation, but she had not heard from many of the old crowd lately.

“Lady Oceanvine,” Ted replied politely.

“Oh yes! I’d forgotten you’d changed your name,” Janie remarked.

“It’s no big deal,” Oceanvine shrugged. A few years earlier she had been very exacting about it, but after the events in Querna she had come to realize that she had more important problems than worrying about what she was called by friends and family.

“But why did you change it?” Janie asked. “And what’s with the flying pearl?”

Oceanvine chuckled a bit, not realizing that any of her old friends had been so far out of the loop. She wondered if maybe that had been her own fault and had unwittingly pushed them all away. “It is customary for a mage to take a new name on graduation,” Oceanvine explained. “Actually there are all sorts of traditions I hadn’t expected. For example, were you aware that a mage is always presented to the King without gloves on his or her hands?”

“Can’t say I did,” Janie admitted with a giggle. “I don’t think I could get myself to do that.”

“It wasn’t easy,” Oceanvine shrugged.

“But the pearl, Elie?” Janie pressed.

“It was a gift from Queen Orya of Granom,” Oceanvine replied. Janie looked amazed, but Oceanvine continued on before she could ask for details. “It also seems to be becoming the latest fashion accessory for female mages, or did you miss Jollin’s silver bead?”

“I was wondering,” Janie replied. “Could you make one for me?”

“A bead?” Oceanvine laughed. “It’s just a normal bead. If you want to float one around your head, though, you need to learn telekinesis.”

“Oh,” Janie replied, disappointed.

“Well, it’s not all that difficult to learn, but it does take hours of practice,” Oceanvine explained. “Hey, I’ve been out of touch. Have you two…” she left the question hanging.

“We just set the date last week,” Janie explained. “We decided on the winter holidays so we could fly to the Isle of Fire for the honeymoon. I’ll send you an invitation. I promise!”

While Oceanvine and Janie had been talking, Lord Theodore struck up a conversation with the men and they eventually decided to move their tables so they could all sit together.

“So is this restaurant one of the new hot spots?” Jollin asked Janie during a lull in the conversation.

“Not as such,” Janie laughed. “I just found out about it the other day, in fact. This is one of those places you go when you just want a nice quiet meal. Still, I’ve seen a lot of the usuals in here this evening. Most of them left just as we were coming in before you arrived. None of us have been seeing you lately, Elie.”

“I haven’t had the time to keep up with the latest vacation spots,” Oceanvine admitted, wondering if she could even have afforded this sort of trip these days if it had not been for the *Maiyim Bourne*. “I’ve been teaching at University and then spending the summers studying and well, I guess some of what I did made headlines a few years ago.”

“Did they?” Janie asked, wide-eyed.

“They did, dear,” Ted told her. “You really should keep up with the news. Your old friend here has been awarded both the Star of Emmine and the Granomish Order of the Silver Stay. I doubt there are many more who could say the same.”

“Six could,” Oceanvine commented, “How about you, Uncle Candle?”

“Not I,” Candle laughed. “I never accepted the Star of Emmine. It wouldn’t have been right at the time.”

“Perhaps, but I doubt there’s anyone else who is a Marquess in Granom and a Lord in Emmine,” Sextant told him.

“Empty titles,” Candle shrugged. “Something kings do because it’s cheaper than actually paying.”

Both Sextant and Oceanvine knew better than that, but it was an old discussion so they let the matter lie and diverted the others to more current topics. It was a pleasant evening, but when Janie suggested they go out dancing, they all begged off and went to bed early.

Eleven

They stayed in Othisl only another three days. On their second day in port, three second-year general magic students and a professor from the University at Merinne arrived at the president’s request.

“Glad to have you here,” Candle told them. “Had I known you were available, I’d have been glad to have you on hand sooner. It’s not a particularly hard curse to dispel, but we are going to have to go over some fairly advanced stuff before you can be safe when handling it.” He paused and turned to the teacher. “No offense intended, Or, but you don’t look old enough to have been an active mage back when it was still fashionable.”

“I’m not,” the teacher replied with a broad smile. His mage name was Horizon and like most Orenta he stood around seven feet tall. It had become popular among the young Orenta to wear their hair short, but Horizon’s straight black hair dropped to below his shoulders. “I’m more of a throw-back to even earlier times. I come from a small town in inland Orent called Lann. I doubt you’ve heard of it.”

“Actually I have,” Candle replied. “Wizard Meadow lived there, didn’t he?”

“He did!” Horizon exclaimed. “He was my master’s master. You see, I was trained by Master Tradewind, but by the time I was ready to attend University, there was, of course, no magic curriculum, so I earned my degrees in biology. A few years ago when general magic was added back to the curriculum, I was able to place as a journeyman and I hope to defend my master’s thesis next spring.

“Very good!” Candle commended him. “I’ve been telling my own students there were still a few of us floating around, but you’re the first one approximately their age I’ve managed to find.”

“Yes, we heard Journeywoman Oceanvine and Master Sextant were working with you, sir,” Horizon commented. “Where are they this morning?”

“I sent them out to cure the cows that started the mess here on Othisl,” Candle replied. “It shouldn’t take too long and in the meantime I need to teach you about the Bond of Aritos.”

“I’ve heard of that,” Horizon nodded, “but Master Tradewind would never actually show it to me.”

“Unless you really need to know, as you do now, it would have been useless knowledge,” Candle replied. “The few of us who were left thought the symbol had lost all its power anyway. It turned out we were wrong.”

“Excuse me, Wizard Candle?” one of the students asked. “But just what is the Bond of Aritos?”

“Every living thing has a pattern that can be expressed as a symbol. To know that symbol gives you the ability to use the power represented by the symbol,” Candle replied. “That’s not a particularly useful bit of knowledge because there are far easier ways of tapping into power than learning someone’s pattern. There is also a spell I will not teach you that does just that regardless of a person’s pattern.”

“Why won’t you teach it, sir,” the student asked. “Is it dangerous?”

“Not just dangerous, but incredibly evil,” Horizon told him. “I believe the Wizard Candle is referring to the Hook. There is never a good reason to know that one.”

“Although eventually you may need to learn how to disrupt the Hook without killing the victim,” Candle told them. “Fortunately, we are not dealing with that today.”

“Does anyone still know how to use it?” Horizon asked.

“Unfortunately, yes and they’ve made it even worse than it used to be. Some magical genius has learned how to combine it with the Bond of Aritos. Which brings us back to your question.

“The Bond is actually misnamed. It has practically nothing to do with Aritos. His symbol is called the Seal of Aritos and looks like this.” He drew the golden pen out of his shirt pocket and willed it to grow into a two and a half foot-long baton which he tilted to show them the symbol on the ends.

“Wow!” Horizon gasped.

“What is that?” the second student, a pretty young Orentan woman, asked.

“I’m not sure if it has a name,” Candle admitted, “but Oceanvine and some others have started referring

to it as the Staff of Aritos. It was originally a gift from him to his children, the demons. It has a lot of uses I have not even begun to guess at yet and it appears to function best in different ways for each person who uses it. I'll be happy to discuss it with you another time, but for now, I'm just showing it to you for comparison." The baton shrank back into a pen and he reached into one of the *Maiyim Bourne's* drawers for a sheet of paper and a pencil.

"Now this," he went on, starting to draw, "is sort of what the Bond of Aritos looks like. Do not try to draw it for yourself until you've learned how. Anyone can draw it, but only with training can you do it without making it an active curse. Don't even let your mind dwell on the shape of this sign, for that matter. This is the most dangerous magic you are ever likely to encounter."

"Even more dangerous than the Seal of Aritos?" Horizon asked.

"Absolutely," Candle nodded. "First of all you cannot invoke the Seal without the express permission of Aritos himself. Actually, I believe that might be true of any person's pattern symbol, but, understandably, I have not experimented with that. Second of all, Aritos is not the all-consuming devil the priests make Him out to be. Actually He's a fairly nice guy and I have lunch with Him on a semi-regular basis when I'm in Randona."

"Aritos spends His time in Randona?" the female student asked.

"No, but he visits," Candle replied. "He does keep an office in Midlon and one or two other places. Believe it or not, he occasionally works as a marriage counselor. Anyway he doesn't collect souls and tells me he wouldn't know what to do with one. The point is, the demons are eager to give anyone the use of their symbols. They get more out of it than the poor mortals who try even though it may not seem like it at first.

"The demons have been imprisoned on their islands far south of Ellisto, except for Arithan. He was destroyed. No," he stopped the questions. "Not now. Maybe over dinner tonight. The danger of the Bond is that it corrupts everything and everyone it touches. You cannot use it to cure or heal. There is, in fact, no good use for it, but there have always been people who thought to use it to gain power. It doesn't work that way. And almost everyone who has ever tried it was eventually devoured by the demon they thought to use. Those who didn't meet that fate, were killed by other mages.

"Now the one I've drawn here is a simplified version of the Bond associated with Arithan," Candle continued. "It's the safest one to show you these days. This is the basic pattern, but none of the Bonds are quite this simple. Expect to see a lot of patterns within the pattern. Swirls, knotwork-like designs and more. Also this is a two-dimensional representation of the Bond, but it can be three-dimensional as well. Both can be deadly, but each variation has its strengths and weaknesses."

He went on to describe the various Bonds in detail, discussing their properties, their strengths and weaknesses. Then he described what he and the others had seen so far and what measures they had taken in each case.

"That's does not sound as bad as I expected," Horizon admitted.

"We'll see how you feel after you treat your first patient," Candle told him, "but you're right. As long as you are careful, this particular variant is fairly simple to defeat. In fact it is the simplest I've ever encountered and that actually bothers me."

"Why?" Horizon asked.

“Because I keep worrying that I’m missing something vital. This series of curses is a little different on each island I’ve visited so far, but it is essentially the same. I think it was a single mage who enchanted a series of rings – we’ve found two of them so far – and then had confederates use them to spread this series of diseases at pretty much the same time in several places. He also does not care much about the people he uses. At least one got caught up in the curse and I suspect all four on the islands we’ve visited so far did.”

“I agree!” Oceanvine proclaimed as stepped down into the cabin. Jollin and Sextant followed and all three helped themselves to sweet seltzer from the food box as Candle introduced them. “We found a third ring, Uncle,” she told him before taking a first sip. “I left it active for you, but I think I know what made those dolphins ill.”

“Oh?” Candle asked. “Tell me.”

“The mage who cast the spell is either sloppy, incompetent or both,” Oceanvine remarked. “When the spell in the rings is invoked, the ring becomes a vector of infection by contact just as we suspected back in Direford. That’s why Hira’s assistant got caught by the curse. It’s why the ring was thrown away in Direford. The person who got duped into casting the spell started feeling bad and tried to get rid of the cause. I’m fairly certain it was too late, of course. I don’t know what happened to the one on Cewen, but I really hope it’s been well and truly lost or this illness will come back as soon as someone finds it. But enough of what I think. Look at it for yourself.” She reached into her purse and pulled out a small bundle of silk. She placed it on the table, but rather than opening it by hand, she used telekinesis to avoid the possibility of touching the ring. “I know we don’t think this spell affects humans,” she told Candle, “but I see no reason to take chances. I was careful to remove this from the victim before dispelling the curse.”

“Where did you find it?” Candle asked and he investigated the ring.

“In a hayloft,” Oceanvine replied. “It was still on the caster’s hand. She was dead, by the way.”

“She? Do you know who she was?” Candle asked.

“A health inspector,” Oceanvine replied. “Gillia identified her. Gillia’s downtown at the police station right now, giving a statement and getting an investigation started. We’re hoping to track down the mage who caused this by identifying the inspector’s associates, social and otherwise. Actually I promised we’d all go there this afternoon to make statements as well.”

“Shouldn’t take too long,” Candle replied. “After that we’ll see if any new victims have been found.”

Late the next day, President Jiroshi called again and asked Candle to rush to the island of Semmos. “The situation sounds worse than any that has been reported so far,” he told Candle.

“Did he at least say how the situation is worse?” Sextant asked as they left the harbor on Othisl.

“He didn’t give me a lot of details, but it sounds more like what we saw in Rjalkatyp,” Candle replied. “The infected people seem to be actively trying to spread the curse. You may recall that Xander told us the crime rate had gone up in that area of the archipelago as well.”

“Sounds like a different rogue mage than the one who cause the problems here in southwestern Bellinen,” Jollin remarked.

“And if that’s the case this one may not be as clumsy as the first,” Candle told her. “I do wish we had found him, whoever it was, though. The thought that someone who would do that is still running around somewhere bothers me.”

“Maybe he was one of the victims after all,” Oceanvine suggested.

“In which case we probably saved his life, leaving him free to try again,” Candle commented sourly. “Did anyone check the weather report? I don’t like the look of the clouds to the west.”

“Just cloudy today,” Sextant reported, “but we may have some stormy weather by dawn.”

“That’s about twenty hours away,” Candle noted. “Maybe we can outrun the storm.”

“You want to sail all night again, sir?” Sextant asked.

“A storm could keep us port-bound for days,” Candle replied. “Did the radio say what sort of storm?”

“We’re on the wrong side of the equator for a cyclonic storm at this time of year,” Sextant replied, “so unless you think One Maiyim has figured out how to cause a hurricane...”

“Why do you say that?” Candle asked.

“It’s the only way I could think of getting one in these waters,” Sextant replied. “Is that even possible? Seems to me that it would take a lot of power to accomplish.”

“I have never tried to affect the weather,” Candle admitted thoughtfully. “I suppose you could try discussing it with Methis or Aritos sometime. The Bond of Xenlabit might be able to do that. Xenlabit’s favorite trick, in my experience was causing earthquakes and tsunamis, but he did have some talents with other natural forces as well. But if this is an unnatural storm I imagine we’ll know that soon enough.”

The skies completely clouded over two hours later and the wind shifted around to the southeast, but while it was no longer directly behind them, it was still a fresh quartering breeze and they stayed up on the foils until Candle ordered the foils retracted sometime after sunset.

“We just passed the last of the Falienas,” Sextant reported as they paused to eat dinner. “If we hold to this northerly heading we should be well to the northwest of Lilo by sunrise, but we might make better time if we adjust our course by twenty degrees to the east.”

“But if we get caught in the storm we’ll be safer at sea,” Oceanvine replied. “If we’re too close to Lillo we could get driven ashore. On the open sea we can set the sea anchor and wait it out.”

“I’m with Vine,” Jollin voted.

“Okay, Vine. We’ll go with your course this time,” Candle decided.

“Oceanvine,” she corrected him.

“It’s getting rough out here,” Sextant told Oceanvine just after midnight.

“Yeah,” Oceanvine agreed as yet another wave broke over the bow spraying them both with cool salt water. “I think Uncle Candle made a mistake this time. We should have found a port in which to wait this out.”

“Too late now, Vine,” Sextant told her. “I think the storm front must be moving faster than expected. We’d better come about and set the sea anchor. You take the helm and I’ll strike the mainsail and set the anchor.”

She agreed and Sextant quickly pulled down the mainsail. They had struck the jib and stowed it away earlier. He did not bother to do more than yank down the sail before hurrying to the bow and deploying the large cloth sea anchor. The sea anchor, which filled with water and bloomed out in front of the boat’s bow, would hold them facing the wind and waves throughout the storm. Then finally, once their position was secured, both Sextant and Oceanvine worked to furl the mainsail against the boom before going below and securing the cabin door behind them.

“Time for my watch already?” Jollin asked as Oceanvine stepped into the cabin. “Are you wet?”

“Everyone is off watch for the duration,” Oceanvine told her, drying herself off with a large towel she had borrowed from the shower stall. “And yes, I’m wet. I was soaked before the shower, but now at least it’s fresh water.” She threw her wet pile of clothes into the closet and closed the door, knowing they would not be there when she opened it again.

“I like that closet,” Jollin remarked. “I could have used one as a child. It would have kept Mom from constantly telling me to clean up my room.”

“Me too,” Oceanvine chuckled.

“You, Vine?” Jollin asked. “Didn’t you have maids to pick up after you?”

“Mom wouldn’t allow it,” Oceanvine replied. “She didn’t grow up noble and while her family was gentry, her parents wouldn’t let her settle into the pampered life either. It didn’t do me any harm and it’s one less thing to miss about living in the manner.” She opened the closet door again and found a set of heavy flannel pajamas. “Hmm, I was thinking about something a bit more feminine, but maybe the closet knows best.”

“The closet has the brain of a rock, Vine,” Jollin corrected her as Oceanvine reached for the pajamas. “Even I know that. It’s your subconscious telling you to get warm.”

“It was getting chilly up on deck,” Oceanvine allowed, “but I sometimes wonder if perhaps the *Maiyim Bourne* does think for herself sometimes. The complex of spells that runs her is amazing, you know. Have you ever looked at its aura?”

“No, should I?” Jollin asked.

“Wait until morning,” Oceanvine advised. “You’ll only lose several hours of sleep otherwise. Move over, will you?”

By morning the storm had passed, but the sun rose over a still-rough ocean. “Morning, kids,” Candle

greeted Oceanvine and Jollin as they came out for breakfast. "Still a bit choppy out there, but the marine forecast says the swells will be back down to one or two feet within the hour. We may as well have a leisurely breakfast although Six went back to sleep." The radio was playing in the background and at the moment the announcer was reading the fishing report out of Lewena on the island of Lillo. Evidently a fair number of fishing boats had run for home in the face of the storm and it had been an unusually large auction that morning. Prices on almost everything except tuna had dropped substantially.

"He pulled a double watch until we set the anchor last night," Oceanvine replied. "He's entitled. Where are we?"

"According to the Loran unit," Candle replied, "we're just off the coast of Lillo, which we cannot see because of that fog bank to our east. I guess we got pushed well to the east of where we were." He cleared the chart off the table to make room for Oceanvine and Jollin, but not before Oceanvine saw the marks on the chart where Candle had done his calculations after reading the numbers off the Loran.

"You know, had you done that on a normal chart, the skipper would have had you flogged," Oceanvine told him tartly.

"Except I am the skipper," Candle reminded her, "and next time I need the chart it will be clean again."

"Why don't you just ask the boat for a chart with your position already marked?" Jollin asked.

"I never thought of that," Oceanvine told her.

"Neither did I," Candle admitted. "Sounds like cheating."

"Looks pretty rough out there still," Jollin remarked. "Why does it feel so calm in here?"

"It's always that way," Candle explained. "Methis told me it's how Nildar worked out the problem of powering all the spells that went into the boat. The outer movement gets absorbed and turned into power the spells can use. I haven't the foggiest notion how that works, however."

"Is this the first time you noticed?" Oceanvine asked, reaching into the food box and pulling out a pair of cheese and onion omelets. She put them on the table before turning back for a pot of coffee.

"I thought it was my imagination playing tricks on me," Jollin replied. "Besides, I'm a landlubber so I expect my bedroom to stay still."

After breakfast, they went up on deck and pulled the sea anchor back out of the water. Oceanvine used a spell to wring the water out of it so they could put it away dry. Then they hoisted the sails and continued on a northeasterly track to Semmos.

Twelve

They were met at the dock in Tanne by several officials and quickly rushed to a nearby hospital. "We've been quite beside ourselves," the mayor told them as they entered the hospital. "None of our doctors can get a handle on the disease and every day still more victims are being brought here and to the other hospitals. What's worse is they keep trying to get away."

“Is the disease spreading from person to person?” Candle asked.

The Director of the local Board of Health replied, “We don’t think so. At least very few doctors and nurses have been infected and they’ve been handling the victims from the start.”

“Definitely different from what we saw in the southwest then,” Candle commented. He repeated himself a few minutes later after they arrived in the ward where the patients were all strapped down to their hospital beds. “This is an entirely different spell, in fact.”

“Is that the Bond of Kerawlat?” Sextant asked, wincing at the noise in the disease ward. The victims were all in evident great pain and were moaning and in some cases screaming.

“It is,” Candle replied grimly, “and it is far better suited to this sort of task than the Bond of Gredac was. What’s worse, I think this spell was better crafted than what we’ve seen so far. I think we’re dealing with a different mage here.”

“And this disease affects more than just Orenta,” Jollin pointed out. There were several Granomen in the ward and even a pair of humans.

“Still no tell-tale spell strings, though,” Oceanvine pointed out. “There’s no way to track down the originator of the spell.”

“We’ll just have to cure it as best we can, then,” Candle told her. “Now how to go about it? The Bond of Kerawlat is more animal-like than the other forms, but when we ran into it on Ellisto, Silverwind was able to stop it by diverting its energy flow. “There was one heck of a lot of it and he ended up causing it to spray upward in a tall fountain of sparks. However, that time the spell had been cast directly by Kerawlat and Arithan and it looks to me like this spell has nowhere as much energy behind it. I think it will be sufficient to use your staves in the same way we did in Querna. Just drain the Bond and the spell should fall apart.”

They tried and while successful, it was slow going much as it had been in Rjalkatyp. By the end of the day only six victims had been cured, but eight new ones had been added to the ward.

“Let’s try this cooperatively,” Candle suggested the next morning and outlined his plan carefully so Sextant and Oceanvine would know how to work with him. “Let’s try curing eight people at once and see how it goes.”

They worked together, but it still took them until lunchtime to finish the job. “That was better,” he told them tiredly, “and I think we can probably up the number to twelve, but that’s about it.”

“Still, twenty-four per day is significantly faster than new victims are being found,” Oceanvine pointed out, secretly worried that Candle might not be up to the strain of doing this for much longer. “I just wish I knew how the curse was being spread.”

“It does spread by contact, but not very well,” Candle told her. “It would take several minutes of contact, maybe much more, with an infected person in order to pass this disease-like curse on. That’s why the doctors and nurses haven’t caught it en masse. There must be another way it is being spread.

They continued working for the next two days and finally managed to cure the victims in the first hospital. The problem was there were three other hospitals to visit and still more victims were being found and brought. Also several of the first people they had cured had contracted the curse once more and needed

curing all over again.

“Where’s Jollin?” Oceanvine asked when they had stopped for lunch on the first day in the second hospital.

“Your friend said she was going out for a bit of fresh air,” a nurse informed her.

“Can’t say I blame her,” Oceanvine commented. “The noise alone in here is enough to drive any sane person away. Can’t we sedate these people?”

“They are sedated, Vine,” Sextant told her. “I asked about that days ago. I don’t think the drugs are doing any good, though.”

“Doesn’t sound like it,” Oceanvine grimaced as they left the ward. “How long ago did she leave?” she asked the nurse who accompanied them.

“About half an hour ago,” the nurse replied. “It was the third time she left the ward actually.”

“She probably just went for a cup of coffee,” Candle suggested, however it turned out Jollin was not in the hospital cafeteria when they arrived. “Or maybe she really did go out for a bit of a walk,” he added.

They ate a hasty lunch then returned to the ward for their afternoon session. By the time they were done, however, Jollin had still not returned and Oceanvine was worried.

“Calm down, Oceanvine,” Candle advised as they rode back to the boat in a police car. “I’m worried too, but she may have simply gone back to the boat. Yes, I know she should have left a message, but we’re all foolish from time to time. We can’t report her as missing until tomorrow morning anyway.” The officer giving them a ride nodded agreement.

“Isn’t this the sort of situation that’s an exception?” Oceanvine asked.

“It probably should be,” Candle replied with seeming calmness, “but the strange thing about the rule of law is that there aren’t supposed to be any exceptions.”

“If she’s not at the boat, I want to go looking for her,” Oceanvine insisted.

“Where will you look?” Candle asked.

“I don’t know,” Oceanvine admitted. Then she turned to the cop at the wheel and asked, “Might I ride on patrol with you?”

“I’m off-duty in an hour, but I suppose someone will allow you to join them,” he replied.

“Good!” Oceanvine replied. “We’ll check out the *Maiyim Bourne* and if she isn’t there, I’ll ride back to your station house.”

Jollin was nowhere to be found and Oceanvine was as good as her word so she did not return to the boat until almost three in the morning. “No luck?” Sextant asked from the galley table.

“No,” she replied dejectedly. “What are you still doing up?”

"I couldn't sleep either," Sextant admitted. "I went to sleep earlier but I've been up for nearly four hours. I hope you don't mind, I was reading through your thesis notes and drafts. You left them out here. Looks good. I only wish my own thesis was as inspired."

"Normally, I'd probably be flattered, Six," she admitted tiredly. "I think we'd better both try to get some sleep though. We won't do Jollin any good if we look as wasted as the curse victims."

There was no sign of Jollin for the next two days although it was Oceanvine, searching for her when she could, who discovered the primary vector of infection.

"I stopped by the Board of Health," she told Candle and Sextant that evening.

"You said you were going to," Sextant agreed. "Did you find any sign of Jollin?"

"No," Oceanvine shook her head, "but I did learn something else. Did you know there had been a lot of dead and sick birds found around the city?"

"Is that important?" Sextant asked.

"Could be," Candle told him. "Go on."

"Well, when I was there one of them was brought in for study," Oceanvine replied, "and out of habit I took a good look at it as well. It was carrying the same curse as all the people are."

"Interesting," Candle replied, "but how are the birds transmitting it to the people There can't be that many people tossing crumbs to them in the park."

"That's what prompted me to send you that note telling you I'd meet you back here," Oceanvine explained. "The curse in the birds does not transmit any more easily than it does from person to person. I mean, how long are you likely to hold a sick or dead bird, right? So I went out for a walk and started looking around. It's the mosquitoes. They're biting both birds and people and possibly a host of animals as well. We'll have to look into that."

"There are many species of mosquitoes," Candle informed her. "They don't all bite people. Some only bite dogs or cats, some only bite birds and so forth, but in this case we have one that bites both birds and people, I suspect. Yes, that makes a lot of sense. Momentary contact doesn't spread the curse, but the insects transfer minute amounts of blood between the victims. That would be enough to spread the infection. That's pretty clever. That's a little too clever to suit me, actually, but that was very well done, Oceanvine. Now that we know how it spreads perhaps we can do something to slow it down."

"It's just dusk now," Sextant commented. "If we go up on deck now we might be able to spot some of the mosquitoes in the air."

"It's worth a shot," Candle agreed. However a few minutes later they had only managed to see two mosquitoes. "I guess they don't like salt water," Candle shrugged, or else they're getting ready to settle in elsewhere for the night."

"I think they are primarily nighttime flyers," Oceanvine remarked.

"Then perhaps we're too far from their breeding habitats or else it's too early," Candle told her. "Of course, we're only looking for flying curse-carriers and they're hard enough to spot at that size anyway. I

wonder how long a mosquito lives after contracting the curse. Not very long is my guess, but the birds and people live longer and there's always a new crop of mosquitoes coming along."

"Wouldn't the bird population drop after a while though?" Sextant asked.

"Probably, yes, but that's not a good thing either," Candle replied. "This is a much nastier situation than we had to deal with down south. We need to cure both the bugs and the birds."

"You may need to use the staff again," Oceanvine suggested.

"At least," Candle replied. "Tell you what. Let's go hail a cab and see if we can do something from the center of the city."

"Suits me and we can cruise around and look for Jollin some more," Oceanvine requested.

"Vine," Sextant tried to be reasonable, "the police are looking for her and they know this city better than we do."

"I can't just sit and wait," Oceanvine insisted.

"You never could," Sextant replied.

"No," Oceanvine shook her head, "I used to be content to sit and wait."

"Not since you started your apprenticeship," Candle replied seriously.

"Hardly," she denied. "I wasn't planning this as a career."

"Maybe not," Candle replied, "but it chose you. Vine, not even your great-grandmother took to magic as naturally as you did. My sister worked her heart out to get into University. You heard some of her stories yourself. She served an old-fashioned apprenticeship while working every spare moment to continue paying for her lessons. Her master was not disposed toward teaching girls and it wasn't until her very last year with him that he finally admitted to himself that she was his best student ever.

"You would have completely blown him away," Candle continued. "You've worked just as hard as she did with even less reason to and yet you put your entire heart into it and while you didn't admit it to yourself I could see you were already committed by the time we landed on Kern. Do you have any notion of how far you've come in the last four years? By your age, your great-grandmother had been studying for over a decade to your four years. You know more than she did at this stage. Not only that but she stood for her master's degree when she was twenty-five. You're only twenty-three. By the time you get your degree you'll still be a year ahead of her.

"Vine, my sister was one of the two greatest wizards I have ever known," Candle told her. "Your great-grandfather was the other. If there's even the slightest truth to what the geneticists have been telling us for the last century then I'm more surprised you're the only member of your family who figured out how to levitate a rubber ball as a child."

"Yeah, Vine," Sextant chimed in. "I hate to admit it, but if I wasn't having so much trouble trying to keep up with you, I doubt I'd have come so far myself."

"You're very talented yourself, Six," Candle assured him.

“I’d like to think so,” Sextant admitted, “but Vine’s in a class by herself. Well, Vine, if you really want to cruise the streets, we’ll try it for an hour or so, but promise me we’ll stop when one of us admits to getting tired. We won’t do Jollin any good if we exhaust ourselves in a fruitless search.”

Oceanvine agreed grudgingly and they went down to the end of the dock to find a public phone. Sextant was about to call for a cab, but when Oceanvine spotted one at a nearby taxi-stand, they quickly hired it and were off. Orentan cabs were similar to those in Granom and Emmine, save that the cabbie insisted they pay for the trip before he would start driving. Oceanvine was insulted by the demand, but Candle took it in stride and handed the man several gold coins, telling him, “Let me know when we’ve used that up.”

There was a large wooded park near the center of the city where the mages felt they had their best chance of finding a large concentration of mosquitoes that carried the curse. “I only see a few,” Sextant noted, “but there are a lot of infected birds in the trees.”

“Yes,” Candle agreed. “I see that and I also see insects contracting the curse as they bite those birds. I think we can cure the birds and insects we see fairly easily, but that won’t stop the curse because we can’t get to all the birds and insects in the city before still more are infected. Even some of the people have been getting infected again after being cured.”

“There has to be a way to stop the cycle of infection,” Oceanvine remarked.

“Sure,” Sextant replied, “three nights or more during which the temperature drops below forty degrees. That would kill off all the adult mosquitoes and allow us to cure the birds.”

“It never gets that cold here,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“No, but we might be able to convince the city to spray insecticide,” Candle told them. “Kill enough of the mosquitoes and we can cure the birds and break the cycle.”

“We’ll have to move fast before these birds decided to migrate for the summer,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“Don’t you mean for the winter?” Sextant asked.

“We’re in the tropics,” Oceanvine replied, “but we’re north of the equator and most of those are northern species. In six to eight weeks a lot of our fine feathered friends here are going to be headed for Granom and the Isle of Fire.”

“You’re assuming they’ll survive the journey,” Candle retorted, “but even dead these birds will be dangerous.” He had already been using the golden staff as a walking aid. Now he straightened up and was suddenly enveloped in a bright blue nimbus of light that shimmered for a few moments then floated upward, looking like a glowing cloud. As it touched the leafy canopy of the treetops, it spread out until the entire park was bathed in a faint blue light. Candle continued to stand still for many minutes as people in the area gasped and commented, trying figure out what they were seeing.

Oceanvine looked upward as well, but unlike most of the people present that evening she could see and understand exactly what Candle was up to. The blue light was actually the visible segment of the spell that reached out and touched every bird and mosquito in the area and slowly leached the energy out of the Bond of Kerawlat in the infected creatures. It took him nearly half an hour, but finally, he was done and the light faded quietly away.

“That won’t stop the spread of the curse,” he told Sextant and Oceanvine, “but it will slow it down a little. Tomorrow I’ll try to convince the city to start spraying. The real question is how far have the birds and bugs spread the curse up to this point?”

“If the first birds infected were in this park,” Oceanvine remarked, “they may not have wandered too far. Most of them stay near because people feed them here. I’ve heard that while mosquitoes might fly as much as a mile in search of a blood meal, they normally stay within half a mile of the pool they emerged from. Of course some birds can and do fly for miles every day, so it’s still going to take a while.”

“If we’re lucky, Horizon and his students will be joining us soon,” Candle told her.

“Oh, have you sent for them?” she asked.

“No, but I intend to, first thing tomorrow,” Candle promised. “We have most of this cleaned up and spraying the mosquitoes will help, but we know something is going on in Tissa as well.”

“We can’t move on until we find Jollin,” Oceanvine replied.

“No, of course not,” Candle assured her.

They spent the rest of the time until midnight searching for Jollin, but failed to find her until they returned to the Marina.

“Hi, guys! What kept you?” Jollin asked as they neared the *Maiyim Bourne*.

“Where have you been?” Oceanvine demanded, running forward to hug her cousin.

“Hold up, Vine!” Sextant shouted. He caught her up in a ward that cradled her softly, but also lifted her up an inch off the deck of the pier.

“Six!” Oceanvine shouted angrily. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“He’s right, Oceanvine,” Candle told her. “Take a good look at Jollin.”

“You’re crazy!” Oceanvine shot back, “Both of you.” But she did look. Jollin was sitting on top of the cabin with her legs hanging over the hatchway. She seemed to be smiling, but on second look, the smile seemed to have frozen, and there was a strange look to her eyes. Oceanvine had seen it before. A few years earlier she had seen it on hundreds of people in both Rjalkatyp and Querna.

“Let me down, Six,” Oceanvine requested in a tightly controlled voice. “I don’t know how I missed it.”

“The same way someone hoped we all would,” Sextant told her.

“This isn’t the same curse as we’ve been facing here,” Candle warned her unnecessarily.

“No, it isn’t,” Oceanvine replied almost emotionlessly. “But it does have some of the same features.”

“What’s wrong?” Jollin asked, sounding genuinely puzzled. She jumped down to the deck and started walking toward them. “Don’t I get a hug?”

“Yeah,” Oceanvine nodded. “Just give me a few minutes.” She caught Jollin up in the same sort of ward Sextant had caught her in and held Jollin tight. Jollin had become ensnared in the spell called the Hook. Worse, it was very much the same as the one that had been used in Querna where the slave masters had killed their victims and animated their corpses to continued spreading the spell to new victims. This wasn’t the classic Hook but the same filthy spell that was powered by and coupled to the Bond of Aritos. Oceanvine realized she would have to work quickly or her cousin’s life and possibly her soul could be lost. The only good news Oceanvine could see in the situation was that whoever had Hooked Jollin, had not found a way to do it without the usual spell string that attached the slave to the master.

In the three years since they had been in Querna, Oceanvine, Sextant and Candle had discussed this spell and had eventually decided that using the Seal of Aritos as Candle had done in Querna, might not have been necessary even though Aritos, himself had suggested it. She had also discussed the matter just the previous autumn with Methis when the goddess had decided to pop in to Randona one afternoon just to chat.

In the original Hook the key was to instantly take control of the spell before the slave master could react, reverse the flow of energy, essentially enslaving the slaver, and then cutting the spell string that bound the victim to him. A healthy victim was almost sure to survive the experience, although Methis had mentioned a technique that could soften the impact that was almost unavoidable when the string was cut.

The Bond/Hook coupling could not be treated in exactly the same way because if the Hook component suddenly disappeared that way, the remaining Bond would destroy the victim and mostly likely the mage attempting to defuse it. It was Oceanvine, however, who came up with a possible means of handling the spell and while Methis had admitted that she thought it would work if done correctly, even she had to admit that they would not know for certain until it had been tried. Both agreed that it would be best if they never had a chance to try such a thing and went on to discuss a recently released movie.

Now, however, Oceanvine faced the terrible situation in which she would have to try the new technique and she worried that she might be killing her cousin in the process. She swallowed hard and went to work. She saw the spell string that wrapped itself around Jollin’s body in a spiral so tight that it almost looked like a translucent, milky shroud except that the end of the string went out into the air to wherever the slave master was hiding. In addition, she could see the evil symbol representing the Bond of Kerawlat floating over Jollin’s head, dripping black tendrils that touched the Hook component of the curse in a hundred different places.

First she erected a ward between her and Jollin. If the spell blew up in her face the ward might be the only thing that could save her. She put what that might do to Jollin firmly out of mind. Then she concentrated on what she had to do and willed it to happen. She simultaneously reversed the energy flow in the spell string and forced the entire Bond of Aritos component of the spell to follow the new energy flow back to the former slave master.

The moment the Bond had shot out of sight, Oceanvine cut the Hook’s string and Jollin sagged downward. Jumping down from the pier, Oceanvine got there in time to ease her cousin gently to the deck.

Thirteen

Jollin had been badly drained in many ways and Oceanvine used some of the energy in her staff to replenish a bit of what her cousin had lost. “Hi, Vine,” Jollin greeted her tiredly. “Nice to see you again.”

“Is that all you can say?” Oceanvine whispered.

“You’re lucky I can say anything right now,” Jollin replied. “May I go to sleep now?” She didn’t wait for permission and started snoring while still on the deck of the *Maiyim Bourne*.

“You’re wiped out, Vine,” Sextant told her. “I’ll levitate her to your cabin.”

“Thanks, Six,” Oceanvine replied quietly. As Sextant gently floated Jollin into the cabin, Oceanvine looked up at Candle and remarked. “That was too close.”

“I hope none of us have to do that again,” Candle agreed, “but if we do, I think your solution is the best way to handle that variant of the Hook. Did you happen to think to see where the slave master was?”

That was possible, Oceanvine knew. In the moment a mage took over the spell, reversing the energy he or she could actually sense where the slave master was. “I was preoccupied, Uncle,” she replied regretfully. Just then a bright flash of light illuminated the hazy sky. It looked like several dozen bolts of lightning all going off at once. “But if pressed to hazard a guess,” she continued, “I think he may have been over that way.”

Candle looked across the city to examine the explosion of light. It was soon followed by a low roar of thunder. “Possibly,” he agreed, “but I think Six and I had better go investigate what just happened.” The low-pitched noise continued unabated for over a minute.

“I’ll go with you,” Oceanvine told him, getting to her feet as the thunder began to fade. “I’m not as bad as I must look.”

“Actually, you only look a bit tired,” Candle replied. “but someone has to stay with Jollin. She’ll be waking up in an hour or so and if she’s like some of the others who have been caught by the Hook, she won’t have eaten much lately.”

“All right,” Oceanvine agreed, secretly glad she didn’t have to go running off again.

“What was that?” Sextant asked as he came back up from the cabin.

“Oceanvine’s been cooking again,” Candle replied.

“Hey!” she protested. Over the past three years, Oceanvine had found it necessary to learn how to cook for herself. Having grown up as the daughter of an earl, it was not a skill she had ever needed to develop save to occasionally assemble a sandwich or pour out something prepared in advance by someone else. In fact when it came to presentation she was very skilled. While she was delighted to discover how simple it was to make an omelet or a salad, she had never been one to be content without trying ever more ambitious projects. An attempt at split pea soup came out thick enough to cut with a knife on her first few tries, and she had a terrible time understanding how to add just the right amounts of herbs and spices. Finally, after one particularly disastrous meal of burnt chicken and over-steamed vegetables, Sextant noticed through the smoke that she had no cookbooks in her collection and realized that she must have been doing everything out of her head. He bought her a beginner’s book on cooking and her abilities improved immediately, but Candle had never stopped teasing her about those initial forays into meal-making.

“Heh!” Sextant chuckled. “You’ve done worse, Vine. Did you say you were worried about having left

the gas on?"

"That was weeks ago and home is almost exactly in the other direction," Oceanvine replied.

"Come on, Six," Candle told him. "We had better find out what's cooking."

They both ran back down the pier and out of sight, leaving Oceanvine standing on deck. She went below and checked up on Jollin, who seemed to be sleeping soundly in the fore cabin. Oceanvine was sorely tempted to join her, but decided that if Uncle Candle was right and Jolin did wake up soon, she might need to have something brought to her.

Oceanvine had not really wanted to admit how much curing Jollin had taken out of her to Sextant and Candle, but she was feeling drained, then realized she had never replenished her own energies after having given some to Jollin. Normally, Oceanvine preferred to just sleep to restore herself. Merely absorbing a bit of magical energy to keep going, she knew, did little to wash fatigue toxins out of her system or allow her to experience the essential dream state modern doctors had found was needed for a healthy life, but it did allow her to keep going in an emergency. She seriously wondered how her reflexes and judgment might be impaired by even a short term use of such an expedience. She felt alert, but was she really?

Without realizing why she was doing it, she found herself making notes on the subject and sketching out ways in which one could experiment to determine how the effects of working that way might be measured. She had filled up three lined sheets of paper before she heard a soft sound coming from the bow. Looking up, she saw Jollin stumbling back toward the galley.

"You should have said something," Oceanvine told her as she got up to help Jollin to the table. "I'd have brought you something."

"I didn't know you were still here," Jollin admitted. "I should have known you wouldn't leave me alone after what happened."

"Hey, I'm here for you," Oceanvine told her, "not because of you. You got caught by a rogue mage. It could have happened to anyone." Jollin nodded, but was obviously unconvinced, so Oceanvine got up and opened the food box and brought out a bowl of oatmeal and a large mug of coffee, heavy on the cream and sugar. With the brown sugar encrusting the oatmeal and the sweetness of the coffee, Oceanvine wondered if she had done too much along those lines, but Jollin didn't complain and ate and drank everything in front of her.

"Want to talk about it?" Oceanvine asked gently.

"I'd love to," Jollin admitted, "but I don't remember any of the important stuff. The last thing I remember before waking up under that spell was walking down to the cafeteria for a cup of coffee. I don't really want to think about the spell. Whoever was controlling me, and I never saw him... or her, I suppose, just had me walking around town and infecting small children. If I ever find out who that was, he'll regret ever having learned how to breathe."

"Too late," Sextant replied from the hatchway, stepping into the cabin. Candle followed behind. "Whoever that was... well, I doubt there's enough of him left in one piece for the gods to identify him."

"What happened?" Jollin asked.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Sextant admitted. “I’m just glad your rogue was outside of town.”

“We think he was driving along the highway to Wonl,” Candle explained. “At least there’s a large hole where a section of the road used to be.”

“Oh my!” Oceanvine gasped. “I never thought the spell would do more than kill the rogue mage.”

“I doubt any of us would,” Candle replied, “but don’t go feeling guilty. There is only one way that Bond could have produced an explosion, especially one like the one we witnessed. It was designed to do it. Whoever cast the spell was aiming at us. He knew we would try to cure Jollin and he set the Bond to explode when we tried to deactivate it. He must have expected us to handle it the same way we did in Querna.

“Once a Bond starts to come apart,” Candle continued, “there’s no way to stop it. I first came across one like that in Northport on Horalia. Silverwind was trying to unravel it, but it kept trying to fly apart. He eventually had to let it go. Fortunately it didn’t physically explode, but it did summon both Pohn and Arithan. That could have been worse, but that’s why I don’t usually try to handle any version of the Bond that way. Aritos’ way of handling it is much safer, but this was keyed to explode when tampered with so if we had tried to drain it of energy, it would have blown up in our faces before we could finish. We’ve never tried to just send the Bond elsewhere and it wouldn’t have worked while we were dealing with a mass of cursed people, but in this case we got very lucky.”

“How many were killed?” Oceanvine asked tensely.

“Look, it really isn’t your fault, Vine!” Candle insisted.

“Oceanvine!” she corrected him loudly. “How many people did I kill?”

“Only one that we know of, Vine,” Sextant told her.

“There may have been others in that car,” Candle added. “We’ll probably never know, but...”

“We’ve been saying that too often lately,” Oceanvine complained.

“True enough,” Candle shrugged.

“How many did I injure?” Oceanvine asked suddenly.

“You didn’t injure anyone,” Candle told her. “Any harm was caused by the person who cursed Jollin that way.”

“A dozen people were taken to the hospital, Vine,” Sextant told her honestly, “but only two were badly injured.”

“I want to visit them,” Oceanvine decided. “I need to.”

“In the morning,” Candle told her, shaking his head, “if you insist. They won’t let you see them before then anyway.”

“It’s not your fault anyway, Vine,” Jollin told her. “It’s mine.”

“Oh it is not!” Oceanvine replied quickly.

“Yes, Elie, it is,” Jollin insisted, intentionally using her given name. “I shouldn’t have been following you all around Bellinen. I’m a pretty darned good smith and machinist. I’m at least as good at civil engineering, but I’ll never be more than an apprentice mage. I’m just a liability to you.”

“You are not,” Oceanvine argued. “Any of us might have been caught in the same way you were. None of us would have thought to shield ourselves while in the hospital of all places.”

“But I can’t do that in any location,” Jollin pointed out. “I think it would be best if I just got out of the way and went back to Kern.”

“I hope you won’t,” Oceanvine told her. “You may not realize it, but you’ve been a tremendous help since we first landed at Mati.”

“Okay, so I was able to do a few little things here and there,” Jollin admitted, “but...”

“But nothing, cousin!” Oceanvine argued. “Anything you did, freed us up to work on other matters. If nothing else having you on board allowed us all to get a bit more sleep.”

“That’s nice, but I’m still at fault here,” Jollin insisted.

“No, if there’s anyone to blame, it’s me,” Oceanvine retorted.

“You’re both wrong,” Sextant told them. “It’s all my fault.”

“How?” Jollin asked, genuinely puzzled.

“In what way?” Oceanvine demanded at the same time.

“Um,” Sextant hedged. “Give me an hour or two and I’ll figure it out. Actually, I was just trying to get both of you to pay attention. The only one at fault here recently got turned into a lot of disassociated molecules and probably a fair amount of energy as well. You two are feeling guilty for no good reason. Jollin, you were a target of opportunity, that’s all. Had you not been there, he might have caught and cursed one of the nurses or aides or a janitor, anyone really. He might not have even known who you were at first. If he had I think he would have sent you at us sooner.”

“No, that bastard had me infecting children,” Jollin growled.

“Well, he got what he deserved,” Sextant replied.

“No, he didn’t,” Oceanvine disagreed. “He deserved far worse.”

“Yes, well I can’t put him back together so you can try again, Vine,” Sextant told her. “And stop blaming yourself for what happened, because unless you can come up with something that would not have resulted in an explosion, there’s no way you could have stopped it. Had it gone off here, everyone in the marina would have been killed.”

“I suppose,” Oceanvine agreed grudgingly, “but I’m still going to visit those people.”

“And I’m coming with you,” Jollin told her.

“How are you feeling?” Candle asked Jollin now that both women had calmed a bit.

“Exhausted still,” she admitted. “I neither ate nor slept the entire time. The only good part is that I also did not have a clear notion of what was happening to me either. It was more like watching someone else doing it through a curtain of gauze, except I also knew I was doing it, but couldn’t stop myself. I wasn’t doing very much, just talking to children on the playgrounds, then sitting in a singles bar waiting for someone to pick me up, not that anyone did.”

“Don’t feel bad about that,” Candle advised. “You’re human and most of the people in that bar were probably Orenta. There’s no sexual attraction between the species.”

“Oh, I know that. Even as disjointed as my mind was I remember thinking what a stupid thing it was to try,” Jollin replied. “Uh, do you mind if I go back to sleep now? I think it’s going to take weeks to catch back up.”

“Not at all,” Candle chuckled. “Go ahead. I think we all ought to get to bed soon.” Jollin nodded and headed back to the cabin.

Sextant caught sight of Oceanvine’s notes and quickly scanned them “Interesting topic,” he commented. “Have you changed your thesis subject?”

“No,” Oceanvine shook her head. “It might turn into a paper sometime, though. Maybe after I finish the thesis.”

“Maybe sooner, if you don’t mind a collaborator,” Sextant suggested. “I think we could recruit the undergrads to use as subjects.”

“The undergrads?” Oceanvine asked skeptically.

“The Psych Department has been using them that way for years,” Sextant replied. “Besides this is one of the techniques they all learn early on. If it actually impairs their abilities, it will be a valuable lesson and will keep them from trying to pull all-nighters just before their finals.”

“I doubt anything will stop that,” Candle chuckled. “This is something all the apprentices did back when I was a student. Heck, even non-mages were doing it. Well, they did it with lots of coffee and various drugs I’d rather not go into just now, but it was the same basic thing.”

“Except recharging yourself magically is not as immediately harmful as those drugs,” Oceanvine commented.

“Sounds like we don’t know that yet,” Candle replied.

“Then not as immediately addictive,” Oceanvine tried again.

“Back when classes were larger there were always one or two who started using the technique far too often,” Candle told her, “so I wouldn’t count that possibility out either. Journeyman candidates, on the other hand, were always far less likely to have trouble with alcohol and drugs than the rest of the student body.”

“They wouldn’t have remained journeyman candidates long if they had,” Sextant replied. “They would

have flunked out.”

“There is that,” Candle admitted, “But masters were always very careful about the moral character of the apprentices they accepted, so that could be a reason too. Well, Six is right,” he concluded after looking through the notes for himself. “I think you have an interesting subject here and it would have made a good thesis, but I think I like your first idea better, especially since you worked out how to make an amulet.”

“Only one way so far,” Oceanvine admitted.

“There may only be one way,” Candle reminded her. “Well, you two can stay up if you want, but I need my beauty sleep. Good night.”

Fourteen

When Horizon and his students arrived, Sextant immediately took them in hand and trained them how to charge and use mage staffs. “I know it seems old-fashioned,” he told them, “but you’re going to be glad to have them when you run into the victims of this curse. You had a nice easy warm-up down south, but this one is nasty.”

He went on to describe the problem, the fact that mosquitoes seemed to be transmitting the curse between humans and birds and also mentioned what had happened to Jollin. “Vine got the rogue who did that,” Sextant explained. “There might be others, although I doubt it. However, I really recommend wearing bug repellent for the duration. We’ve already had that announced to the public, in fact. The city and the towns all over this end of the island are also spraying insecticide into all known mosquito habitats. We cured as many of the birds as we could find, but you’ll need to travel around the island to make sure we didn’t miss any. We’ve also sent word to the surrounding islands to keep an eye out just in case.

“I think all you have ahead is a clean-up operation,” Sextant continued, “but just like down south, we won’t know for certain until no new victims have been found.” He and Oceanvine continued working with them and stayed two extra days until they were comfortable that Horizon and the others could handle this new form of the Bond curse.

Oceanvine also started working with Jollin on casting defensive wards. It was not easy for Jollin. It meant skipping a few steps in her magical education, but with Oceanvine’s patient encouragement, she kept trying although she was having minimal success at best.

Both of the women went to visit the people who had been injured in the blast. As Sextant and Candle had assured them, very few were still in the hospital by the next morning and they had to track them down all over Tanne. The victims and their families appreciated the concern, but were unable to follow how either Oceanvine or Jollin could be feeling responsible for their injuries. However, both the women felt much better after having made their rounds.

Finally, after receiving another call from President Jiroshi, Candle told them it was time to leave. “We have a three-day sail to Tis if the winds are with us, and they probably won’t be all the way so call it four or five.”

“Should we plot a course around the north side of Fehl and Killarn?” Sextant asked as Oceanvine allowed Jollin to try her hand at piloting the boat out of the marina.

“It’s a temptation, but the conditions in the confluence of the Nildar Ocean and the Sea of Aritos can be, well, unpredictable,” Candle decided. “We’ll take the southern route. It will involve sailing through Merinta which is almost as exciting as trying to make our way through the Celenens that you grew up in, but the channels are carefully marked and I understand there are more modern Orenta playing tourist there these days than during my last visit.”

“When was that?” Oceanvine asked.

“Sixty some-odd years ago,” Candle replied, “during the Quest.”

“Is there any place you didn’t go during that quest?” she asked with amusement.

“Well, we never got to Sutheria or Methis’ Chain, and we didn’t have to go to the Isle of Fire,” Candle shrugged. “As I recall, we never quite landed anywhere in Saindo either. Other than that, we covered most of the world. Isn’t that what a quest is supposed to do?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Oceanvine retorted. “So far none of the gods have assigned me to one.”

“That you know of,” Candle replied. Oceanvine had no ready answer to that especially since she had often wondered why Methis had seemed to take such a liking to her from the start.

The winds were unfavorable until they rounded the southern tip of Semmos, which took most of the first day, but then they were able to fly past Kaesa and find a small port to stay in that night on nearby southwestern Killarn Island. On the second day after leaving Semmos, they stayed in the port town of Nannia on Mir for a night, and then moved on into the Merinta Islands.

Merinta, like Sextant’s native Celenan Islands, was a sub-archipelago composed of small islands and treacherous, twisty channels, but as Candle recalled, the wider and safer channels had been marked and while they could no longer continue at the *Maiyim Bourne*’s usual breakneck pace, they made fairly good time even while sailing in a conventional manner, stopping at dusk by anchoring the boat in the lee of an island. On their second afternoon in Merinta, they arrived at the island of Miorn near the eastern edge of the island group.

Their course so far had kept them mostly in the more naturally preserved parts of Merinta, but Miorn had become very much the tourist trap with large marinas and a dozen or more high-rise hotels. Candle, however, chose to land at one of the older and smaller docks in the port on the north side of the harbor. “This was the only developed part of the harbor when I was here last,” he told the others, “and if we’re staying on board, who cares about the hotels?”

“This boat is more comfortable than any hotel I’ve ever been in,” Jollin remarked. The others agreed and after securing their lines to the dock’s cleats, they went in search of the harbor master, knowing that there were port fees to be paid and that the Merinta no longer lived with a barter economy.

Modern, sophisticated Orenta had come to love Merinta as a preferred vacation area and the natives of Miorn had been quick to capitalize on that fact. It was a trend that had already started when Candle had been here last, but then the tourists were content to visit trading towns like Miorn and enjoy their rustic charm. Over the years, civilized Orenta had decided they wanted to bring all the comforts of home with them and the tourist city had grown up to the south of Miorn Old Town.

“Even the islands we came past are more developed than when I was your age,” Candle told the others as they strolled through the town. “Something like Old Town here was the height of civilization. It looks

about the same, but I'll bet most of the buildings weren't here. Excuse me, Elder," he turned to an old Merint at the end of the dock who looked to be his own age, "but could you direct us to the Harbor Master?"

"You will want my son, sir," the Merint replied. "He's the harbor master of Old Town. That's an interesting boat you have there. When I was much younger there was one that looked just like it and had the same name. It arrived during the Great Plague and was captained by Wizard Silverwind."

"This is the same *Maiyim Bourne*," Candle informed him. "I was here with Silverwind and his wife Oceanvine." He went on to introduce the others.

"I thought as much," the elder told him. "Please allow me to escort you to my son's office." Candle let the man lead the way and they were soon in a small building with an old-fashioned thatched roof that overlooked the Old Town harbor. A middle-aged Merint looked up as they entered, but before he could utter a greeting the elder introduced the mages, adding, "These people are not to be charged. Wizard Candle was one of the outsiders who saved all Merinne's Children when I was a young man. It is a debt that cannot be repaid sufficiently."

"But we shall make a start here, Dad" his son replied solemnly. "My father is correct. It would be a sin against Holy Mother Merinne and all the gods to charge you so much as a penny. Welcome back, Wizard."

Candle thanked the man and his father and after chatting a few minutes the mages left to return to the *Maiyim Bourne*. "I had hoped to stroll through Old Town and maybe buy a souvenir or two," he admitted to the others, "but if word got out, I'd feel like I was stealing if a Merint insisted on giving me something that caught my eye." The others agreed and instead they stayed on board and got to sleep fairly early.

They were preparing to cast off the next morning when the elder Merint walked down the dock and bade them, "G'morning!"

"Good morning, Elder," Oceanvine greeted him in return. "May I help you this morning?"

"In a sense, Lady Oceanvine," he replied formally. Oceanvine wondered how the old man had known to address her in that manner and decided that perhaps the Merinta were not quite as primitive and isolated as they tried to appear. "It has been over two generations since your ancestors and your mentor saved the lives of my people, but we have never been able to honor those great wizards properly. When they were here, we were weak and barely able to care for ourselves and by the time we had recovered, they had sailed on to other places needing their help. So I am here to invite you to Miast Island."

"Miast?" Sextant asked, trying to remember if he had seen it on one of the charts.

"It is a very small island a few hours to the north of Miorn as our traditional outriggers paddle. Perhaps just an hour by more modern conveyance, although we do not normally allow motorized vehicles there. We would make an exception in your case," the elder added.

"No need," Candle chuckled. "The *Maiyim Bourne* has never been equipped with engines. Tell me more about Miast Island, though. It sounds like it holds a special place in your hearts."

"Indeed," the elder agreed. "As our modern cousins have come to appreciate the Merint Islands, very few of those islands have managed to stay pristine and untouched by all their conveniences. Those few

tend to be off the normal sailing routes and are held in the hearts of all Merinta as sacred ground. Miast is one of those where we can practice our traditions in the same way our ancestors did. I have taken the liberty of letting all Merinta know you are here and while the entire nation will not be in attendance, of course, I am sure there will be adequate representatives from all three of our great clans. Please allow us to pay our debt to you and your ancestors, at least symbolically, this evening.”

“We have a pressing need to be on Tissa as soon as we can,” Candle began, but Oceanvine cut him off.

“But we will be honored to join you on sacred Miast, Revered Elder,” she told him formally. He nodded solemnly and walked back up the dock.

“We really do have to get to Tis,” Candle told her. “You do remember that, don’t you? This isn’t some grand tour we’re on.”

“You heard the man, Uncle,” she argued firmly. “These people have felt they owed you an unpayable debt for generations. The very least we can do is allow them to show you the honor they feel they owe. When are we going to be able to return here? Besides it’s only proper we accept now while there are still a few of them left alive who remember it.”

They set out for Miast Island an hour later and were soon surrounded by dozens of outrigger canoes who escorted them all the way into a small protected lagoon where they were able to beach the *Maiyim Bourne* and lash her securely to a nearby palm.

When they stepped off the boat, the Merinta greeted them with happy, smiling faces and dozens of garlands of the native flowers before escorting them to the interior of the small island where a large clearing served as a natural gathering spot for the celebration. All afternoon and well into the evening the mages were feted with diverse native foods, music and dance.

Throughout their stay, Merintan parents would bring their children up to the mages to be introduced. Oceanvine asked one of the Merintan women about that. “Our traditional beliefs teach us that the more widely known one’s name is, the more widely successful that person will be,” she was told. “You come from very far way so these parents believe they are ensuring the success of their children by introducing them to you.”

The children, for their part, did not look quite as enthusiastic about being there as their parents until they caught sight of Oceanvine’s pearl and Jollin’s silver bead at which point it became difficult to drag them away from the novel sight. So much so, that Oceanvine and Jollin attempted to explain how it was done and encouraged the children to continue practicing after the feast. “If you truly keep working at it, I’m sure you’ll be able to do it in a few days or weeks,” Oceanvine assured them repeatedly.

“Who knows?” Jollin laughed sometime later. “Maybe someday we’ll be able to come back here and find all the Merinta with little objects floating around their heads.”

“It would be an interesting tribal adornment, I suppose,” Oceanvine admitted, “but I suspect only one or two will keep at it long enough.”

Then late in the evening after the dancing had subsided the story-telling began. An elderly man stepped out into the circle and began speaking in a language none of the younger mages had heard before. “Harabawa is our greatest living story-teller,” a young Merintan woman leaned over to inform them. “He is speaking the language called Old Orentan which even we have not used in daily conversation in many years.”

“Then how do you still know it?” Jollin asked, whispering.

“We use it in our religious observances,” she replied. “Would you like me to translate?”

“Yes, please,” Oceanvine requested politely.

It turned out Harabawa was telling the story of the Great Plague and how the wizards Silverwind, Oceanvine and Candle had joined forces with the Orentan Wizards, Hyssop and Airblossom, to save the lives of all Merinta. It was a long and involved story that culminated in an epic battle between the wizards and two demons.

“Did it really happen like that, Uncle Candle?” Oceanvine asked him softly when Harabawa had finished.

“Well, he prettied it up and understandably left out some details no one could have known, but that’s fairly close. Of course, only Silverwind was a wizard at the time. Hyssop and Airblossom could have been, I’m sure, but Hyssop didn’t bother and by the time Airblossom decided to get hers, the old Wizard’s exam was no longer being given.”

“I did not know that,” Harabawa admitted, having overheard the exchange. “Please, Wizard, enlighten me.”

“Ah,” Candle paused to gather his memories. “Well the demons’ names were Xenlabit and Arithan and we only defeated Xenlabit in the battle near Mir. Arithan was using his brother just long enough to steal as much of his power as he could. Then as we closed in, Arithan left Xenlabit in the lurch. Even drained as he was, fighting Xenlabit was no walk in the park. Anyway, we encountered Arithan three more times before he met his end, but that’s another story. The Great Plague of Merinta was just part of the whole thing, though.”

“I would love to hear it all,” Harabawa requested.

“Well, why not,” Candle shrugged. “I can skip over the part you just told, if someone could bring me something more to drink?” Several women got up immediately to find a pitcher. “Oh, one more detail for your story, though. When we were somewhere in the middle of these islands and badly in need of a few hours rest, we stopped at a small island where we met a young Merintan couple. They were friendly and generous and everything we had come to know a good Merint would be. They shared a meal with us and then sent us on our way the next morning. I’ve thought about those two from time to time over the years. They called themselves Sarina and Larinawa but I notice they don’t figure in your story and you mentioned almost everyone else we did meet by name. Also this pair were healthy and completely untouched by the plague. Even the comparatively healthy Merinta we met otherwise were showing signs of great weariness. Those two couldn’t have been real Merinta.”

“Who were they, then?” Jollin asked.

“Wenni and Nildar,” Candle replied. “Had to have been. No one else in these islands was in any shape to treat us as well as they did. They knew we needed a break, a chance to rest and gave it to us.”

“So you’ve met the gods?” Harabawa asked respectfully.

“To one extent or another,” Candle replied, accepting a large mug of fruit juice from one of the women.

“I’ll get to that. It all began shortly after my graduation from the University at Randona...”

Candle told the entire story of the quest the gods had given to Silverwind, Oceanvine and him and even with skipping past the bits that happened in Merinta it still took him over three hours to tell the entire story.

When he was finally done, soft music began and the attendees spoke among themselves until dawn.

Fifteen

The festival in Merinta was a welcome break for the mages, but nothing could have prepared them for what they found when they approached the island of Tissa.

With the sun just rising as the party finally broke up, Candle decided they should sleep themselves out before leaving Miast. Evidently the Merinta felt similarly and as the *Maiyim Bourne* slipped out of Miast’s lagoon, she was surrounded by outriggers, providing them with an honor guard as the magical boat started its journey back out of the sacred islands of Merinta.

In each canoe, one Merint had the duty of holding up a torch so the mages found themselves surrounded by a sea of flickering yellow lights which gradually became increasingly sparse as the canoes went their own ways. However, they did not entirely lose sight of all the torches until they extinguished themselves some hours later.

Perhaps those torches were a harbinger of events to come, because Tis was a city enwreathed in flames as they approached over an hour after dusk the next evening.

“Ahoy, the *Maiyim Bourne*!” a female voice shouted down to them from the deck of the *Bellinen Coast Guard Cutter Rehomewa*. “Strike your sails or change your course! Entry into Tisport is not allowed at this time.”

“Why?” Sextant shouted back, as he came about to face into the wind. “What is happening in the city?”

“There are riots,” came the reply, “and we’ve been ordered to block all attempts to enter the harbor for the duration.”

“We’re here at the President’s request though,” Sextant protested.

“He would not thank me for letting you into the harbor,” the Orentan woman replied. “Sorry.”

“Head south, Six,” Candle told him from the hatch to the galley.

“But we have to land in Tis,” Sextant reminded him.

“Actually, we have to be in Tis,” Candle corrected him. “We can land in the next town to the south and rent a car to bring us to Tis.”

“Yes, sir,” Sextant replied even as he set a southerly course.

“Oh my Gods!” Jollin exclaimed as she climbed up on deck and caught her first sight of Tis. “What’s

going on?”

“Coast Guard says riots,” Candle explained.

“You don’t believe them?” Jollin asked.

“I think that may too simplistic an answer,” Candle explained. “We’re looking for another way in. Better go wake Vine up and pack your overnight bags. We’re probably going to have to leave the boat in a different town.”

They only had to sail a few miles down the coast to a sleepy little town named Festai where Candle paid for a temporary slip at the dock before going in search of a car to rent. He returned to the dock half an hour later with a bright red convertible into which they threw their bags and sped off to the north.

“I’m surprised you found a car to rent this late at night,” Oceanvine commented.

“I didn’t,” Candle replied. “I’m surprised they didn’t roll up the sidewalks at dusk in this town.”

“Then how did you get this one?” Jollin asked.

“Creation magic,” Sextant replied, figuring it out before the others. “Sir, I think you can dispense with the engine noises. As I recall you kept them up all the way to Renton four years ago.”

“Fortunately this won’t be that long a trip,” Candle told him.

“Do you want me to drive?” Sextant asked.

“That won’t be necessary, we’re not going all that far,” Candle replied.

“I don’t get it,” Jollin admitted. “You made this car out of nothing?”

“No,” Candle denied, “but a fair amount of thin air went into it, but mostly I used the contents of a trash dumpster. Creation can go directly from energy to matter, but more often it is a double conversion; matter to energy to different matter. For small items, like a rose you don’t really need to consider where it comes from. Random atoms and molecules from the air and ground around you. Just try to be careful not to pull random pieces of the people around you. That actually is the main reason for all those exercises I’ve been putting Six and Oceanvine through. You need to control where not to get your basic building blocks from, otherwise you can kill yourself and others around you in a myriad number of ways. When you get right down to it, it’s amazing Silverwind figured out how to do it and survived, but then he was a true scientist before science was fashionable. The real miracle was in how the occasional wizard managed it before they even truly appreciated the nature of matter as we currently understand it.”

“We could be wrong too, you know,” Sextant told him. “Do you have to worry about quarks for example?”

“I’ve been using creation magic since before we even knew what quarks were,” Candle laughed, “but you’re right. You don’t really need to understand subatomic physics. You don’t really need to know your molecular chemistry, although believe me, that helps! You do need to be absolutely certain about what you do want to create, however, and don’t let your mind wander even in the slightest. It doesn’t take much of a mistake to create radioactive materials, although Aritos once admitted the main cause of death among mages attempting creation for the first time was by explosion. Evidently, inexperienced mages had

a tendency to create ions that were either all positively or all negatively charged so rather than hold together cohesively, they sort of flew apart suddenly.”

“So we need to concentrate on not doing that?” Oceanvine asked.

“Just don’t try to get fancy,” Candle told her. “You two are almost ready, you know. You could probably do it now, but I’d like your life expectancy to be at one hundred percent before you try.”

“Wind must be coming from the north,” Jollin commented, sniffing the air and then coughing. “It’s blowing the smoke out this way.”

“Large fires tend to make their own weather,” Candle told her. “No matter where the wind is coming from, it goes straight up. Then when the smoke has cooled enough to fall back to ground level the upper currents may have pushed it all over the place, but generally, you’re right, the prevailing breeze must be from out of Tis.”

Then they came over the top of a large hill and saw the burning city spread out below them. There seemed to be not one but several areas ablaze and possibly more but the columns of smoke obscured their view of much of the city. “Nice view of the city,” Candle commented dryly. “I’ll bet all the teenagers drive out here on the less traumatic evenings.”

“Is it me or do those fires seem to be burning in a pattern?” Jollin asked.

“You’re right,” Oceanvine told her. “Well spotted. It’s not finished yet, but it’s another Bond of Aritos. The Pohn variant is my guess.”

“It is,” Candle agreed. “I wonder how I missed that. Pohn is nothing but power, but in this case that may be what it most appropriate. Oh Gods, if that Bond is completed it could destroy the entire northeast quadrant of Bellinen. Maybe more. There’s a lot of power being applied to that spell, but it’s only about half done.”

“Use the staff and the Seal of Aritos to drain the Bond of power before it’s completed,” Oceanvine suggested.

“That’s my plan,” Candle agreed, “but not from here. We’re too far away.” He started the car moving again and they made their way into Tis at high speed.

Two miles later, however, they had to slow down as they reached the suburban rings that girded the land-bound edges of Tis. Traffic was heavy going in both directions with cars filled with boxes, suitcases and trunks.

“Slow moving here,” Sextant noted.

“I don’t think they know the way out of town,” Oceanvine remarked, “but they all look like they’re trying to get there.”

“It’s a panic,” Candle explained. “It may look like an ordinary rush hour, but this is the face of panic. These people are trying to get out of town, and that ought to mean all going in the same direction, but some have tried alternative routes, gotten lost and now are heading in every direction at once. Out here it just means heavy traffic, but I fear we’ll see worse as we get deeper in.”

After a few blocks, however, the inbound lane cleared up and they got nearly a mile deeper into the city before turning a corner to see both lanes filled with on-coming traffic. "I hate being right," Candle grumbled. He grabbed on to the golden staff and telekinetically lifted the car up, propelling it over the approaching cars.

"Maybe this is a one way street, Uncle." Jollin suggested..

"It is now," Candle told her.

"I didn't see any signs to that effect," Sextant added.

They continued on for five blocks in the air before traffic cleared up almost entirely. Candle set the car down gently and Oceanvine suggested, "Maybe I should take a turn propelling this crate?" Candle nodded agreement and she took up the task.

"Not too fast, Vine," Sextant warned her a few moments later. "Most of the drivers are behind us, but every so often..."

As if to illustrate his words two cars suddenly zoomed around the next corner and narrowly missed Candle's car as they shot on by. "I see what you mean," Oceanvine replied. "How much further, Uncle Candle?"

Candle closed his eye for a moment, then replied, "Another mile. That will put us close to the middle of it."

"Is that safe?" Jollin asked.

"No place within two or three hundred miles of here is safe," Candle told her. "I'm not sure if even that would be far enough, actually. Don't worry, though. I've already started working on it. Whoever is lighting the fires is still working his way through the Bond, although he is close to complete. The last time I saw something like this was in my first few weeks as an apprentice. Someone was using the Bond of Pahn to kill deer in a ritualistic manner and depositing their dying bodies at key points to shape a large Bond of Aritos. It took him weeks to complete it because he chose to only kill one deer every Arsdays."

"Why? Was there any reason that would improve the spell?" Oceanvine asked.

"None that I'm aware of, but he was part of a demon cult so that made part of their rationale, such as it was, religious in nature. For them Arsdays was the holiest and the act of raising a demon to them was a holy task. I don't know if the mage who did it was one of them or just using them though. Anyway, he managed to raise Pahn in the middle of Northerton and destroyed a good part of the city in the process.

"The reason I bring that up is that the final ritual killing was done at the focus of the Bond. The focus is that point at the center where all the power is concentrated. In most uses of the spell it doesn't matter, but in large ones that are built up modularly the strongest way to use them is to work your way toward the focus."

"Do the mages of One Maiyim know that?" Oceanvine asked.

"This one appears to," Candle remarked. "Of course it could be beginner's luck for all I know."

"I doubt that," Sextant commented. "This is not apprentice or journeyman-level magic. None of the

current apprentices and journeymen are up to this sort of thing. I can't even do it and I'm a master now."

"Actually you could," Candle told him, "So could Oceanvine and one or two of the others. You just don't know how, but I'll bet you could figure it out based on what you know about using the Seal of Aritos or Methis."

"No thanks," Oceanvine retorted. "I've heard too many cautionary tales on that subject. Besides, mages have successfully battled the Bond of Aritos and the demons behind them for centuries. I don't need to fight fire with fire."

"Good," Candle replied, "and that strategy wouldn't work all that well here. "Pull over, Six. Stop the car, Vine." They were now deep in the heart of the city and surrounded by fires although none were closer than a few blocks away, but the air was thick with the stench of burning buildings.

"That's Oceanvine," she replied tightly, but stopped propelling the vehicle with her mind. They glided to a halt and Candle started getting out of the car. "Is there any reason you have to be standing to do this?" she asked him.

"I would feel more comfortable that way," he replied.

"You don't generally do advanced magic sitting down," Oceanvine recalled.

"Probably because the rest of my classmates would close their eyes and go into a trance just to pick up a pencil," Candle laughed. "I guess I picked up my bad habit of being a show-off from your great-grandfather. My sister tried to break me of the habit, but you know how habits can be. Still I do feel more comfortable standing. It makes me feel ready for action. If you want, you have my permission to go into battle, while lying down on a bed."

"That could give mages a reputation for laziness," Oceanvine bantered.

"No, just you," Candle retorted as he pulled the golden pen out of his pocket and let it expand into its staff form. "Okay, time to get serious. Put your wards up."

"Mine already were," Jollin remarked. "What are we on guard against?"

"Probably something we can't even imagine," Candle told her, "but for now just think of it as defending yourself from an offensive spell."

Candle concentrated on the growing Bond of Pahn that surrounded them. He coughed twice as he breathed in a bit too much smoke, but quickly got himself back under control. "This is bad," he told the others at last.

"We know that," Oceanvine replied tartly.

"I mean, I'm not sure how to approach it," Candle explained. "I had planned to summon the Seal of Aritos and use it as I have before to envelope the Bond and drain it of power, but there is too much power involved. If I summon the Seal and attempt to counter this spell directly there will be a backlash that could kill everyone on this end of the island, ourselves included. If I try to funnel energy off, it will either be too slow a process, allowing whoever is casting this to finish up before I'm done or else if I go too fast I'll produce so much heat and light I'm likely to do more damage than the Bond is."

“You said it could kill everyone for hundreds of miles around,” Jollin pointed out.

“Sorry, I meant immediate damage,” Candle clarified his statement. “The damage from the Bond would come after the actual spell was completed. However, if I handle it wrong or lose control, which would be all too easy, it could incorporate the power of my counter spell and really make things worse. Normally, you know I let the energy flow through my staff and erupt upward to scatter into the atmosphere, much like a fountain of sparks. But there’s so much energy here I’d be afraid of setting the atmosphere on fire.”

“I seriously doubt that’s even possible,” Sextant argued. “Physicists worried about that same thing when the fusion bomb was tested fifteen years ago and it didn’t happen then. As I recall they worried about the same thing with those early fission devices too. Thank the gods no one ever used those outside of the few experimental tests!”

“Even so, those blasts did burn the nitrogen locally,” Candle pointed out, “which means there’s a good chance we’d have similar damage here. If you don’t mind, I’m kind of looking forward to breakfast.”

“What about using the Seal of Methis?” Sextant suggested.

“I considered it and tried that too,” Candle replied. “It’s the same problem. The spell I’m working against is too big, too powerful.”

“Cooperative magic then,” Oceanvine replied. “We’ll all work together. We’ve done it several times in the last few years.”

“You don’t have enough power in those staves of yours,” Candle told them, “and neither Aritos nor Methis have given you leave to use their Seals. They might in an emergency, but we don’t exactly have time to call them at the moment, so you may be able to help a bit, but you cannot assist on anything using those spells.”

“That’s an idea, though,” Oceanvine remarked. “Use both the Seal of Aritos and the Seal of Methis together. That should give you much more power than any Bond can generate.”

“That’s even worse,” Candle replied, “unless,” he trailed off.

“What?” Oceanvine asked.

“Creation magic,” Candle replied. “By now you know as well as I do that it is the act of converting energy into matter.”

“I thought you usually converted matter to energy and then back again,” Jollin remarked.

“Usually, yes,” Candle agreed, “but usually I don’t have this much loose energy at hand to use.” He paused to consider it again. “No, that still won’t work.”

“Why not?” Oceanvine asked.

“Vine, you might think I can do anything, but I do have limits,” Candle replied. “Concentrating on two divine signs at the same time exceeds those limits.”

“What if I help?” Oceanvine offered, “I’ve been studying the Seal of Methis for years now and I think I have it pretty well down.”

“Pretty well is not enough,” Candle replied. “You need to be spot on.”

“This bauble Methis gave me will help,” Oceanvine countered holding up the pendant the goddess had given her three years before.

“Methis has still not given you permission to use it yet, you know,” Candle pointed out.

“She told me I would need it one day,” Oceanvine argued, “so I’m sure she expects me to try eventually. Besides, I don’t plan to use it myself. You are. I’m just going to hold it for you, sort of.”

“Do you really think you can finesse a goddess that way?” Candle asked, genuine amusement showing on his face.

“That really isn’t my intention, and I think Methis would know that,” Oceanvine insisted, “but we have to try something.”

“It does sort of make sense, you know,” Sextant agreed. “Use one to contain the Bond and the other to siphon off the power.”

“And we’d better try something fast,” Jollin added. They turned to see her sitting halfway in the front seat of the car with her eyes closed. “Because whoever is setting all those fires – and I think there are several people working together – is almost done.”

“She’s right,” Candle agreed, sparing a moment of his attention for the spell being cast around them. “Six, I want you to maintain a protective ward all around us. We are not going to have the time to do it for ourselves. Jollin may help if she feels up to it.”

“I’ve never done cooperative magic before,” Jollin commented uncertainly.

“This will be fairly simple,” Sextant told her, offering his hands. “Just relax and concentrate on storing energy in your staff, but don’t fight me when I start taking it from you. The energy has to flow freely or we’ll all be in trouble. Give us a minute or so to get started,” he told Candle and Oceanvine. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the task at hand.

“Hey! That tickles,” Jollin giggled the first time he tried.

“Better than pain,” Sextant replied, “but, here let me try again. Is that better?”

“Are you doing anything?” Jollin asked in return.

“Better,” Sextant decided and reported to Candle, “We’re ready, sir.”

Oceanvine had already started to concentrate on the Seal of Methis, by levitating the pendant so that it floated in front of her. In her mind the vastly powerful symbol that reminded her so much of an impossibly complex clockwork flower, came to life, each ring of petals alternating between clockwise and counterclockwise movement. She had done this many times before, but after the first few seconds there was something different about it this time. Normally the image remained somewhat distant in her mind, but now it was all around her as though the Seal knew it was about to be put to use and letting her know it was eager to assist. “I’m ready too,” Oceanvine reported.

Candle did not acknowledge her verbally but immediately went to work himself, invoking the Seal of Aritos and using its power to envelope the massive Bond of Pahn. Before he was quite finished with that first step, the mage controlling the Bond of Pahn became aware of the interference and began to fight back. Wave upon heavy wave of an invisible force crashed against the ward Sextant and Jollin were maintaining, but Sextant had chosen to use one of Oceanvine's so-called nonstick wards and it easily deflected the attack.

Confident their defenses were adequate for now; Candle ignored the attacks and continued with what he was doing. In the past when using the Seal of Aritos to counter any of the Bonds he had tended to pit the power of one against the other directly. However, he had come to learn that the Bond worked best when used in a less direct manner. It seemed ideally suited to patiently surround the power of the Demon Pahn and waiting it out. It seemed like an eternity and by the time he was finished, so, evidently was the rogue mage. If Jollin was correct, they were dealing with a team of mages, but Candle thought it might also be possible that non-mages could be directed to start this spell.

It did not matter, however, whether there were one or many at this moment. The Seal of Aritos completely enfolded the Bond of Pahn even as their enemies completed building the Bond and it came completely to life. The Bond pulsed and tried to explode, but under Candle's guidance, the Seal of Aritos held the power in and calmed Pahn's influence in much the same way Candle imagined Aritos himself must have tried to calm his demon children.

Then it was time to use the Seal of Methis. His eyes were shut as even he was forced to do when performing the most advanced of magical feats, but from behind his closed eyelids he could "see" the Seal of Methis waiting in Oceanvine's mental grasp. He reached for it with exceeding care and attached a spell string from his golden staff to Methis' Seal. He felt the power of the Goddess surge forward instantly; ready to assist him in anything he asked of it. A small part of his mind privately wondered if perhaps Methis had tacitly given Oceanvine permission to use Her sign long ago but said nothing. The Gods, he knew, had a tendency to test those mortals they respected and loved and not only had Methis loved Oceanvine on first sight, but She had also started testing the young mage gently from that first meeting as well.

Forcing his attention back to the problem at hand, he saw the Bond struggling to burst out of its confinement and in a few places it looked as though it might eventually do so if he failed to act swiftly enough. Then he made a suggestion to the Seal of Methis.

Candle supposed that in reality he was giving it orders, but when dealing with the divine seals, he never thought of it in those terms. Instead he suggested what he would like in the same manner he might in conversation face-to-face with the deities themselves. It seemed more polite and less hubristic than attempting to summon the might of a god and commanding it to do his bidding. It never occurred to him to do otherwise.

The Seal of Methis worked even more rapidly than he could have imagined and a few minutes later the Bond of Aritos had been snuffed out and a small gold ingot sat on the pavement in front of him.

"Okay, kids," Candle told them tiredly. "Fun time's over. Even the fires are extinguished."

"How did you do that?" Jollin asked opening her eyes. She looked over at Candle and Oceanvine. Candle was looking as tired as he sounded and he leaned slightly on his staff for support, but Oceanvine's eyes were still closed and she was smiling beatifically. As though she understood Jollin was staring at her, Oceanvine took a deep breath and opened her eyes. She did not look tired at all and, in fact, looked more alert than she had most mornings on board the *Maiyim Bourne*.

“As I mentioned,” Candle reminded her, “creation magic is a matter of converting energy into matter.” The ingot floated up from the street and toward Jollin. “I just converted it all into this chunk of gold. Here,” he offered. “Make something pretty for yourself.”

“I don’t normally work in gold,” she replied, “but maybe something the entire family can share. This is only a bit over ten or twelve pounds of gold, however. Is this all you got from all that energy?”

“Do you have any idea of what $E=MC^2$ means?” Sextant asked with a chuckle. “That’s enough energy to power every city on Maiyim for years. That’s kind of scary, you know?” he added.

“Very,” Oceanvine agreed, suddenly very serious. “That someone would even think of trying to use such power destructively. Uncle Candle! Are you all right?”

“Just very tired,” Candle told her. “Let’s see if we can find a place to sleep for the night. Then in the morning we’ll go looking for the local authorities and see if we left any loose ends. Somehow I doubt it, though. Part of what I had to do to would have killed anyone associated with the Bond itself. At the moment I’m too tired, however, to figure out if they were frozen or incinerated. We’ll find out in the morning.”

Sixteen

It was nearly dawn before they found a hotel that was still open for business. Most of the delay, however, was in encountering the various police and fire lines that had been set up around the multiple scenes of disaster.

“As inconvenient as they are now,” Candle pointed out to the others, “these barriers mean we probably did not harm many innocents. Probably none since most are likely to still be trying to get out of the city.”

“Why didn’t we see these barriers on the way in?” Jollin asked after they had spoken to the police at the third one they encountered.

“We came in through a section of the Bond that had not yet been set ablaze,” Candle informed her. “That was intentional on our parts. No fire, no reason to set up a barrier, not that one would have stopped us then, but it’s just as well we did not have to talk our way past any on the way in. We barely got in place in time as it was.”

At the next barrier, they found the Chief of Police set up in a temporary center of operations. The Fire Department Chief was present as well so Candle and the others explained what had happened. The head of the Firefighters was openly skeptical about their stories of a demonic curse, but the Police Chief disagreed, “No, Mayor Trehomawa told me they were on their way here a few days ago. What kept you?”

“We were blocked from the harbor by the Coast Guard,” Sextant replied. “We had to sail on down the coast a bit and then drive back.”

The Chief of Police took that with a nod and eventually directed them to the Garrison Hotel Tis, one of a Granomish chain of high class hotels, which stood in an area that had been left untouched.

Power was out all over Tis, but the hotel had generators for just such an eventuality so while they were

given a suite on the top floor, they could still ride the elevator and there were lights, however dim, in the hallways.

Jollin woke up around noon time wondering where she was. Looking around the hotel room the events of the previous night can rushing back, so she sat up and tried to look out the window. It turned out her room did not have an exterior window, so she slipped on her only change of clean clothing and stepped out into the suite's common room to see Oceanvine already up and working on her thesis with the pearl orbiting her head. Jollin smiled and reached into her purse for a silver bead and did likewise before joining her cousin.

"Morning," Oceanvine greeted her softly, looking up for a moment. "Looks a mess out there, so I figured I'd better get some of this done before we have to go out and start helping with the clean up."

"I see," Jollin noted, looking out the suite's large windows. "You can still see the shape of the Bond in the burnt-out buildings."

"Yes," Oceanvine agreed, "and that's still very much a danger even if it has been deactivated. Someone concentrating on its shape too much might well invoke its power inadvertently. Fortunately I think its shape is sufficiently obscured or I'd have rushed out already, but Uncle Candle might think otherwise."

"We also need to make sure that no other instances of the Bond of Aritos are active here," Jollin added thoughtfully.

"True," Oceanvine agreed. "One Maiyim has proven they are capable of doing more than one thing at a time."

"Was this caused by One Maiyim too?" Jollin asked.

"Who else?" Oceanvine retorted. "There have been only two lines of mages active on Maiyim these last few decades. One is represented by the students and teachers in the renewed General Magic Departments in the three universities, not that there are many of us. You met Horizon. He was never really trained as a mage in school, although he is fairly talented, I think. The teachers in Granom aren't anywhere near as young as he is. Most of them are only a few years younger than Uncle Candle. Anyway, Sextant and I are probably the most advanced of the new mages of that line, but only because we started before any of the other students. The other line is One Maiyim."

"Back when Uncle Candle was our age they were campaigning to outlaw magic all across Maiyim. I don't think they came very close, but they did tap into a lot of people's basic fears and it made magical studies far less popular. Eventually the abolishment of General Magic Departments was completed by the work Uncle Candle did with my great-grandparents. Ironical, that, but with the rise of Tech-magic, very few people really needed to know the basic corpus of magical techniques their forbearers had to learn. Specialization was the key to success and those specializations made the sorts of magic we do unnecessary in the manufacture of our modern technological devices."

"Factory workers would learn one spell and none of the theory behind it in order to do their jobs. Then even that became unnecessary as magical automation was developed about twenty years ago. Only a few technicians were necessary to build and maintain the machines that performed the magical tasks factory worker once performed."

"I'll bet the unions weren't happy about that," Jollin commented.

“Not initially, but they soon discovered that there was no shortage of jobs for trained workers. They demanded and received training for their members and that was another blow to magical studies,” Oceanvine concluded.

“But magic is still needed for our high technology,” Jollin countered. “Someone must know enough to create new machines and technologies.”

“A few,” Oceanvine shrugged, “but you’d be surprised just how few. They are very specialized and while they have studied interdisciplinary subjects, they don’t actually have to be able to cast the spells to make them work, just coordinate teams of specialists. I’m sometimes amazed they get anything accomplished at all, but it does seem to work.

“Anyway, One Maiyim’s mages are technically general mages, but have specialized too, it seems. They have worked in the Demonic Studies,” Oceanvine continued. “You already know how they are ranked by which demon’s Bond they studied. The thing is, the better you get at using the Bond of Aritos, the more likely you are to be at the infinitesimal mercy of the demon associated with it. I wonder how many mages they have lost over the years.”

“Perhaps they have learned the hard way just how far they can go,” Jollin suggested.

“Could be,” Oceanvine nodded. “That could also be why their very best, the Arithan mages, have learned more than one form of the Bond. As they got too accomplished, they switched in order to stay safer. It’s still not safe, I don’t think, but it does put off the day before they suddenly find themselves teleported into the jaws of a demon.”

They had arranged to meet with the Chief of Police that afternoon and after breakfast, they left to honor that appointment. “The Fire Department found three bodies at the center of the disturbance. They appeared to be half-charred and half frost-bitten. And all three were wearing these rings and medallions.” He indicated three heavy gold rings and three small medallions that had been worn as pendants from gold chains. All had the breaking wave sign of One Maiyim on them.

“I had wondered what the effects of my counterspell would be,” Candle mused. “If there is any justice in this world, those will be our rogue mages, or some of them. It’s possible a few might have gotten away, but only if they had already left the area. One of these three is most likely to have been the leader. Any chance of identifying them?”

“We’re working on that,” the Police Chief replied. “Two were Orenta and the third was a Granom. The Granom was carrying a passport from the Isle of Fire and we have sent inquiries.”

“Both or neither of the other two might have been from there as well,” Candle explained. “One Maiyim is an International organization and they recruit from all nations.”

“You really think this mysterious and illegal group is behind all this?” the Chief of Police asked.

“That collection of jewelry confirms it, Chief,” Candle told him. “For now, however, we need to make sure there are no traces of last night’s curse waiting to trip us up in all the rubble. A big spell like that rarely comes apart cleanly and the left over traces can be more dangerous than the original spell, although in this case maybe not.”

They spent the next few days cleaning up the mess that had been left behind, but they also had some nasty surprises along the way. Most of the dangerous spell traces they found were from the Bond of

Pahn, but they also found active Bonds representing all three of the other remaining demons.

“I think we’re dealing with more than the work of three mages here,” Candle told them at the end of the first day. “One or more of the bodies they found may have been Arithan mages, but there are far too many other curses here in the rubble for only three mages to have done all this. What really bothers me is that it looks as though they were using the Bonds of Xenlabit, Gredac and Kerawlat to set off the larger Bond of Pahn. It seems excessive to me.”

“Worse,” Oceanvine commented, “this is all so clumsily done. All of these Bonds were supposed to be part of last night’s disaster and yet did not go off with the rest. They can’t have been in that much of a hurry.”

“A lot of this looks like something an apprentice might do,” Sextant opined. “Most of those Bonds are so poorly done, missing important details and all, that they should have gone off in the faces of the mages who cast them, and yet they got lucky on that count.”

“And so did we,” Candle replied. “But there seem to be dozens of these little Bonds.”

“Can a Bond ever truly be little?” Jollin asked.

“Of course,” Candle informed her. “It’s all a matter of how you choose to cast the spell. Of course, it’s silly to use the Bond of Aritos for some small-power application when something far safer would do. The Bond is not the only curse in the world and most of the others do not put your soul in jeopardy.”

“Is it possible, they used the smaller Bonds here because they didn’t know those other ways?” Oceanvine asked.

“That would be a stupid and reckless way to train a mage,” Candle replied. “Why do you ask?”

“Well, aside from a few simple fireballs and lightning bolts, almost every spell I’ve seen a One Maiyim mage cast has had the Bond of Aritos behind it. Lord Wollono in Querna, or Victory as he called himself, used it to power that big ward he put around the Wurra Palace. He used it for almost everything else he did too. His wife may have been doing the same thing, although she seemed a bit more skilled. And Adamant down in Sutheria used the Bond to teleport with.”

“And I think he was using the Bond to power his attacks on us, even though it wasn’t necessary,” Candle agreed, “but that still sounds like a foolish and wasteful way to train apprentices.”

“It’s possible the Inner Circle of One Maiyim simply does not care about how many apprentices they burn their way through,” Jollin suggested. “I saw similar behavior from the warlords of Saindo while I was there. They recruit the kids, give them guns and jobs. Usually those jobs are to attack competing bosses and most of those kids die on their first mission, but sometimes they survive and if they do, they get a promotion and another mission. Most of them are killed off that way, but sometimes one manages to learn and becomes one of the higher-ups in the warlord’s organization or he might even become a warlord himself. The Warlords don’t care how many kids they kill so long as they get what they want.”

“Yeah, that sounds a lot like One Maiyim too,” Candle agreed. “They must be teaching their apprentices about the Bond of Aritos from the very start. I wonder if each student picks the variant he is going to learn or if that’s assigned to him or her.”

“It would certainly explain the sloppiness of what we’ve been seeing this summer,” Sextant replied.

“Half-trained apprentices sent out to cast the Bond of Aritos with no clear grasp of everything it can do.”

“Now that is a scary image,” Candle admitted. “I wonder why they haven’t thought to send that sort after us. A few dozen random attacks like that and any of us could be vulnerable. It’s not like they don’t know who we are.”

“They obviously haven’t thought of that,” Oceanvine told him. “Or maybe they don’t think we’re that great a threat.”

“Their error then,” Sextant replied coldly. “All this is just plain unconscionable. It’s like giving a child a book of matches and encouraging him to go play.”

“Actually, I have not seen evidence of such recklessness on One Maiyim’s part before this,” Candle noted. “This may be something new.”

“It could also be that this great world conspiracy is as anarchic as Saindo,” Jollin pointed out. “From what you’ve told me, there’s no clear proof that Adamant was operating for anyone save himself in Sutheria. The People’s Party was a somewhat more cohesive effort on their part, but what if each member of the Inner Circle has his or her own agenda? So Adamant was a lone operator and the People’s Party was being secretly controlled by one of the members of the Inner Circle, but not the others? How many sit on that Inner Circle, anyway?”

“Strangely enough,” Candle replied, “none of them have seen fit to keep me abreast of their organizational scheme.”

They found their worst surprise on their third day in Tis.

“Now that is pure evil,” Candle remarked as Oceanvine brought him to her discovery.

“What is it?” Jollin asked.

“All four of the Bonds of Aritos have been cast on this lamp post,” Candle explained. “They were primed to become active with the lamp was turned on.”

“What would they have done?” Jollin asked.

“Spread a curse disease across the entire Northern Hemisphere, I think,” Candle told her. “Maybe the south as well. This was supposed to explode when the lamp came on and use the Bond of Pahn to spread for hundreds or maybe thousands of miles. The big spell was supposed to be powering this. Well, I know how to handle this one. It’s compact enough that I can do what we did in Querna.”

He tightened his grip on the golden staff he had taken to walking with everywhere in Tis and the lamp post disappeared instantly. A moment later there was bright star-like point in the sky.

“What did you do?” Jollin asked, but Candle did not answer. Sextant saw the wizard was suddenly looking tired and rushed to his side to help him stay on his feet.

Oceanvine helped prop Candle up on the other side and answered Jollin’s question. “He teleported the whole construct into outer space. Then sent the Seal of Aritos after it to drain it of all power. That light you see is the excess energy being spent harmlessly. It’s a fairly advanced set of techniques, both for distance and power. I doubt I could have done it without the golden staff.”

“Unlikely,” Candle whispered. He took a deep breath and gave himself a slight recharge. “There. That’s a little better,” he shook them off. “But, perhaps that should be all for today.”

Seventeen

They remained in Tis for another five days, cleaning up the bits and traces left over from the devastating curse they had defeated. They finally left when nothing new was discovered for two days and a message from President Jiroshi arrived tipping them off that something was afoot on Jent Island.

“I’m beginning to think the big spell might have been cast from those rings instead of directly by the people wearing them,” Candle remarked as they drove away from Tis.

“Why?” Oceanvine asked.

“It was a very large spell. The caster of such a spell needs to have the entire construct in his mind to keep it from blowing up in his face. You know that,” Candle explained.

“I do,” Oceanvine agreed, “but while I’ve never attempted something on quite so grand a scale, is it really so much more difficult?”

“Very much so,” Candle told her. “I’d rather attempt such a thing as cooperative magic with a mage I barely know than try to cast something that large unassisted. Sometimes I might not have a choice, but given my druthers and all that, yes it really is more difficult.”

“That does make sense,” Sextant agreed. “We already know One Maiyim uses those rings cooperatively. That spell they nearly killed us with in Rjalkatyp was cast that way.”

“If that’s the case,” Oceanvine remarked, “I hope they don’t have too many more rings stored up with that giant Bond of Pahn. Too many of them and we’ll flood the gold market.”

“Fine,” Candle shot back, “next time I’ll create lead or iron if you would rather.”

“Did President Jiroshi say what the problem was on Jent?” Jollin asked.

“No,” Candle replied. “I got the impression he wasn’t entirely certain himself, or maybe he didn’t want to start a panic. Hard to say with politicians. They get so used to covering up problems they forget which should be public knowledge and which really are best kept from the public safety after a while. And most of those secrets that are best kept? Well, most of us wouldn’t even think to look into anyway.”

“No doubt we’ll find out when we get there,” Oceanvine speculated.

The trip to Jent was nearly uneventful, although they met up with a pod of pilot whales who followed them nearly two thirds of the way until the *Maiyim Bourne* came about around Cape Sira at the Southwest end of Ponar. The three days on the inner seas of Bellinen, however, gave Jollin the necessary time to improve her defensive wards, Oceanvine much needed time to work on her thesis and several sessions for both Sextant and Oceanvine with the golden staff.

They had worked together on the staff over the previous several years, whenever one of them came up

with a new insight about the staff and wanted to check it out. The one known property of the staff Candle forbade them from trying the ability to make the same sort of path through physical objects that the demons had once used to travel on from one place to another on Maiyim. “Methis warned me against it after stopping me from destroying one of her favorite trees,” Candle had told them. “She also went and showed me how it was done, but it isn’t likely to be of any real use to us. None of us can hold our breath to travel any path long enough to be worth using.”

They stopped each night in a convenient port and left again before breakfast the next morning and finally they sailed quietly into the port city of Oeh.

Oeh was an ancient city and its architecture had not been rebuilt in the modern style. The buildings themselves had been modernized enough for the addition of electricity, natural gas and air conditioning, but outwardly the city looked much the same as it had a thousand years earlier.

“Why have they maintained these ancient buildings?” Oceanvine wondered their first day in port. “Wouldn’t it have been more economical after a while to build new buildings?”

“Probably,” Candle agreed, “but Oeh has a special place in the hearts of all Orenta. This was the ancient capital of Imperial Bellinen. This archipelago has not always been the democratic republic we know today. Twenty-five hundred years ago it was a group of small kingdoms until Habemawa I consolidated the archipelago into a single empire that lasted over one thousand years until the death of Emperor Gareawa IX.”

“I’ve never taken Orentan history,” Sextant admitted. “What happened then?”

“Things became as chaotic as you can possibly imagine. Old Gareawa left no heirs for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that most of them killed each other off and he out-lived the few who survived each other’s tender attentions. So naturally the petty local kings each decided they ought to be emperor and what some scholars call a ‘Dark Age’ began. Most, however, call it the Age of Faith.

“Gradually, however, the Orentan mages became weary of war and secretly banded together to bring it to an end. Most warfare up to that point had used magic freely, but with the mages on strike the generals were forced to come up with new ways for fighting their wars or agree to truces. Truces and armistices rapidly became the rule of the day and the Kings were coerced by their nobles to find another way. Several were probably killed by those nobles when they refused, but eventually the nobles came here and met in what later became known as the first Senate of Bellinen. It took a couple hundred years before it evolved into the current form and by that time they had decided to move the capital to Merinne.

“About five hundred years ago, a group of Orenta decided to restore the ancient buildings and monuments of Oeh,” Candle continued. “During the restoration period here, Oeh became a favorite vacation spot of the Senatorial elite of Bellinen. Many Senatorial families would come here for several months each year to participate in the ‘Season’ as they called it. And gradually the city was restored to its ancient glory.”

“How accurate a restoration is it?” Jollin asked. “I mean did Oeh really look like this in the ancient times?”

“Parts of it maybe,” Candle told them, amused. “The archaeologists argue about it frequently, I understand. You see the city really doesn’t look much like it did at any particular time. The north wing of the old palace, for example,” he pointed to a large imposing, marble-faced building on top of one of the three surrounding hills. “It’s generally considered to be a perfect reconstruction of how it looked during

the reign of Habemawa III. It ought to be, since it was based on a period drawing. The south wing, however is reconstructed from descriptions made some six centuries later.

“The entire city is like that,” Candle went on. “A mishmash of buildings in all the various styles from over the course of the Imperial Millennium. So while each one is possibly an exact reconstruction of the building from some time or other, there is probably not a single block that looks exactly like it did at any given time in history. Actually I’m not even certain all that many buildings are perfectly restored. Quite a few, I understand sport a mixture of ornamentations that never coexisted.”

“Well, I think it’s charming,” Oceanvine maintained. “Can we tour the old palace?”

“Of course,” Candle told her. “They have tours up there twice an hour. There was even a pleasant restaurant in the old ballroom last time I was there.”

They spent the next afternoon touring the palace where several rooms were undergoing restoration based on recently discovered paintings from another part of the city. The gardens had recently been replanted as well with varieties of flowers and trees that had been established as having been in existence during the Imperial Millennium. The Ballroom Restaurant was still where Candle remembered and they ate dinner there before returning to the *Maiyim Bourne*.

When not playing tourist, however, they spoke, not only to the local authorities, but to people on the streets and in the markets. No one knew of any problems in Oeh. As far as anyone could tell, life here in the ancient tropical capital was idyllic and good for all. The mages privately wondered who the natives were trying to fool, but had to admit that they could hardly fault the locals for being happy.

“We’ve been here for three days and it’s starting to look like there’s absolutely nothing wrong here,” Sextant commented as they ate a late meal aboard the boat that night.

“I do feel like we’ve been sent on a wild goose chase,” Candle admitted. “None of us have seen so much as a trace of the Bond or any other malicious magic for that matter since we arrived and no one seems to be complaining either.”

“Maybe we should try looking somewhere else,” Oceanvine suggested. “Outside the city, perhaps.”

“That’s a good idea,” Candle agreed. “Also it could be that we’re not looking for the right thing. We’ll have to use our imaginations. However, before we do, I’ll give President Jirosi a call in the morning. If he’s going to send us here, the least he can do is tell us what we’re supposed to be looking for.”

Just then the special radio began to hiss and almost immediately after a familiar trumpet fanfare could be heard throughout the cabin. The fanfare continued on as it always did and Oceanvine reached for several sheets of thaumagraphic paper. Finally the message began, “Seven. Victory. Adamant. Niner. Five. Four. One. Mission . Two.” There was a long pause and then the voice continued, “Two. Five. Seven. One. One. Niner. Seven.” And so on.

“Sounds like they’re back to the old code,” Sextant commented.

“Shhh!” Oceanvine shushed him, but continued copying the coded message by willing it on to the paper.

The message lasted nearly half an hour this time but it was eventually followed by the same code as it opened with and then the trumpet music sounded once more before the sound trailed off in a hiss and

then a minute later that too went away.

Eighteen

Oceanvine dreamed.

It was a familiar dream with nothing particularly strange about it. She found herself sitting on the bed in what she had begun to think of as her room at Methis' Forge. There was no compulsion to do anything in particular – there never was when she had this dream. If she wanted to, she could have just gone back to sleep, but that possibility never occurred to her. The Goddess Methis wanted to talk.

Oceanvine stood up and left the room. She walked the few steps to the stairway and then down to where Methis was waiting for her, book in hand, in an overstuffed arm chair. "What are You reading?" Oceanvine asked, sitting down in the chair across from Methis.

"Your thesis, dear," Methis replied. "Sorry, but I couldn't wait."

"Hopefully it's the same one I'm working on now," Oceanvine laughed nervously. "So what did You want to talk about?"

"I haven't seen you this summer," Methis replied, "and I found I sort of missed that."

"I sent You a postcard," Oceanvine pointed out.

"From Othisl, yes," Methis acknowledged. "I appreciate the thought. Not very many send Me greetings in such a mundane manner."

"Uncle Candle calls You on Your birthday," Oceanvine noted.

"Yes, he does," Methis smiled. "How did you know?"

"Wenni mentioned it on Snake Island," Oceanvine chuckled. "I don't think She sounded very approving."

"My cousin can be a bit stuffy at times," Methis shrugged. "Bellinen can be rather formal, but he's not quite so stuffy as She is and Merinne? Well, Merinne is an almost silent goddess. She rarely speaks aloud to Us and I only know of one case in which She spoke out loud in the presence of a mortal, but She does have a much better sense of humor than Her daughter."

They continued to chat for a long time and Oceanvine felt utterly relaxed as they did. In fact the only times she felt so relaxed was when Methis came to her in dreams like this and they often occurred when Oceanvine was feeling her most tense. That made sense, she decided, even as they continued to talk about the most nonessential matters. Right now, she was not only under pressure to finish her thesis, but the elongated mission in Bellinen was starting to look as though it would never end. Without realizing how they got there, Oceanvine started talking about that mission.

"Yes," Methis nodded, "you are right that the mages of One Maiyim do not, for the most part, have your training. The Bond of Aritos is their primary area of study and after learning only a few basic skills they put their apprentices directly into Demonic Studies. I suppose that makes those who survive very

powerful, but all any of them can do is destroy.”

“They seem to be very good at that,” Oceanvine replied.

“You ain’t seen nothing yet,” Methis told her wryly. “Wake up!”

The command was not delivered forcefully, but there was no resisting it nonetheless. Oceanvine’s eyes snapped open and she was in the dark bow cabin with Jollin. She was tempted to close her eyes and go back to sleep, but instead decided that Methis must have had a reason to wake her, so she got out of bed and slipped on the first things that came out of the closet. It was too dark to see them, but from their feel, Oceanvine decided the closet had delivered up her usual “school uniform.” She stepped quietly out of the cabin and made her way into the galley before taking a look outside. Everything looked normal so she helped herself to a cup of coffee. After her first sip, she took another look outside where the sky was still dark but the lights around the dock illuminated everything nearby.

Something was wrong. The dock was higher than it had been a few minutes before. No, that was not right. It meant the boat was getting lower. She looked out the other side of the boat and saw the water level in the harbor had gotten lower and was still receding at an alarming rate. In the Bay of Rhosda, known for its extreme tidal bore, this might have been normal, but anywhere else on Maiyim it could mean only one thing.

On a world where all of the land mass was made up of islands, children were taught almost from the cradle about tsunamis. They did not occur frequently, thank the Gods, but it was essential to know the signs of an impending great wave and what to do about it.

What to do was normally rush, if at all possible, to high ground above the effects of the wave. That was not an option, but she did rush through the boat, waking everyone up. By the time she was done, the *Maiyim Bourne* was hanging from the dock on its mooring lines and the cabin was listing at an almost impossible angle. Oceanvine grabbed her staff and used it to telekinetically hold the boat level.

Another look outside showed her the bottom of the harbor, but far out, in the light of the moon, she spotted a gleaming white line where the approaching tsunami was starting to shoal. The others were just coming out of their cabins when the great wave rushed in, picking up the *Maiyim Bourne* like a child’s toy and snapping her free of the dock.

Now the boat was rushing with the wall of water down a narrow street in Oeh. Oceanvine stopped trying to hold the boat level and instead tried to keep her near the center of the street. That worked out fairly well until a large building got in their way. Suddenly none of the mages were able to move and the boat crashed into the building.

The *Maiyim Bourne* was truly indestructible and it scraped along that building and then around it as the unrelenting wave drove them onward. “Don’t worry,” Candle called out. “I’m holding all of us.”

Ah, thought Oceanvine, *that explains it*. She had wondered if her inability to move just prior to the impact was some hitherto unknown defensive property of the boat. Now she knew Candle had cast a ward that held each of them in place to cushion them from the blow. Meanwhile, outside the cabin, the ancient City of Oeh was rushing by. The water started to recede twice, only to be stopped by successive waves. Finally, however, the water really did start to drain back into the ocean, but the *Maiyim Bourne* came to rest on her side over half a mile from the harbor.

Candle let them down gently and then using the golden staff picked up the *Maiyim Bourne* and held her

level just as Oceanvine had been doing. "Better retract the centerboard," he told Sextant who immediately complied while Jollin and Oceanvine went outside to assess the situation. When Candle let the boat back down, she was still listing a bit, but no longer at the radical angle she had with the centerboard extended. "Where are we?" he asked.

"We seem to have landed in a public park," Oceanvine told him.

"I think it's the same one that had the swan boats," Jollin added. "We're about one hundred feet from the pond. Doesn't look quite so pretty as it did the other day, though."

"I'd be surprised if it did," Candle remarked and came out on deck still wearing his pajamas. "Let's take a look. Yes, I think you're right." He concentrated again and the boat rose up in the air and floated over to the now brackish pond and let her down into the muddy water. "There are the remains of the small dock on the far shore, Vine. Please pilot us over there while I get dressed."

"Right," Oceanvine agreed, failing to correct him on her name. She did so and they were floating beside the truncated pier before Candle had finished getting dressed. Jollin and Oceanvine found a way to secure the boat by lashing her to the deck of the pier, then looked around at what they could see of the city.

"Shouldn't we have felt a quake before the wave rushed in?" Jollin asked. Most of the buildings in sight seemed to have withstood the wave's onslaught, although one had completely collapsed and another was about half down.

"That depends on how far away it was," Oceanvine pointed out. "Also the *Maiyim Bourne* tends to cushion us against most minor shocks, and I imagine the water would have done that for us as well. And, of course, we slept through it. I wonder how much damage there has been closer to the water. We got pushed a long way, you know. We probably would have gone even further had the centerboard not been extended."

"Vine?" Jollin asked, "How does a boat like this even have a centerboard? Shouldn't it just have a deep permanent keel?"

"That's how it looks when you see her out of the water," Oceanvine explained, "but this is a magical boat and Nildar and Wenni decided we might have to beach her from time to time. It's just one of those strange things about the *Maiyim Bourne* I've grown accustomed to."

They ate a quick breakfast then rushed out to see what had happened elsewhere. "Shouldn't we move the boat back to the harbor?" Jollin asked.

"Let's see how much of the harbor is left first," Candle told her. "There are going to be a lot of people who need our help, and I doubt anyone is going to ride the swan boats again for a while, wherever they got off to."

City Hall had been swept off its foundation but surviving officials were already setting up temporary offices in tents that had been set up nearby. "The mayor is missing," the City Clerk advised them, "as are a lot of department heads. You have to realize that houses on the beach are the most prestigious anywhere in Bellinen. I'm just glad my husband insisted on living in the hills."

Candle asked what the mages could do to help, but the Clerk had no suggestions. "Magic won't help us here, Wizard. We have thousands of people dead and if we don't clean up fast enough, we'll have

disease. The only good news I've had this morning is that the Navy and Coast Guard will both have ships here by noon."

"Fast response," Candle response.

"Yes," the Clerk nodded. "We were lucky they were so close when this disaster struck. Two fleets ready to help out all up and down the coast."

"Amazingly lucky," Candle replied before heading off to find whoever was in charge of the police department.

"I appreciate the offer, Wizard," a tired-looking police chief told him, "but while we're stretched too thin just keeping the peace as best we can, I cannot really see what help you can be at this time."

Oceavine looked like she was about to debate the point hotly, but Candle cut her off by thanking the man and letting him know the mages would remain in town at least until the Navy and Coast Guard had become established and probably a bit longer just in case. "We can't force them to let us help, Vine," he told her a few minutes later. "Right now the best help we can be is to help search for survivors. We'll move the boat back to the harbor and then come back and help as best we can."

"That's all?" Oceanvine demanded.

"No, not completely," Candle replied. "We'll also keep an eye out for spell traces. You know which demon has an affinity for seismic events. Keep an eye out for spell strings that might be connected to the Bond of Xenlabit. If this tsunami was artificially generated it's more than likely we'll find spell traces. We may also have spell strings, but keep in mind how difficult Xenlabit strings can be to follow."

Moving the *Maiyim Bourne* was the easy part and they had just finished securing her to cleats at a section of wharf that had survived the great waves when two Coast Guard cutters steamed into the harbor. On the distant horizon, Oceanvine spotted a carrier group from the Bellinen navy. The aircraft carrier and most of the escorts moved on, but two of the smaller ships split off and followed the Coast Guard vessels into Oehport.

"Come on, kids," Candle told them. "Let's go help with the digging."

"The next two days were spent digging through the mud and rubble and while quite a few survivors were found, many more bodies turned up instead. The third day started out equally depressing, but it was then the first sick people were being rushed to the emergency hospital that had been set up at the edge of town. Candle was not expecting anything out of the ordinary, but, "we need to make sure."

"After what we saw elsewhere," Oceanvine reminded him, "none of us would argue with you."

"The physicians might," Candle pointed out. "I doubt any one of them has ever used magic to treat their patients." It turned out he was wrong.

"Candle?" an elderly Orentan woman looked up and greeted him as they entered the gymnasium that was being used to triage the patients.

"Perilla?" Candle asked uncertainly.

"Only my family calls me that these days," Perilla laughed. "No one takes a medicinal mage very

seriously.”

“They would if you threatened to turn them into a fairy tale,” Candle told her.

Perilla laughed, “I try not to plagiarize and as I recall that was always one of your favorite lines.”

“You’re free to borrow it. I inherited it from Silverwind and Oceanvine,” Candle laughed then as a second thought added, “the First, that is.”

“The First?” Perilla asked.

“You have been out of the loop,” Candle laughed and introduced the others. “Perilla here,” he added to Oceanvine, Sextant and Jollin, “was in a few of my classes when I attended the University at Merinne. So have you been here in Oeh all along?” he asked Perilla.

“Not at all,” Perilla shook her head, “I arrived on a Navy helicopter this morning. Do you know if the rest of the fleet has arrived yet?”

“Two ships of it,” Candle replied. “The rest appeared to be headed elsewhere.”

“Well, there were a lot of cities and towns that got hit all up and down this coast,” Perilla decided.

“We were here when it happened,” Candle told her, “and haven’t been able to hear much. Where was the epicenter?”

“Just across the bay on Lehana,” Perilla informed him. “It was a moderately strong quake, but not normally one that would have set off a tsunami. It caused a fair-sized landslide, however, and that landslide caused the tsunami. The entire northshore of Jent and a few places on Sa were affected.”

“Could have been a lot worse, then,” Candle replied.

“The estimates of over ten thousand dead are bad enough for me,” Perilla told him tiredly.

“Yes, I suppose they are,” Candle agreed seriously. “And I understand that is just here in Oeh. Lehana, you say?”

“Yes,” Perilla agreed. “It was a magnitude 6.9 quake. Respectable, but not extreme. Why?”

“Maybe I need to go take a look over there for myself,” Candle replied. “Remember One Maiyim?”

“That organization was outlawed back when we were still in school,” Perilla replied.

“Doesn’t seem to have stopped them much,” Candle told her, reaching into a pocket to take out one of the rings he had collected.

“Is that supposed to mean something to me?” Perilla asked.

“It doesn’t?” Candle asked. “Oh yes, that’s right, the first time I saw it was in the aftermath following the attempt on Ksaveras IX’s life. Well, this wave sign is used by One Maiyim for members to identify each other. They’ve learned how to charge up the rings with specific spells and some pretty nasty ones at that.”

“If you’re going to use magic aggressively,” Perilla remarked, “I don’t suppose a light show is likely to be very effective.”

“The same technology could have been used to store defensive spells,” Candle pointed out. “It doesn’t need to be killing spells.”

“Perhaps not, but if you’re right, One Maiyim isn’t back to pursue its ecological agenda,” Perilla told him.

“Uncle Candle,” Oceanvine interrupted, “I don’t think we need to visit Lehana. We have a problem right here.”

She was right. Candle turned to see what she was talking about and spotted the complex and twisted symbol that appeared in black on the upper arms of some of the victims. Candle rushed over and investigated immediately. “The Bond of Xenlabit,” he announced. “I wish I could have been wrong, but I was expecting something like this.”

“There are spell strings attached to these victims,” Sextant noticed.

“So there are,” Candle agreed. “It’s been years since we had to deal with this variant of the Bond.”

“But last time the spell strings were harder to detect and follow,” Sextant added.

“Whoever did this was clumsy,” Oceanvine remarked. “He or she was trying to spread another Bond-Hook curse like the one in Rjalkatyp. Yes, more like Rjalkatyp than the one in Querna. However, the Hook is not properly attached to the Bond, they aren’t working together but at cross purposes instead.”

“Yes, I see that,” Candle nodded. “That’s why these people are so ill. They are supposed to be mindlessly spreading the Hook, but because that component of the curse is improperly connected, it’s just draining a small amount of power from the Bond. The Bond, however, unable to work with the Hook falls back on the one working part of its instructions, to spread a curse.”

“Did you say the Hook, Candle?” Perilla asked. “I thought that old slave spell was extinct.”

“Sadly, in every generation there is at least one mage who learns it and passes it on to someone else. I don’t think that’s a requirement of life, but it does seem to be the case nonetheless. In this case it’s a spell that One Maiyim knows all too well. So yes, the curse the mage intended was the Hook, but the Bond here is incapable of spreading that. Every version of the Bond of Aritos, however, has a heavy component of disease in it, so it is spreading that, but not very well. It wants to spread the Hook but it cannot.

“From what I can see,” Candle went on, “the curse was initiated by the tsunami. That part was clever, I suppose. Anyone caught up in the wave, but who managed to survive, became cursed by the Bond of Aritos.”

“But these people are infectious?” Perilla asked worriedly.

“Technically,” Candle told her, “but you would have to be in physical contact with them for five to ten minutes. It is not what the mage in question had in mind, but he was trying for a city full of slaves. We

need to cure these people quickly, however, because, while the Hook is not working, the connection of a spell string will be enough to alert the mage we are dispelling the curse.”

“It will also allow him to change the nature of the spell,” Oceanvine pointed out, “If he is clever enough.”

“I have some doubts about that,” Candle replied, “but I’d hate to underestimate this one. Fortunately, we can dispel this curse fairly easily.”

“By draining the power out of the Bond again?” Sextant asked.

“That would work too, but as it happens all we need to do is cut the strings,” Candle replied.

“Do we want to send a blast of power out to kill the mage?” Sextant asked.

“No!” Oceanvine exclaimed a little too loudly. “I mean, I got lucky last time. I could have killed hundred or thousands of innocents. I think it would be better to track this person down.”

“That’s going to be harder when we cut the spell strings,” Candle told her.

“Spell strings work in two ways,” Oceanvine told him. “I’ll put a tracer on that mage. Start cutting strings, it should be enough of a distraction.”

They went to work and as Candle predicted, merely cutting the connecting strings was enough to cause the spell to dissipate. The remaining strings started vibrating frenetically once they started so Oceanvine hastily sent her tracer spell down one such string before Candle and Sextant could cut it. A minute after they started, however, all the remaining strings suddenly winked out, freeing the victims.

“I expected more trouble than that,” Candle remarked.

“What happened?” Perilla asked.

“Whoever cast that spell, just cut the spell strings himself,” Candle explained. “It saves us a lot of trouble, but I can’t help but wonder why he didn’t fight back.”

“He may not know how,” Oceanvine speculated. “We noticed before that many of One Maiyim’s mages were not particularly well-versed at what they were doing. That one with the Bond of Gredac in the southwest for example. We never did find him although I’m thinking he ended up killing himself.”

“Not necessarily,” Candle argued. “That one was doing everything by proxy. Whoever it was may have been less than masterful with the Bond of Aritos, but he was pretty good with those rings.”

“That’s not that difficult a spell,” Oceanvine countered.

“Actually it’s more difficult than invoking the Bond,” Candle told her. “You’re a much better mage than you give yourself credit for. Did you get that tracer set?”

“Of course,” Oceanvine replied. “He’s outside of town, somewhere in the hills.”

“All right,” Candle told her, “let’s go find him.”

“Uncle, I think I should stay here,” Jollin spoke up. “I’ll be of more use than I would be tagging along

with you. I did quite a bit of medical assistance in Saindo, after all.”

“Very well,” Candle told her. “We’ll meet you back at the boat.”

Candle walked outside with Oceanvine and Sextant and conjured up another phony car to ride in. “I wish you could create an engine for a change,” Sextant remarked, getting in the back seat to allow Candle to drive. “I’ll push.

“Good,” Candle replied, “Vine, you keep track of where our rogue is.”

“Oceanvine,” she corrected him automatically, sitting down in the front passenger seat.

Candle let that pass and they quickly drove away from the makeshift hospital. They were already above the high water line from the flood, so had no trouble getting out to the highway that led out of town to the south. Five miles out, however, Oceanvine informed them, “I think we’re going to have to go it on foot. He’s about a half a mile to our east now and I haven’t seen any roads.”

“Let’s go another mile or two,” Candle suggested. “There may be a long driveway or a dirt road that doubles back toward them.” There wasn’t however and eventually they stopped the car and continued on foot.

They climbed a steep hill and then, looking down on the valley below, noticed that there had been a path that was much easier to negotiate heading up to the head of the valley. It came to an end near a small house.

“Remind me to take the long way out on the way back,” puffed Candle as they looked down. “He’s in there,” Candle confirmed, using the golden staff. “And he, no she appears to be alone. Well no surprises there. She’s trying to hide out.”

“Can you tell any more about her?” Sextant asked.

“She’s an Orente,” Candle remarked, “but not from anywhere in Bellinen. The Isle of Fire would be my guess and Bellinen would be an ideal place for her to take refuge if she is one of our missing mages from Rjalkatyp. Orenta don’t stand out as much here as they might in Querna or Randona.”

“Or she might have been ordered here by the Inner Circle,” Oceanvine remarked.

“That’s a possibility,” Candle shrugged. “We don’t know how tightly they control One Maiyim, not for sure in any case, but if I were running an international organization bent on taking over the world, I know I would be issuing orders to my minions.”

“You sound like a bad movie, Uncle,” Oceanvine told him.

“I’m a product of my upbringing,” Candle remarked.

“You never saw a movie until you got to University,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“How did you know that?” he asked.

“You told me so years ago,” she retorted. “Are you feeling okay? You look a bit flushed.”

“Just feeling my years, I’m afraid,” Candle replied. “Running through the hills after the bad guys is a young person’s game. Don’t worry, I’m just a bit winded is all.”

“Let’s rest a few minutes before we continue on then,” she suggested.
Nineteen

Jollin watched the others go, and then turned to help Perilla. “I really have played medical assistant a few times,” she told the older woman. “Your average nurse is better, but I can take orders and I won’t get nauseous from looking at infected wounds and the like.”

“You also look physically strong as well,” Perilla remarked.

“I grew up in a family of blacksmiths,” Jollin chuckled. “Some of my earliest toys were a small hammer and tongs and I never lost my interest in working iron and steel. You need muscles to do that. Why, you need something lifted?”

“Patients, mostly,” Perilla replied, “and as it happens we’re dreadfully short of muscle power so you’re just what this doctor ordered. But you also know magic?”

“Just a little,” Jollin admitted. “Vine’s been showing me a few things this summer, but while I’m a first-rate smith, by both name and trade,” she smiled, “I doubt I’ll ever be more than an apprentice mage.”

“That’s nothing to be ashamed of. Most mages never got beyond the apprentice or very junior journeyman stage when I was your age,” Perilla told her. “I just barely passed my master’s exams before turning to medicine. Magic always was the most difficult of disciplines, because it was so generalized. Someone like Candle, a wizard, had to be proficient in any number of fields. People these days don’t really understand that. They think specialization is a step above being a generalist, but it’s actually the easy way out. A generalist is not merely a jack of all trades, while mastering none. He actually needs to be the master of several – preferably the master of all, but only the Gods can do that, of course.

“Now let’s get to work,” Perilla continued. “The curse may have been lifted, but these people are still in need of medical assistance. They are weak, hungry, bruised and some probably have contracted other more conventional diseases.”

Jollin nodded and pitched in with every ounce of effort she could muster. Perilla and two younger physicians continued triage on the incoming patients for another half an hour until they managed to catch up with the influx of injured people. Then only Perilla continued to sort through new arrivals while the others joined the doctors who had already been treating patients on the other side of the gymnasium. Jollin continued working with Perilla, occasionally running to fetch something or to bring another doctor over to look at a patient, but mostly she helped comfort patients or took notes while Perilla performed various treatments.

In the middle of the afternoon one Orentan man, muddy and battered, looked at Jollin and said, “I know you.”

“I’m not exactly a local girl,” she replied, earning a weary chuckle from the man.

“No, you’re too short and light skinned for my tastes,” he replied and added, “but for a human you’re

cute enough, I suppose. But you're one of the mages who were asking around my neighborhood about strange problems."

"I was," Jollin agreed. "How are you feeling? Better, I hope."

"Better than when I got here. I thought I was going to die," he replied. "Look, I'm sorry we all lied to you the other day."

"Lied?" Jollin asked.

"We told you there was nothing out of the ordinary happening," the man told her. "That was not true. There was another group of mages; five or six of them, in fact. They've been around for a month, picking fights, taking anything they wanted and even killing anyone who tried to resist. Is that the sort of thing you would have wanted to hear about?"

"A bunch of rogue mages?" Jollin asked. "Probably, yes. Anyone using magic and behaving like that is likely to be a member of One Maiyim. And if they aren't, then they need to be stopped anyway. Bullies are not to be tolerated especially magic-using ones. Why didn't you tell us about them then?"

"It's not that simple," the man protested. "They threatened us, our parents, our children; anyone we held dear. They made examples of anyone who tried to resist. You weren't here. We couldn't stop them."

Jollin held her peace. It was the same as she had encountered on Saindo. It had nothing to do with magic. There was no magic of any import in Saindo, but it had everything to do with intimidation. A handful of bullies could cow an entire nation if they chose and people were all too ready to give up any form of liberty in exchange for the chance to feel safe. What disgusted her was that the more liberties they surrendered the less safe they were. And yet the reaction was always the same; do whatever the persecutor told you because he wouldn't hurt you today. Tomorrow was another story. Here in Oeh it was a handful of mages who stole these people's dignity and pride. In Saindo it was the warlords and their henchmen. The experience, however, had opened her eyes and she knew now that the same thing had happened from time to time all over Maiyim. The triumvirate of the Isle of Fire was just such a case, one almost within her lifetime. They had come close to such a state again just recently when the Peoples Party had gained control of the government. Granom had come even closer to defeat a short while later during the failed revolution.

That had not occurred in Emmine in over a century, but while she had been taught in school it couldn't happen there, Jollin knew better. A couple of years in Saindo had shown her that it could happen anywhere that people allowed it to and people could always be convinced to sit back and let it happen. All you had to do was convince them they were under some sort of a threat, but that you would keep them safe. Organized criminals did it all the time. So did governments to one extent or another.

The realization convinced Jollin that as much as she loved her forge, she had a higher calling. It would start on the Isle of Kern; she would enter the political arena of Medda. Who knew? She might just be one of a number of local politicians, never getting beyond the city council, but she had her eyes set on a much higher office. Their current representative to the House of Commons was popular, but he was also getting old and probably would not stay in office more than another one or two terms. Jollin might just be the next MP from Kern.

She quickly shelved that dream for now, however, and asked the man, "So why are you telling me this now?" While they had been talking, several of the volunteers had gathered around to listen.

“What else do I have to lose?” he asked hopelessly. “I last saw my wife and children just before the wave. When it struck, the water rushed into my home and swept me out the window. I was able to grab onto a tree so I did not get swept away, but I don’t know what happened to them. I got sick soon after and I was not able to go home, so maybe there’s a chance. It’s been less than a day, but I’ve heard a lot of people were swept back out to sea when the water receded.

“But there is nothing else those people can do to me,” he continued. “The worst has already happened, but there is something you need to know.”

“What’s that?” Jollin asked.

“Those mages,” he told her. “The people who pushed us around so badly . . . they left town the night before the flood. At the time I thought it was good news for all of us. We had a party in the street even. We heard them say their work here was done and it was time to move on. One of them said they had one more trap to set. I think they knew the wave was coming.”

“I think you’re right,” Jollin told him, remembering what she had learned about the powers of Xenlabit. “Oh, my Gods!”

“What, child?” Perilla asked.

“Uncle Candle, Oceanvine and Sextant,” Jollin replied. “They’re chasing down the mage who used the Bond of Xenlabit. They think they’re following a single rogue mage. What if it’s really five or six mages and Uncle Candle doesn’t know that? It’s a trap.”

“I’ve known your Uncle Candle a long time, Jollin,” Perilla told her. “There’s no one on Maiyim cleverer than he is.”

“Maybe not, but he’s not Aritos,” Jollin retorted. Perilla frowned at the comparison. Most people on Maiyim recognized Aritos as being clever, but they also thought of him as the Devil. “He’s only mortal. He can make mistakes. I have to find them. Warn them.”

“If that’s the case, you’d better do it,” Perilla agreed. “But how?”

“I need a car,” Jollin decided, “or a bike. I know which way they went and Vine’s tracer spell is still working.”

“I’ll give you a ride,” one of the other helpers offered. “I’m Heawa, by the way.” Heawa was tall, even for an Orente and Jollin estimated he was seven and a half feet tall and wore his hair several inches longer than Oceanvine did. That hair was pulled back into a long pony tail and his long, pointed ears poked through the shiny black hair.

“Thanks, Heawa,” she told him. “You have a car?”

“No,” he laughed, “but I do have a bike. Come on.”

“A bicycle?” Jollin asked, following him rapidly out of the gym.

“Motorcycle,” Heawa laughed. “You know how to ride?”

“I’ve done it a few times,” Jollin admitted.

“Old boyfriend?” he asked curiously.

“An older cousin actually,” Jollin laughed. “He’s my dad’s age but he’s been a rider for years.”

“That’s cool!” Heawa admitted. They got outside and he swung his long leg up and over the motorcycle.

“That’s a big cycle,” Jollin whistled appreciatively. “But I guess you need to build them taller in Bellinen.”

“That or suffer terrible leg cramps,” Heawa laughed. “Actually, I have a friend on Ponar who owns an Emmine-built bike. Nice machine, and the engine is more powerful than any used on our domestic bikes, but he had to rebuild the chassis to fit his legs to it. It was a lot of work, but worthwhile. I’m thinking of opening a specialty bike shop – one that builds custom bikes. Then I can build the chassis to fit the customer like a glove, but use whatever engine I think will suit the machine. Have you seen some of those Granomish jobs? Sweet!”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Jollin laughed as she managed to climb on. “Uh, they went south.”

“Out of the city?” Heawa asked.

“I think so,” Jollin replied uncertainly. “At least that’s what Vine said. She’s a lot better at that sort of thing than I’ll ever be. All I can tell is the direction.”

“Vine, huh?” Heawa asked. “Pretty name.”

“Short for Oceanvine,” Jollin explained. “It’s a formidable name.”

“It’s a familiar name,” Heawa replied over his shoulder, “but I’m not sure where I’ve heard it... Oh wait, yes I do. My Dad had a whole bunch of old books in the house when I was growing up. They were about the Wizard Silverwind and some of them featured a sidekick named Oceanvine.”

“The real Silverwind and Oceanvine were Vine’s great-grandparents,” Jollin explained, “and my uncle and aunt.”

“Really?” Heawa asked. “That’s cool too.”

Heawa made his way through the streets of Oeh’s east end and quickly reached the highway that circled the city. On the highway he really opened the throttle and the large motorcycle zoomed around the city at a speed well in excess of the posted speed limit. Normally, Jollin might have warned him to slow down but at the moment the faster the better as far as she was concerned. They soon found themselves well to the south of the city where Jollin spotted the car Candle had created.

“Stop!” she shouted to Heawa. He did so and as soon as he came to a halt beside the bright red, she continued, “This looks like something Uncle Candle would have made.”

“Made?” Heawa asked.

“Cheaper than buying one on the fly,” Jollin replied. “Actually it looks just like the one we used on Tissa. I guess he wasn’t feeling very imaginative this time.”

“He made this?” Heawa asked again.

“Uncle Candle is a wizard after all,” Jollin replied. “It doesn’t have an engine though. On Tissa he and Sextant took turns pushing it with their minds.”

“Can you do that too?” Heawa asked.

“To a lesser extent and not as long,” Jollin admitted. “I’m just a beginner. That’s why I stayed at the gym. I think they must have gone up and over this hill on foot.”

“We don’t need to do that,” Heawa told her. “This bike can go off-road if it has to.”

“Okay,” Jollin replied, “but keep in mind we may be riding into a trap.”

“I’ll be careful,” Heawa promised. He rode the motorcycle up the hill and then partway down before stopping again. “Looks like a war down there,” he noted and turned off the bike’s engine.

“We’re too late,” Jollin replied dispiritedly.

Twenty

“Looks pretty peaceful down there,” Sextant remarked.

“Only on the surface,” Oceanvine told him. “Are you certain she’s alone in there?” she asked Candle.

“As certain as I can be,” Candle responded. “She’s sitting in a cave up at the head of the valley, or maybe it’s an old mine shaft. She’s also pretty scared. I didn’t look any deeper than that, but she’s so worried, some of her emotions slipped on through even the light touch I gave the area. It makes sense, though. She knows we’re on to her, that’s why she released her victims as quickly as she did.”

“She could have simply killed them,” Sextant noted.

“Maybe she’s not as bad as some of her compatriots then,” Candle replied, “although I suspect she just did not think of it.”

“She’s still pretty awful to have cast that spell in the first place,” Oceanvine commented. “Do we really need to kill her?”

“You know why that will probably be necessary,” Candle told her. “The members of One Maiyim are not known for their ability to feel remorse and regardless, this one is responsible for the deaths of thousands. If she can do what she did, there is no jail that can hold her. I’m just glad she isn’t trying to form a volcano like Adamant did.”

“You’re right,” Oceanvine agreed, “but just once I’d like to bring one of these people to trial. Their crimes aren’t even proven in court because no one wants to try a dead man.”

“In Bellinen it’s even worse than that,” Candle told her. “It is illegal to do so and any crimes committed by the deceased officially were not committed by him. It sounds silly to our ears, but it was done to protect the innocent heirs of the guilty.”

“Well, we aren’t going to do anything from up here,” Oceanvine decided. “Wards up, boys.”

They continued on down the grassy hill and were soon in the valley and surrounded by tall tropical oaks. “Good there there’s a narrow road here,” Sextant decided.

“There almost had to be,” Oceanvine told him, “Otherwise our rogue probably would not have come through here either.”

“Also if that’s a mine she’s in, there has to be a way of carting ore out of here,” Candle reminded them.

The head of the valley had been cleared of trees. The grass there was only knee deep and was peppered with the stumps of the trees that had once been there, and up ahead the broad flat area of gravel by the opening of the mine shaft. They walked forward another hundred yards until they were well beyond the middle of the clearing when an Orentan woman appeared in the mouth of the mine shaft. “Looking for me?” she asked in the lilting accent of the Isle of Fire. She did not give them a chance to react and the ground beneath them shook violently.

Oceanvine found her feet sinking into the ground as the soil beneath her liquefied, but she quickly levitated herself and fired back a volley of lightning. At the same time, Sextant sent fire at the rogue mage and Candle worked somewhat less directly, by attempting to weaken the Orente’s protective ward.

The team effort was partially successful and the woman was hurled back into the mine shaft under the force of the assault. The tremor she had started abruptly ceased. The mages started forward, but just a few feet from the entrance to the mine, a large tree flew at them from behind and smashed into Sextant’s ward, knocking them all to the ground.

Turning around they saw four other people, two Orenta, a human and a Granom standing at the edge of the woods. “Damn!” Candle swore. “I should have been looking a little more carefully. They suckered us in.” Then he shot up into the air just as the four attackers raised their arms in the air and a bright blue light flooded the area.

“Good thing we’re using your special wards, Vine,” Sextant noted. “I think that’s pretty much the same killer we saw in Rjalkatyp.”

“I’m sure it is,” she replied, “but we know how to counter it as well.” But before they could do that, the blue light switched off as two large trees converged on Candle’s position above.

He was not injured, but while his ward could absorb the impact, it was still bound by the same laws of conservation of momentum that affected everything else on Maiyim. Not having seen the flying trees in time to counter them, the wizard was thrown back against the rocky hillside.

Meanwhile Sextant and Oceanvine were under attack once more from a lightning bolt, several fireballs and a thick, strange-looking beam of red light that made them vibrate violently even within their wards.

Oceanvine replied by firing off several projectile wards, one of which hit and knocked out the Granomish man who had been shooting fire at them. Sextant sent a wild shot of rocks at the two Orenta and while their wards held up under the onslaught, the beam of red light ceased abruptly, but the human mage made a dramatic gesture and suddenly the valley was filled with fog.

“How the heck did he do that?” Oceanvine asked no one in particular.

“Vine,” Sextant told her, “they’re probably moving under the cover of this fog. We should too.”

“Then no one will know where the others are,” Oceanvine replied.

“As long as they don’t have the advantage,” Sextant retorted as they started running to their left.

“Where’s Uncle Candle?” Oceanvine asked.

“Up here,” came Candle’s reply. “Hold on.” The wind suddenly picked up from a very light breeze and turned into a howling gale, clearing away the fog rapidly. Oceanvine saw the two Orenta and sent projectile wards at them, with such ferocity their own defenses were shattered, she followed up with intense fireballs, but a shiny black ward appeared to shield them and the fireballs splashed against it harmlessly.

Sextant tried another trick and tried to teleport the two Orentan mages away. He only caught one of them and the unconscious man fell to the ground one hundred feet away from his previous position. Suddenly the ground began to shake again and neither Sextant nor Oceanvine were able to stay on their feet. Above them they saw a large violet sign begin to form in the air. It rapidly coalesced into the Bond of Aritos and also seemed to combine the features of the Gredac and Xenlabit varieties.

Oceanvine cast her most protective ward and looked to see what Candle was doing. He was summoning the Seal of Aritos and using it to attempt to smother the Bond. Oceanvine tried to concentrate on the Seal of Methis in the hope that perhaps her previous use of it in conjunction with Candle had somehow gained for her the necessary permission to use it. However, while she was able to picture the symbol perfectly, it would not come to life. Methis, it appeared, did not mind Oceanvine holding the Seal in her mind, but did not yet believe the young mage was ready to use it. She quickly discarded that line of attack and looked to see what Sextant was doing.

Sextant was standing hip-deep in the liquefied ground, shooting great globules of the stuff back at the remaining Orentan mage. It seemed to be covering him fairly efficiently and solidifying on impact as well, so Oceanvine tried the same thing on the human mage who had been trying to circle around them.

Candle was still struggling against the dual Bond of Aritos and while he was able to hold his own, it took all his concentration to keep it contained. However, when a third mage, the Granom, woke up and started adding the Bond of Pahn into the construct, Candle was over-powered and found himself on the wrong end of a losing tug-of-war. He continued to hold on as best he could and hoped Oceanvine and Sextant could tip the balance back in his favor.

Meanwhile on the ground, the shaking had stopped again, but Oceanvine and Sextant found themselves stuck firmly in the earth, and were now unable to levitate themselves free. Oceanvine rapidly started teleporting the dirt away from them, in small chunks, but across the clearing the enemy mages were having no trouble digging themselves out of the piles of dirt Oceanvine and Sextant had buried them in.

“Six!” Oceanvine shouted. “Shield me.” Without waiting for him to do so she concentrated on the combined ward above them and with all her power, attached a spell string between it and the earth, in an attempt to drain energy out of it that way. It was partially successful and it gave Candle an even chance, but only until the Bond began to develop traits of Kerawlat as well.

“That doesn’t add up,” Sextant observed as he rushed to add his own power to Oceanvine’s in the attempt to dispel the Bond of Aritos. “Two of them are still knocked out as far as I can tell, and yet they have all four Bonds of Aritos at work.”

“One of them’s an Arithan mage,” Oceanvine concluded, “and he is controlling two or more Bonds at once.”

“What’s the good news?” Sextant asked.

“I didn’t have any cavities on my last trip to the dentist,” Oceanvine replied dryly. “Any idea which one may be our Arithan?”

“Could be all of them for all I know,” Sextant replied, “but if I had to guess, I think it’s the Orente in the green shirt. He seems to be holding up against us better than the others.”

“Okay,” Oceanvine decided, “Take over for me. I need to try something.”

“What?” Sextant asked even as he took over direction of the spell to drain the Bond of its power.

“Just don’t lose concentration,” Oceanvine warned him. She looked over at the attacking mages and decided Sextant might be right. The Orente wearing the predominantly green floral print shirt did seem to be waving directions to the others. Over the past few years Candle had filled her head with all sorts of stories about her great-grandparents. Some of them were stories almost everyone else on Maiyim had heard and some were tales only Candle knew the truth of. Candle had reminded her of one fairly recently and reaching out with her mind, she used telekinesis to tickle the green-clad mage.

It was not a deadly spell, but deadly force, Oceanvine reminded herself, was not always the most effective means of dealing with a threat. The great composite Bond floating in the air above wobbled and threatened to collapse under Oceanvine’s assault. Suddenly both Candle and Sextant were making rapid progress and the Bond was starting to shrink and fade.

“It’s working, Vine,” Six told her, “Keep it up!”

In the next instant, Oceanvine was overwhelmed by pain greater than she had ever experienced. She cried out briefly before falling to the ground. The Bond grew in intensity again and Candle and Sextant had to join forces just to keep it from growing even faster than it was. Then tendrils of dark power grew out of the Bond and wrapped themselves around both Sextant and Candle. Both wizard and master grunted with pain and they too fell to the ground. Oceanvine sat up just in time to see Candle’s golden staff flying through the air and into the hands of the green-garbed Orente.

“Ha!” the enemy mage cried in triumph. The Bond overhead grew threefold and started spewing black bolts of lightning that shattered the ground where they struck. Oceanvine tried to muster her strength to somehow get the staff away from him, but while her head was still spinning, a man on a motorcycle suddenly burst through from between the trees and rode directly at the green-clad mage. The mage twisted out of the way, but the staff went spinning out of his hands and landed just at the tree line as the motorcycle rider disappeared back into the woods.

Distracted, the mage ran to retrieve the staff only to see the shadowy form of Jollin pick it up before he could take more than two paces in that direction. Panicked, he threw a massive ball of fire at her, but Jollin held the staff before her and the fire ball splashed harmlessly against her ward. The mage tried again with no more success than the first time. Then the staff changed shape, turning into a long golden sword and she swung it directly at his neck, neatly decapitating him.

Candle was still unconscious and Sextant was still struggling to sit up, but Oceanvine had managed to get

back on her feet in time to see the Bond of Aritos lose coherence for a moment only to coalesce into three individual Bonds of Pahn, Gredac and Xenlabit. While Oceanvine kept the three of them safely warded, even gravity seemed to suddenly become much stronger, the ground shook and bolts of lightning stormed down on them from out of the clear blue sky.

She saw the Granom standing once more and with a furious growl shot him down with a projectile ward and a surge of her own lightning. The man was briefly a white, flaming figure, then fell to the ground dead and the Bond of Pahn disappeared along with the crushingly strong pull to the ground.

Then she turned to face the human mage and tried the same on him, but while it was possible to cast such a spell in a way that could not miss, she was not taking that sort of care and in her anger and with the ground shaking violently, she was effectively shooting from the hip and narrowly missed him as more lightning hailed down on her, Sextant and Candle. Only her iron will kept the protective ward intact under that onslaught, but a moment later the ground suddenly stopped shaking and she was able to try again.

By now Oceanvine was not hurling clearly thought-out spells, but trading power for power. Then she decided she was going about it all wrong and instead of firing raw energy at the human mage, she used her staff to draw as much as she could out of him. The spell string between them glowed with a visible white light as all his energy began to fill her staff. She kept that up until the ends of her staff burst into flame and she was forced to throw it away.

The human mage was still standing, but just barely and one last fireball left him charred and dead. It was only then that Oceanvine realized she was stuck in the ground up to her thighs.

Twenty-one

“What happened to the one in the mineshaft?” Sextant asked as he extricated himself and Candle from the ground. Neither he nor Candle had sunk into the earth anywhere as deeply as Oceanvine had and he supposed that had been because she had been standing while they had both been lying down. Jollin came running to them, with the golden sword still in her hand followed by Heawa on his motorcycle.

“It looks like that shaft collapsed during all the shaking,” Jollin told him.

“Then she did it to herself,” Oceanvine replied, still stuck in the dirt.

“You want some help there?” Jollin asked.

“I’m fine,” Oceanvine replied. “See to Uncle Candle.”

“I’ll survive,” Candle groaned, although he did allow Jollin to help him sit up.

Oceanvine concentrated for a moment then levitated herself out of the form fitting hole. “Oh heck!” she exclaimed. “My shoes got stuck down there.” She went to work at retrieving her shoes.

“Uncle Candle,” Jollin told him, “I guess this is yours.” She handed him the sword. “But how to you change it back?”

“Just think about it,” Candle told her. He shut his eyes and willed a little energy back into himself. When he opened his eyes again he looked much more alert. “The staff takes whatever shape the holder wants it

to have.”

“I don’t recall wanting an old-fashioned sword,” Jollin replied.

“Perhaps it was your subconscious then,” Candle told her. “It can take the shape of a gun, but it has no ammunition to fire so it would have been rather useless that way. Are you all right, though? You’re covered in blood.”

“Not my own, though. That thing is sharper than it looks,” Jollin replied. “I swung it at that guy’s neck and it went through without any resistance whatsoever. I always thought that was supposed to be a lot harder to do.”

“Well, there was more at work than a mere sword edge,” Candle replied. The sword shrank back into a golden pen. “Too bad it doesn’t have ink either,” Candle remarked as he put it back into his shirt pocket.”

Just then the sky darkened and looking upward they saw another visible Bond of Aritos forming. Sextant and Oceanvine instantly erected a ward large enough to cover everyone, while Candle countered the Bond with the Seal. Jollin looked around through the sparkling ward, recognizing it as one of Oceanvine’s “specials,” and saw the second Orentan mage now standing on the other side of the field.

Jollin wished she was up to projectile wards, but then realized there was nothing stopping her from throwing a rock telekinetically. It fell short of her target, but came close enough to distract him which was all Candle needed to wrest control of the situation from him. The hapless mage rose up and was enveloped by his own Bond of Aritos and then the Bond, the Seal and the mage all winked out of sight.

“Where’d he go?” Jollin asked.

“Orbit,” Candle asked. “See that point of light moving toward the horizon?” he looked around. Is that all of them now?”

“We’d better make sure of the one in the mine,” Oceanvine remarked. “The one we actually followed here.”

“I should probably go back for the car,” Sextant noted. “That road through the trees must come out somewhere and it will be getting dark soon.”

“I’ll give you a ride,” Heawa offered. They rode off while the others were investigating the mineshaft.

“Uncle Candle,” Oceanvine observed, “You’re still looking a bit shaky. Maybe you should sit down and rest while I examine the mine.”

“I’m fine,” he insisted stubbornly although he had already taken the golden pen out of his pocket and allowed it to turn into a cane. Oceanvine looked at Jollin who shrugged.

Together they made their way to the opening of the shaft. There was nothing to see there but a pile of stone and wood where the neatly framed shaft had previously been. Candle concentrated for a moment. “Nothing alive under there, although I do detect a dwindling power source. Ah, I see.”

“What?” Oceanvine asked.

“Her ring,” Candle replied. “She charged it up in the same way you charged your staff. It won’t hold as much, but as a hole card, it’s not a bad idea.”

“I’m glad I wasn’t using a ring today,” Oceanvine remarked. “I’d have lost a finger.” She explained about how her staff caught on fire.”

“Yes,” Candle nodded. “Well, I have warned you about that before.”

“First time it ever happened though,” Oceanvine replied as they turned away from the mine.

“Is this it?” Jollin asked a minute later, picking up a staff that had been badly charred at both ends.

“It is,” Oceanvine confirmed. “It’s not in as bad shape as I thought it might be, but I guess I’ll need to get another.”

“You just need to have it shod at both ends,” Jollin told her. “A cap of iron or bronze perhaps. If we were at my forge, I could whip one up for you in no time.”

“Allow me,” Candle told them, taking the staff from Oceanvine’s hands. It glowed for a moment at both ends but as the glow faded the ends of the staff were wrapped with bands of shining gold bronze. “You’ll still need to clean the soot off the ends, but this does look nice.”

Oceanvine accepted it back. “Nice balance too,” she remarked, swinging it around. “Thank you.”

“It was nothing,” Candle told her. “It was over-charged anyway, so this was a good way to use up the excess energy. Well, we need to get back to town. I don’t much feel like giving any of these people a decent burial.”

“We’ll let the authorities know they’re here,” Jollin suggested. “They can come look for themselves if they want.”

“Oh they will,” Candle told her. “If only to complete their own reports, but we have other places to go.”

“Where, Uncle?” Oceanvine asked. “Have you heard from President Jiroshi or Duke Xander again?”

“No, I haven’t,” Candle replied, “but this was too obviously a trap. There was nothing happening here before we arrived.”

“These mages were bullying the people of Oeh,” Jollin disagreed, but then thought a moment. “Although no one was feeling brave enough to talk about it... That’s why I followed you out here. One of the refugees decided he had had enough. Yes, this might have been a set-up”

“Of course it was,” Candle replied. “I suspect the trouble this lot was making was more in the form of personal entertainment. They were waiting for us to get here. All that clumsiness was to get us to follow one of them out here where they could ambush us. It almost worked to if it hadn’t been for you, Jollin.”

“And Heawa,” Jollin told him. “I could never have gotten here in time without his motorcycle.”

“Yes, lucky that,” Candle remarked. “I’ll have to find a special way to thank him. However, much as I’d like to stay and help the people here and the neighboring islands, we also need to leave as soon as possible. This was a set-up and there’s only one person who could have been behind it since no one else

could have known these mages were waiting here for us.”

“President Jiroshi!” Oceanvine concluded.

“Exactly,” Candle replied. “He’s been sending us all over the archipelago, probably to gauge our strength while preparing for this, so we need to be headed back to Merinne before he can learn this failed and he can set up yet another trap for us.”

They stopped by the temporary hospital Perilla was working at to let her know what had happened but Candle warned her, “Hold off on notifying anyone until we can get off the island. I don’t want the one behind all this to catch wind of what’s happening.”

“Who’s that?” Perilla asked.

“Best if I don’t say,” Candle told her.

“You’re being overly dramatic,” Perilla accused him.

“Overly cautious, maybe,” Candle replied, “but this time I think I’d rather err on the side of caution.”

They were back at sea half an hour later and on Candle’s command, they were hydroplaning even though he had warned them against doing so after dark. “So much for being overly cautious,” Oceanvine remarked.

“Caution comes in many different flavors,” Candle told her. “It will still take us two days to get there; I just want to get a head start.”

Around midnight the wind died down and the boat slipped back into the water. Oceanvine retracted the foils before handing her watch duties off to Sextant. She and Jollin only slept for four hours, however, before getting up for their next watch.

“I hope we’re not all too tired by the time we get to Merinne,” Jollin remarked.

“One of us can handle the boat safely during daylight hours if we need to,” Oceanvine yawned. “For now, however a pot of strong coffee will have to suffice. Maybe we should have flown to Merinne from Oeh. We could have always returned for the boat.”

“Not from Oeh,” Jollin corrected her. “The airport was closed save for military flights. And if the president is behind this, who knows who else might be. We’re better off on a private boat.”

“You had to bring that up, didn’t you?” Oceanvine remarked sourly.

“What?” Jollin asked.

“We don’t know who else might be a member of One Maiyim,” Oceanvine replied. For all we know there could be a navy ship or a submarine, perhaps, following us, tracking us down. A torpedo would ruin the entire day.”

“I thought the *Maiyim Bourne* was indestructible,” Jollin remarked.

“It is,” Oceanvine agreed, “but we’re not. And if one hit us without warning we could be killed

regardless.”

“So we keep an eye on the radar,” Jollin countered.

“Oh, this is a merry little trip, isn’t it,” Oceanvine noted acidly.

It turned out, however, that Sextant and Candle had already considered that and had been keeping an eye on the radar since midnight. There was also a new scope next to the radar that Candle explained was a hypersonic sonar device. Nothing threatening had been seen on either screen, however, and the boat was once more flying on her foils as Oceanvine and Jollin came up on deck with their coffee. They stayed aloft for the rest of the trip and came up on Merinne an hour after midnight the next morning.

“Shouldn’t we have entered the harbor?” Oceanvine asked as Sextant sailed beyond the buoy that marked the entrance without coming about.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Candle told her. “We don’t know if we’re expected, but if we are I would prefer not to run into the welcoming committee.”

“So where are we going?” Jollin asked.

“As I recall,” Candle chuckled, “there’s this nice quiet little beach just a few miles to the west where you used to like to go surfing.”

“Airblossom’s and Waterfall’s house,” Oceanvine guessed.

“Right,” Candle replied. “We’ll land the boat on their beach. I just hope they don’t wake up as cranky as you do.”

“I do not wake up cranky!” Oceanvine denied.

“Right,” Candle nodded. “We wait until you’ve had your morning coffee simply because there’s nothing much to say for the first hour or two each morning.”

“Funny,” she replied flatly. “I do not wake up cranky.”

“Uh, Vine,” Sextant interrupted, “let’s discuss your cheerful morning disposition later. Right now we need to retract the foils and prepare to come about.”

Sailing in to the beach with the surf as high as it was that early morning was a dangerous maneuver in any normal situation, but Candle was not taking any chances and as they reached the point at which the waves began to shoal, he used the golden staff to lift the *Maiyim Bourne* up and out of the water, setting her down again well above the high tide line.

“You used to just pick the lock and make yourself at home,” Waterfall grumbled at Candle as he opened the door to the beach house. “Why didn’t you just let yourself in quietly and talk to us over breakfast?”

“This can’t wait for breakfast, Waterfall,” Candle told him. “Is Blossom up?”

“At this time of the morning?” Waterfall demanded. “You’re lucky I even heard you knocking.”

“Oh, I’m up,” Airblossom told them tartly as she entered the room. “I know I invited you all back, but somehow I imagined I’d be awake when you got here.”

“Sorry about that,” Candle apologized. “As I was just about to tell Waterfall, we’re dealing with a situation that could not wait.” He went on to describe everything that had been going on since they had left Merinne.

“One Maiyim?” Airblossom asked sternly when he had finished. “I wish I could say I was surprised, but after their attempts on the Isle of Fire, Granom and Emmine I suppose it was logical to assume they would have something stirring in Merinne. It was either us or Ellisto.”

“Oh, they probably have plans going on in Ellisto too,” Candle told her. “We just haven’t heard about them yet, or else perhaps the Ellistans are too concerned about their cheese to pay attention to politics or revolutionary movements.”

“We never did figure out the vector of infection when we were looking at the cheese spoilage there a few months ago,” Oceanvine reminded him. “It might have been deliberately done.”

“To what end?” Candle countered.

“It would have collapsed their economy,” Airblossom replied, “leaving them as ripe as their cheeses for a change in government. I can’t say I’ve ever liked their Council of Lords, but that’s probably my own cultural bias.”

“It has its plusses and minuses.” Candle shrugged. “The Council of Lords is not quite as oppressive as it was sixty years ago when it was only ten years old and still trying to keep various underground movements from ousting them. But I don’t know that we can blame One Maiyim for that, even if it might have served their ends. So far all the One Maiyim mages we have encountered seem inordinately fond of the Bond of Aritos. There was none of that on Ellisto.”

“Who said it was done by magic?” Oceanvine argued. “Not every member of One Maiyim is a mage. Some just wear those charged rings.”

“There is that and not every ring has been charged with the Bond of Aritos,” Candle admitted. That nasty blue-light killing spell of theirs. I never did figure out how that was done even if I know how to counter it, but it does not use the Bond. Come to think about it, they used to use a lot of spells that had not relationship to the Bond. I wonder if that means something.”

“Such as?” Sextant prompted him.

“It could mean there has been a change of leadership within the organization and their teachers have been ordered to change the emphasis of what their apprentices learn, It’s stupid, but people, regardless of species, are not always renowned for their wisdom.”

“But are you sure Jiroshi is behind all this One Maiyim activity here in Bellinen?” Airblossom asked.

“All of it?” Candle echoed. “Hard to say, but he’s the one who has been sending us from one place to another all over the archipelago. But my suspicions were really peaked because he sent us to Oeh before he should have known there were any problems there. I believe we were supposed to have been killed in the tsunami, and that nobody realized how well-protected we were on board the *Maiyim Bourne*. The mages we fought would have been a back-up just in case the forces of nature proved as unreliable as

they were. As it is, that ambush nearly got us.”

“But just because Jiroshi sent you there, it does not necessarily follow that he was the one setting you up,” Waterfall pointed out. “It could be a staff-member of his; someone who fed him the information that caused him to send you to Oeh.”

“He did claim not to know about some of the problems Duke Xander informed us of,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“Or he might have been spoon-feeding us these plots one at a time,” Candle told them. “I still intend to confront him this morning.”

“Well, we may as well get a bit of sleep before we do,” Airblossom replied. “If Jiroshi is a member of One Maiyim, we’re going to need to be at our best.”

“We?” Candle asked.

“You don’t think I’m letting you go without me, do you?” Airblossom demanded.

“Don’t you think you’re getting a bit old for this sort of thing?” Candle asked.

“Oh, you’re a fine one to talk,” Airblossom laughed harshly. “I’m only a few years older than you and not yet at the average Orentan life expectancy. You, on the other hand, have lived well beyond the lifespan of a human man or woman for that matter. Besides, I was once a member of One Maiyim just like Vine was. I never have forgiven the movement for its betrayal of everything it stood for. Waterfall and I are going with you and you can’t stop us.”

“Well, I tried,” Candle shrugged. “Besides, if it turns into another battle like we had on Jent, we’ll need a whole army of mages.”

“We can’t just go barging into his office firing spells, can we?” Jollin wondered.

“No,” Candle shook his head. “I didn’t want to admit it, but Blossom is right. We don’t know for certain that it was Jiroshi who set us up. However, I am certain that whoever did set us up is a member of his staff. So we won’t go in with our staves blazing...”

“Good,” Oceanvine remarked. “Mine’s already done that once too often.”

“I suppose it has,” Candle chuckled.

Twenty-two

“I’m sorry, Wizard,” Jiroshi’s private assistant told him solemnly, “but President Jiroshi is not able to meet with you today.”

“And why not?” Candle asked with deceptive mildness. Jiroshi might be too busy to deal with the mages, but there were four Senatorial Guardsmen in the office who looked as though they would relish the opportunity. The Senatorial Guards were a recent addition to the Official departments of the Bellinen government, not having existed a decade earlier, but already they had gained a reputation for being able

to solve almost any problem that came their way whether it was investigating monetary counterfeiting or protecting the senators of Bellinen. They stood coldly and emotionlessly in their places, dressed in incongruously dark floral suits, and looking as though they were ready to spring into action at the least provocation. Candle knew they were also armed to the teeth with modern tech-magic weaponry, which was why he had ordered every member of their party to keep their wards up while they were in the Senatorial offices.

He was slightly concerned about Oceanvine and Jollin who continued to allow their pearl and silver beads circle their heads even in this situation until he realized that both women had cast the spell that held the objects in their orbits to last for hours without constant maintenance. It was not their usual way, but he supposed it did make them appear outwardly to be less tense and ready for trouble than they might have been. Who would, after all, go into a fight playing such games? Well, Oceanvine and Jollin, he supposed, but then turned his attention back to the woman at the desk.

“Because he is not in Merinne this morning,” she replied, narrowing her eyes. “He is the President of Bellinen, after all.”

“No,” Airblossom disagreed. “He is the President of the Senate of Bellinen. There is a very real difference, which you ought to know as well as I, but perhaps the civics classes you youngsters take these days aren’t what they used to be.”

The secretary scowled at Airblossom. While certainly decades younger than Airblossom, the secretary was well into her own middle age and did not feel she deserved to be called a youngster. However, Airblossom was certainly correct as well. While the senators of Bellinen were elected by the people of the archipelago, the president was selected by the Senate. The post had originally been that of chairperson; someone to moderate the debates on the Senate floor. All laws were passed and enforced by the Senate and its agencies. In the past few decades, however, the presidents had gradually been ceded certain discretionary powers, mostly in matters of diplomacy, by the Senate, but the president was still not officially the head of state in the same way the kings of Granom and Emmine were.

“So where is he?” Candle asked.

“Not here,” the woman told him coldly. “I will be overjoyed to let him know you were here and if you would like to make an appointment, he may have an opening next month.”

Candle raised an eyebrow, but replied, “Sure, pencil me in and if he has any openings before then he can call me at this number.” He pulled a business card out of his wallet and handed it to her. The only phone number on it was for his office in Randona. “Oh, and tell him I’ll have my secretary send him our bill. Come on, kids.”

“Right, short stuff,” Airblossom shot back.

“Uncle Candle,” Oceanvine protested as they left the Senatorial office building, “We’re not just going to walk away from this, are we?”

“Of course not,” Candle laughed. “Jiroshi’s just playing games with us.”

“Well, in all fairness,” Waterfall admitted, “he is a busy man and he might well be out of town especially since the Senate is not in session this month.”

“He’s in there,” Candle told him. “I saw his aura pacing back and forth inside the office. You could have

too if you had thought to look.”

“Are you sure it was him?” Airblossom asked. “It could have just been someone sweeping the floor.”

“No, Jiroshi has a distinctive aura,” Candle replied. “Most people do I suppose, but his is more distinctive. When I noticed his skin condition the first time we met in person, I got curious. I’d recognize that particular aura from across the island.”

“Really?” Jollin asked.

“Well, that’s an exaggeration,” he admitted, “but a wooden door is not enough to block the view.”

“I’ve never seen through a wooden door,” Jollin commented.

“Have you tried?” Candle asked.

“I’ve tried listening,” Jollin admitted.

“It’s similar,” Candle smiled. “Anyway I figure that since he was avoiding us it was because he did not want to meet us there.”

“No, he probably would prefer to catch us unawares,” Sextant replied.

“Exactly,” Candle nodded. “So instead we’ll lead him on a merry chase. Anyone up for a sea cruise?”

“Are you crazy?” Airblossom asked him sharply.

“I hope not,” Candle replied. “My point is Jiroshi is expecting us to stick around and keep trying to see him. I wouldn’t even be surprised to find a message waiting for us at your home asking us to meet him somewhere.”

Candle’s prediction proved untrue, but only by a matter of minutes. Airblossom’s and Waterfall’s telephone rang soon after they returned. “Hello?” Airblossom answered the phone. “I’m sorry, Mister President. Who?” She looked meaningfully at Candle who shook his head. “No. I’m sorry you just missed him. He said something about cruising around the islands. It is summer vacation in Emmine, you know. If he comes back I’ll let him know you called.” She hung up the phone. “He does want to meet you,” she told Candle, “and he sounded particularly annoyed that you weren’t here.”

“I’m sure he was,” Candle agreed, “and you lied very convincingly.”

“The legacy of a misspent youth,” she replied, “Not as misspent as yours, I suppose, but I got into enough trouble on my own.”

“My sister was a bad influence on you,” Candle chuckled.

“Oh, I wasn’t exactly the junior partner back then,” Airblossom told him. “I was at least as bad an influence on her as she was on me. Not like her successor here.”

“That does it!” Oceanvine grumbled. “I’m going to have to start causing trouble. What do you suggest? Giving hot foots to the other faculty members?”

“Just be yourself, dear,” Airblossom laughed. “Besides, from what I hear, you’ve been outspoken enough in your own way. So, Candle, what’s really your plan here?”

“I already told you,” he replied. “I’m going to get into the *Maiyim Bourne* and sail away. Jiroshi will come after me.”

“I seriously doubt that,” Waterfall told him. “Sail away and he’ll just ignore you. He won’t have an interest in pursuing if you don’t directly interfere with his plans.”

“You have a better idea?” Candle asked.

“Perhaps,” Waterfall nodded. “Jiroshi only belongs to one political party – the Prosperity Party, but there are others. Some are allied with his, most notably the Labor Party, they form the current coalition controlling the Senate, but there’s also a strong minority coalition mostly made up of Liberals and Conservatives with a smattering of independents thrown in.”

“Since when do the Liberals and Conservatives band together?” Sextant asked.

“Stranger things have happened in politics,” Waterfall remarked. “Also while the names may sound like the parties you’re acquainted with in Emmine, you need to realize that the agendas they hold to here are different.”

“And compared to the Prosperity party, they’re practically brothers,” Airblossom added. “But Waterfall is right, Candle, if you want to draw Jiroshi out, assuming you’re correct that he is a member of One Maiyim, then you need to stay here in Merinne and be seen talking to his political opponents. Who did you have in mind, dear?”

“I was thinking of calling Habawa,” Waterfall replied and turned toward Candle. “Senator Gai was a classmate of mine back in University. He was one of the few non-mages that would hang out with the magic students in fact, and was the driving force that kept the Magic Department at University open, even in its restricted form until recently. I think he would be interested in helping.”

“And I still have quite a few contacts in the Navy,” Airblossom remarked.

“Blossom’s dad was an admiral,” Candle explained to the others, “and you’re right. If Jiroshi is worried about anything, it would be a military coup.”

“The Navy would never overturn the government here,” Airblossom argued.

“Perhaps not,” Candle replied, “but Jiroshi would if he had to and that sort of mentality makes one think everyone else would to. Besides, in spite of what you say, I think the Navy and the other armed forces might well step in if they were convinced it was for the good of the nation. However, I’m not trying to foment rebellion in the normal way, and being seen visiting Jiroshi’s political opponents and high-ranking Naval officers would probably force Jiroshi to take action against me.”

“He could just have us arrested,” Jollin pointed out.

“There’s no way to hold a mage in jail,” Candle told her. “Even you could stroll out of any cell ever built. You just pick the lock telekinetically.”

“Uncle,” she replied, “I don’t know how to pick locks.”

“It’s not very hard,” Candle replied. “Vine, show her.”

“That’s Oceanvine,” Oceanvine corrected him instantly.

“Yeah, her too,” Candle nodded. “So how soon can we start meeting and greeting people?”

They spent three days going from office to office, visiting certain notables once and others on multiple occasions. Oceanvine was amazed that so many busy men and women were willing to give them so much time to play out what was essentially a ruse, but came to realize that this was the nature of politics; perception was more important than fact. It looked as though they were up to something that could be against Jiroshi’s interests, even though once the office doors were closed they did little more than discuss the weather or the crop reports or in one case, play a game of checkers. At that moment Oceanvine realized that unlike her cousins Ksanya and Jollin, she would never be cut out for a political career. She was far too action-oriented. Sitting back and waiting for something to happen was just not her style. She knew there were many activists among those in the political arena, but it was a different sort of action. If she wanted to change the world for the better, she would rather just go out and do it.

“Your great-grandmother was the same way,” Airblossom told her one afternoon after Oceanvine took a break from surfing. Jollin and Sextant were still out in the water with Leotawa, waiting for the right wave. “She was never content to just let something lie. If she perfected a technique, she’d keep picking at it just to make sure she really had explored all the ramifications. If there was a problem, she just dove in and started working on solutions. Heh! Half the time they weren’t even her problems. I used to have to stop some of our classmates from asking her for help because she was never satisfied to just point them in the right direction. If she didn’t know the answer either, which as an undergraduate was most of the time, she’d jump into it full time until she had the answer. The problem was it was often at the cost of her own assignments. Well, she still had the highest grade point average in the class so maybe I was being over-protective, but I think that’s why it took her as long as it did to get her master’s degree.”

“How long did it take her?” Oceanvine asked.

“Five years,” Airblossom replied, “or was it six? It took me longer but I had to work for a living and that really slows you down. Vine stayed at University a couple of years before Silverwind hired her. More than enough time to finish a thesis, but Vine would never have been happy with anything less than ground-breaking work. Have you read her thesis?”

“Doctor Southgate gave me a copy,” Oceanvine replied. “It was hard to believe it was only a master’s thesis, but it’s why I was so picky about my own thesis.”

“Look up her wizard’s dissertation!” Airblossom laughed. “It’s longer, drier and covers every imaginable aspect of her alternating current wards.”

“Multi-phase,” Oceanvine corrected her. “I wrote a paper a few years ago about that. The current in those wards doesn’t really alternate. It just looks like that. What really makes them different is that they’re wards that exist in several phases at once. It’s also why they’re so much harder to cast. It’s almost like casting several simultaneous spells.”

Airblossom smiled reminiscently. “Vine would have loved to hear you say that. She probably would have argued the point back and forth but I think it would have been one of the high points of her life. That you, of all people, managed to come up with a new insight into her work... Yes, she’d have loved that.”

Oceanvine sighed. "I just wish I had known we were related while she was still alive. So many things I could have asked her."

"Ask your Uncle Candle," Airblossom suggested. "He was around for most of it."

"I have, but it's not the same," Oceanvine admitted. "His memories are from his perspective. I can get the facts from him, but not my great-grandmother's thoughts. I think I will read her dissertation, though. It will give me a better perspective on her thoughts. She really did not write very much, though she must have given a hundred interviews over the years. None of the interviewers ever asked my questions though."

"What sort of questions?" Airblossom asked gently.

"Little things," Oceanvine replied, "like her favorite toy when she was a girl, or like what made her want to be a mage. Can you believe no one ever asked that?"

"I don't think I ever did either," Airblossom admitted. "I always had the impression it was a part of her from the very start. She was born to be a wizard."

"That's what I heard on Kern," Oceanvine replied, "but there must have been a single moment in which she realized it herself."

"I suppose there must have," Airblossom replied, "but you know it's not really very important, except to her. Your own decision that way is far more relevant to you."

"Me?" Oceanvine laughed. "I got tricked into it. Uncle Candle made my lessons a condition of cruising on the *Maiyim Bourne*."

"And what made you want to ride on that boat?" Airblossom asked.

"Well, my great-grandmother made me promise I would at least go on board. She told me there was something there for me," Oceanvine explained.

"And that something?" Airblossom asked. "I assume it wasn't just a penchant for silk blouses."

Oceanvine chuckled, "No, it was a life of magic."

"It was a bit of her own life, Vine," Airblossom explained. "My dear friend grew up to become a very wise woman. Of course she did it all the hard way, I sometimes think, but it was probably more fun that way. But you see, I think she knew you would have all these unanswered questions and that was her way of at least answering some of them."

"By giving me her life?" Oceanvine asked.

"No, just a taste of it," Airblossom replied. "I don't know if she expected you to pursue magic as a career. Given your upbringing, I think that would have been too much to expect of you, but she did want you to know who you were and who she was and she was wise enough to realize it had to be when you were ready."

Oceanvine nodded and looked out to sea. Jollin and Sextant were still waiting for their wave, but the surf was no longer as high as it had been earlier. When she looked back Airblossom was using magic to

levitate a pebble around her head in the same way Oceanvine habitually wore her pearl. “Jollin bought a bag full of silver beads, if you like,” Oceanvine commented. “I don’t think she’d mind if I gave you one.”

“I have a few things in the house that will serve that purpose,” Airblossom chuckled. “I wonder why we never thought of this back when I was in school.”

“I only started it as a training exercise,” Oceanvine confessed, “and it was with a hex nut. Occasionally I forgot I was doing it and several professors during my senior year would ask me to stop doing it in their classes, but I didn’t really didn’t start doing it in public until after Queen Orya gave me the pearl.”

“Well, it’s a very good exercise, especially for new mages,” Airblossom remarked. “Are any of your students doing it?”

“Not back at University,” Oceanvine shrugged, “but then there are only six undergrads and one journeyman besides myself and they’re all men. I wouldn’t be surprised if all that changes when we get a few female apprentices.”

“You could assign it as extra credit,” Airblossom suggested.

“I’m not trying to start a fashion,” Oceanvine protested, “and the students get enough homework as it is. To tell you the truth I think I do it as a form of belated rebellion. My father and grandmother forbade the use of magic in the family while I was growing up. They still do for that matter, so I think that’s why I do it so publicly. And of course they can’t complain since His Majesty approves, or maybe I’m just psychoanalyzing myself too much?”

“Perhaps a bit,” Airblossom laughed. “Personally I stopped worrying about why I do things the way I do years ago. Oh, here comes your Uncle Candle now.”

“Well, I think we should see results soon.” Candle told them as he and Waterfall approached.

“What did you do now?” Airblossom asked half a beat before Oceanvine could.

“I called a press conference,” Candle replied, “or rather I convinced Senators Gai and Kaleia and Admiral Bonao to call one jointly.”

“I’ve lost track,” Oceanvine admitted. “Senator Gai is the leader of the Liberals and Senator Kaleia is the head of the Conservative Party, but which one is Admiral Bonao?”

“The Navy Chief of Staff,” Candle told her. “I understand how that can get confusing. I don’t think you’ve met him yet.”

“Somehow I missed that gentleman,” Oceanvine remarked.

“Lady,” Airblossom corrected her. “Men and women are completely equal in all activities in Bellinen, but as you say, you haven’t met her.”

“No, I did meet her equivalents in the Marines and the Coast Guard,” Oceanvine replied. “Aren’t they with us?”

“They are, but we decided that three leaders were enough to get Jiroschi’s attention. The rest will be on hand if a statement is needed,” Candle explained.

“I guess I’d better get changed then,” Oceanvine remarked, starting to get up.

“Take your time,” Candle advised. “The press conference isn’t until tomorrow morning. I wanted to be certain there was time for the news to spread.”

“In this town?” Airblossom laughed. “The word was out before you finished notifying the press.”

Twenty-three

“Vine! Jollin!” Sextant shouted, banging on their cabin door, “Wake up, we have company!”

Oceanvine and Jollin sat up in their bunks immediately. “What’s that weird red light?” Jollin asked. The cabin was illuminated by a pulsing blood red glare and the hull of the *Maiyim Bourne* was vibrating disconcertingly. Candle had chosen to leave the boat on the beach in front of Airblossom’s and Waterfall’s home. And rather than abusing their friends’ hospitality, Candle and his crew stayed on the boat at night.

“If it was that new science fiction show we saw the other night I’d say we were at red alert,” Oceanvine snapped.

“I think we are at red alert, Vine,” Jollin replied, pulling on a blouse and tossing another at Oceanvine, who had already grabbed a pair of jeans, “but what’s that light?”

“Something bad is my guess,” Oceanvine told her. “Don’t forget your best personal ward. I think you’ll need it once we open the hatch.” She was still pulling on her blouse as she ran out into the galley. “Uncle Candle, what’s going on?”

“We have a dozen or so people out there standing in a circle around us,” he told her. “I think they’re using those rings they love so much, but this is a different spell than the one we saw in Rjalkatyp.”

“The light is red rather than blue,” Oceanvine observed. “Does that mean it’s lower power?”

“Not necessarily,” Candle told her, “just a longer wavelength. I’m fairly certain the light is a side effect of the spell. Excess energy has to go somewhere, after all.”

“Is that where most light effects in magic come from?” Oceanvine asked curiously.

“Of course,” Candle told her. “Why else would you get lights for no intentional reason?”

“But why isn’t their spell affecting us?” Jollin asked, “or isn’t it that kind of spell?”

“I’m fairly certain they think we’re dying in here,” Candle told her, “but I cast a protective ward inside the cabin before we went to sleep.”

“You expected an attack?” Sextant asked him.

“I was hoping,” Candle shrugged. “To tell the truth, I didn’t really have anything prepared to say for the press conference. Jiroshi could have just sat back and let this pass. If he had, we pretty much would have

had to pack up and go home.”

“Are we certain President Jiroshi is behind this?” Jollin asked.

“He’s one of the guys out there with his right arm in the air,” Candle replied. “Okay, kids, keep your wards up. If this is as bad as the blue light spell it will take everything you have, Jollin, and it won’t be a day on the beach for Vine and Six either.” Candle grabbed the golden pen out of his pocket and let it expand into a two-foot long baton. Oceanvine and Sextant grabbed their staves as well. Candle looked back to make sure their wards were sufficient, then opened the cabin’s hatch.

He flew out of the boat’s cabin like a shot with Oceanvine hot on his trail. Sextant used his legs to propel himself out and Jollin followed behind him. Immediately after exiting the field of effect of the attacker’s spell, Candle turned around and assessed the situation. Below him he saw Airblossom and Waterfall already casting offensive spells against the people attacking the *Maiyim Bourne*. However, just like the blue-light spell Candle had encountered before, each of the ring wielders was protected by an impermeable ward of the alternating current or multi-phase variety. He also saw Sextant and Jollin climbing up on deck and start throwing whatever they could at their attackers. Sextant was using lightning and Jollin was simply throwing rocks.

“So what do we do?” Oceanvine asked.

Candle looked to his left and saw her hovering beside him. “I didn’t realize you were up to true flight yet,” he admitted.

“It seemed a good time to give it a shot,” she replied. “Besides you always make it look so easy.”

“It’s a bad habit of mine,” Candle admitted. “We need to diagnose that spell down there. I was able to reverse the flow of the blue-light spell and it pretty much destroyed our attackers, but this may not be like that one.”

“I don’t think it is,” Oceanvine replied a second later. “I think the best we can do is disrupt it.”

Candle took a good look and agreed, “This is an improvement over the previous spell. It’s not as deadly to the people casting it if I reverse the flow, but it should be easier to disrupt. We need to cast a set of impermeable wards between each of the mages below, and cut the spell strings that link them.”

“I can do that,” Oceanvine told him confidently, “You’ll keep them from shooting me down.”

It was not what Candle had planned, but there was no time to argue. “I’ll cover you,” he assured her. He was not sure what would happen when she disrupted the spell, but he hoped the attackers would be thrown off balance.

Oceanvine cast a serpentine wall of impermeability that wove its way back and forth around the *Maiyim Bourne* and each time it switch direction it cut between a pair of enemy mages. It was not what Candle had been planning; he had thought of a dozen separate sheet wards, but he realized that Oceanvine’s creativity had produced a better solution because it was a single spell that she could maintain far easier than a dozen such spells at once. In fact it had been his plan to only do a few at a time until finished as that many simultaneous spells were probably impossible for a mortal mage.

The ward would not have been able to stop the blue-light spell, but this was something else. Judging by the nearby vegetation, Candle thought they may have intended to incinerate the *Maiyim Bourne*.

Fortunately, the boat had proved its indestructibility once again. When the spell strings were cut, the protective wards around the attackers intensified and Candle was impressed that whoever had crafted the spell had actually provided for built-in defenses should the spell fail.

Candle tried to power his way through one of the wards, but it resisted all his efforts. Then he realized he did not have to power his way through such defenses. The men and women inside those wards were under siege. They were temporarily safe inside, but they were also under siege. All Candle and his allies needed to do was throw low-level attacks on the people inside and the wards would stay up until they ran out of power.

The rings, he realized, could only hold so much power. The spell in the rings was a high-level one and couldn't last much longer. He waved Oceanvine down to ground level and told everyone his plan, warning them, "Conserve your energy, they're likely to come out fighting."

Oceanvine already had an idea of what to do next, and reshaped her ward to more tightly bind the mages within it. By applying pressure, she was able to catch and hold seven of the thirteen and drag them together just beside the *Maiyim Bourne*. That left six for the others to handle, but Sextant was already at work with a similar binding ward. However, he had not quite completed it when the red-light spell lost power and winked out. The men and women inside his loose ward banded together and cast a spell that broke through. There was always a certain amount of whiplash when a spell is forcefully disrupted, and Sextant fell to the ground, not entirely unconscious, but dizzy and disoriented.

Airblossom and Waterfall shot spells that appeared to be balls of green light. Their targets, when hit, slumped to the ground instantly and stayed there, but they only managed to tag four of the enemy mages before one of the others started shooting fire at them and they were forced to take a defensive stance.

Jollin found herself ducking behind convenient palm trees more than attacking, and when she did manage to throw a rock or two, it was nothing more than a nuisance. However, she understood the value of being a nuisance, and she kept up her barrage when she could.

Candle had been headed toward President Jiroshi when he and the other five mages had broken free. Two bolts of lightning hit his protective ward and while the ward held easily, especially augmented by the power of the golden staff, his vision was obscured for several key seconds. When he was able to see again, he had his hands full with a pair of mages casting some sort of binding spell similar to the one Oceanvine had used and he was no longer able to see where Jiroshi was.

Inside Oceanvine's ward, the seven mages joined hands and cast a ward of their own that stopped Oceanvine's from constricting any further. Then she sensed the pressure building up inside as the mages attempted to burst free of their confinement, so she lifted them telekinetically up into the air. When they were some fifty feet above the beach, she realized they were about to break free and she released her own spells. Four of the seven fell to the sand but three managed to "catch" themselves.

Sextant was nearby and starting to recover and shot lightning at them, hitting and killing one, but the other two were more talented and erected protective wards while continuing to float in the air. Oceanvine, however, was not done with them and lifted a vast amount of sand from the beach and encased them in a spinning, hollow sphere of it.

Two bolts of lightning came shooting out of the sandy ball, but the mages within were shooting blind and instead hit a palm and a nearby beach house. Oceanvine didn't have time to see which house was hit or what the damage was, so instead she used all her might and concentration and "ordered" the sand sphere to implode, crushing the protective wards with millions of tiny grains flying inward at supersonic speed.

She barely had the time to erect another ward that protected everyone on the ground as the tiny grains bounced back from the implosion. She heard the sound of the sand ripping through nearby leaves and landing on the nearby houses, but even as that was happening she also caught the bodies of the two previously floating mages in her ward. She let them down on the sand and went forward carefully to check on them.

Meanwhile Candle had finally spotted the Senate President just as Airblossom and Waterfall each started dueling with one of the rogue mages who were trying to stop Candle. That freed him up to go after the president, but Jiroshi was having none of that and seeing his forces dwindling by the second, had decided to retreat and was now running toward the dirt road on the far side of the beach houses. Candle gave chase on foot, but Jiroshi cast a spell behind him and Candle found himself falling face first into the tough salt grass that made up Airblossom's and Waterfall's lawn.

Behind him Jollin was still playing cat and mouse and somewhat disgusted with herself for having been forced into the part of the mouse. Seeing Oceanvine's trick with the sand sphere, she tried simply throwing sand at one of the mages. It succeeded in blinding her target and allowed Airblossom to strike him down with a fireball.

It was at that moment, however, that Oceanvine's sand sphere imploded and they were showered with shredded palm foliage and gently falling grains of sand, having expended their energies against the leaves. Everyone was blinded for a few seconds.

Candle tried to get to his feet just as the sphere imploded behind him and discovered he had managed to twist his ankle. Waiting for the sandstorm to pass by over head, he levitated himself up and started flying toward where he had last seen Jiroshi. He arrived on the street in time to see a car turning a far corner to head back into the city. Candle managed to tag the car with a tracer spell, but knew it would only do him any good so long as Jiroshi continued to stay in the car. So, he hobbled over to Airblossom's car and using telekinesis, jimmied the lock and hot-wired the vehicle and started giving chase.

Back on the beach, the others were just finishing up with the remaining attackers. "Any survivors?" Sextant asked.

"Six, I think," Airblossom told him, "but three of them fell from a great height and probably broke every bone in their bodies, or near enough as makes little difference and the other three will be unconscious for another few hours."

"Oh, no," Oceanvine groaned. "Your house got hit." Half the roof on Airblossom's and Waterfall's house had been destroyed by the lightning blast.

"At least it's not on fire," Waterfall told her. "We can rebuild. What that's sound?"

"Someone's driving away," Jollin remarked and they all ran to the road.

Oceanvine tagged the car Candle had taken in the same way Candle had done to Jiroshi's "We need to follow him. He may need our help."

"Go," Airblossom urged her. "We'll stay here and wait for the authorities."

"I'll stay here too," Jollin decided. "I'm more likely to get in your way."

“Jollin,” Oceanvine started to protest.

“No, Vine,” Jollin shook her head. “I got lucky back on Jent. I’m glad I was able to come through for you when you needed me, but I doubt I’ll find a convenient motorcyclist to bowl Jiroshi over. Besides, I’m needed here too and I won’t be a hindrance here.”

Oceanvine nodded, making a mental note to be certain her cousin had not lost her confidence. However, Jollin was right this time. She might not be a hindrance as she feared, but it was also unlikely she would be a lot of help.

“Did Candle take your only car?” Sextant asked.

“I’m afraid so,” Waterfall replied.

“We’ll have to fly then,” Oceanvine told him.

“Like Wizard Candle does?” Sextant asked. “I’m not sure I’m up to that.”

“But you’ll give it a try, right?” Oceanvine told him and together they rose up into the air. “Now just think about propelling yourself like a jet plane while also levitating to hold altitude,” she suggested. “It’s not all that hard.”

They shot forward, following the car into the city, Oceanvine noticed that while Sextant was doing fairly well, he was not moving as rapidly as she was and she had to pace herself to allow him to catch up. Meanwhile, the car Candle had taken was well out of sight and deep in the city of Merinne. She could sense it had already come to a halt next to another vehicle with a tracer spell on it.

“Go on without me, Vine,” Sextant suggested. “I’ll only be a little behind you and you might be needed.”

“Uh,” Oceanvine replied uncertainly, “Yeah, okay, you’re right, though I’m not that much faster than you are at this.”

“Maybe not, but seconds can make the difference,” Sextant replied.

Oceanvine nodded and flew on.

Twenty-four

The trail Candle followed lead to the Senatorial Office’s building. Jiroshi had not bothered to park in the lot across the street, but instead had pulled up on to the sidewalk by the main door and entered through there.

When Candle tried the same thing, however, two armed guards blocked his path and told him with false courtesy to please move his car. Candle cast a quick binding spell on them and headed on into the building only to be confronted by still more uniformed men and women who had already drawn firearms and were leveling them at him.

It was child’s play to knock them out harmlessly before a shot could be fired, but after doing so Candle realized he was bound to have to confront still more guards as he proceeded. Also the only ways up to

Jiroshi's were via the elevators or the stairs, both of which would make him an easy target. He could put any guard he saw first to sleep, but it was also possible he might have to hurt some of them and he knew there was an alternative.

Using the staff to help him walk on his injured ankle, Candle hobbled outside and looked upward to the top floor where Jiroshi's office was. Only a few offices had their lights on this early in the morning, but the president's was one of them. Candle concentrated a moment, and then shot upward toward that office. Level with the top floor he looked inside the office to see Jiroshi sitting cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by a glowing Bond of Aritos that appeared to have burnt its way up through the carpet.

Candle braced himself and sent a large shockwave through the window and toward the seated Jiroshi. The window dissolved into thousands of fragments, but as the wave reached the edge of the Bond of Aritos, a bright dome-shaped ward lit up, protecting the president from the attack.

Candle doubled the intensity of his own ward and automatically invoked the Seal of Aritos to reinforce it still more. Then he took the time to look at the Bond Jiroshi had invoked and got the shock of his life.

It was the Bond of Arithan! The dead demon whose sign was supposedly powerless. He nearly dropped his own defenses in that moment, but caught himself and took a deeper look at the magical construct. It might have had the shape of Arithan's sign, but buried within it were elements of Pahn, Gredac, Xenlabit and Kerawlat. Somehow, Jiroshi had managed to master all four active demonic signs and used them to power the Bond of Arithan – that Bond which was the most adaptable and powerful of the five. This was magic of a sort Candle had never encountered and he wondered if even Aritos had ever thought of this abominable use of demonic magic.

Candle had no further opportunity to ponder that notion, however, as tendril-like spell strings snaked their ways toward him and started trying to press their way through his ward. He had used one of young Oceanvine's non-stick wards and the spell strings kept slipping off, but he knew he had to stop them before Jiroshi tried a less indirect attack.

He concentrated on the Seal of Aritos and used it to attempt to enfold the Bond in a way he believed Aritos might have attempted to calm his children. The technique had worked on the other Bonds he had tried it on, but this one shrugged off the attempt.

Arithan hated his father, Candle suddenly remembered, and Aritos had balked at the notion of destroying his son and in this case destruction was the only option. The Bond grew bright yellow-orange and within its protective ward Jiroshi's eyes opened, glowing the same color.

Jiroshi raised his arms and small projectiles, each powered by a small Bond of Aritos came shooting toward Candle, forcing him to concentrate entirely on his ward. Then he recalled what Oceanvine had done on Jent based on the earlier story he had told her of Silverwind and the pirates and he tried to tickle Jiroshi. However, either the president was not ticklish, or his ward was blocking the attempt.

Candle once more tried to use the Seal of Aritos to force his way past the protective energies that were woven around the president. Whatever that ward was, he decided, it was entirely impermeable even to the power of Aritos the God. *Aritos would never want to attack his son*, Candle reminded himself and he attempted to involve the Seal of Methis. The Goddess would have no such tender feelings for the children of Aritos. She knew them for what they were and would not hesitate.

However, his mastery of Her sign was not as great as that of Aritos and he fumbled slightly, trying to replace the power of Aritos with that of Methis. It gave Jiroshi an opening and Candle suddenly found

himself on a desolate island. It was the Isle of Arithan, he realized, little changed from his one physical visit there so long ago. It was also an illusion, Candle realized. Jiroshi had forced him into a mage duel.

Candle was not sure which bothered him more; that he had been forced into this situation unwittingly or that Jiroshi had been to at least one of the Five Demons. It suggested One Maiyim had been sending their best to train or be tested there. It seemed unlikely at first that no one would have noticed the activity, but then he realized that there was no reason anyone should notice trips that way. There were no commercial routes that went near the Five Demons. Even the Granomen, whose scientific curiosity compelled them to maintain a station all year on Robander's Island, the great Antarctic land mass, eschewed investigating the Five Demons. There would be nobody to witness a visit to one of them.

Candle looked around, concentrating on maintaining his Methis-reinforced ward, and tried to get a handle on the situation. The only rule in a mages' duel was that anything one could do the other could as well. Jiroshi had set up this situation so he knew exactly how it worked while Candle was forced to learn it the hard way.

Oceanvine arrived at the Senatorial offices and discovered the unconscious guards. Looking upward she saw the flickering lights in Jiroshi's office and correctly concluded Candle was battling the President up there. She shot upward and was met by a bright orange blast of energy that sent her flying across two city blocks and would have killed her if not for her ward.

She flew back and toward a different window, arriving to see both Candle and the President enveloped in a nearly matching pair of dome wards that were connected by the fattest spell string Oceanvine had ever seen and surrounding them both was a bright orange sign of a form of the Bond of Aritos. It looked strange to her, but she did not have the time to ponder why. Oceanvine shot lightning at Jiroshi's protections, but the bolt was absorbed by the dome and shot at Candle, whose own ward brightened momentarily but otherwise held.

Then Oceanvine tried to teleport Jiroshi out of his ward, but instead the ward took the spell and turned it back on her and she was teleported a thousand feet away, still high over the city, but rapidly falling.

Inside the illusion, Candle was still at a loss. For a long time nothing seemed to be happening, then he became aware of an attack. It was not within the dueling illusion, however, it was a physical attack against his protective ward. The duel was a distraction and he had fallen for it. Suddenly the Isle of Arithan winked away and Candle found himself flat on his back and surrounded by the Bond of Arithan. President Jiroshi stood above him gloating.

Candle was in too much pain to hear what the president was saying, but Candle was completely at his mercy. It seemed the Orente was trying to keep him alive, however, but helpless and in excruciating pain. One by one, Candle felt his bones begin to break, but there was still nothing he could do to stop the pain. The room began to go dark, but out of the corner of his eye he saw the office door open and he prayed it was help arriving just in time.

Jiroshi was also aware of the opening door and shot another beam of yellow-orange magical energy in that direction. However this time it had no effect except to burn the doorway to ashes in an instant. The two figures who were entering continued in. "Who the hell are you?" Jiroshi demanded of the Granomish woman and the human man who had just walked through one of his more destructive spells.

Just then Sextant arrived with the barely conscious Oceanvine in his arms and flew in the window. Jiroshi sent a blast toward them as well, but the Granom, who was the Goddess Methis stopped it before it could reach its target. It was then she saw what had happened to Candle who was lying on the floor,

bleeding profusely. "What have you done?" she demanded of the Orentan president.

"Nothing a child like you could hope to understand," Jiroshi laughed coldly

"You're not going to stop Me, are You?" Methis asked Aritos. Her voice was as cold as ice, but Her glare was entirely fixed on Jiroshi.

"I wouldn't dream of it, dear," Aritos replied calmly, but equally coldly. "If You didn't, I would."

Methis stepped toward the president. Jiroshi in turn bore down on her with the full power of his combined Bond of Aritos, but she shrugged it off. "You want to harness the power of the demons?" she asked him in her iciest voice.

"I have harnessed that power," Jiroshi boasted, "and mastered it."

"Not hardly," Methis replied. "You've barely touched the surface. Here, let Me help you. You want the power? Take it. Take it all."

For a moment Jiroshi began to glow as his defenses became ever stronger, then suddenly he began to scream. He was still screaming moments later when he slowly faded away. It was the very worst thing She could have done to him.

It was the eventual fate of anyone who used the Bond of Aritos too much, that he would eventually fall under the power of the demon it represented and find himself teleported to the demon. Jiroshi, however, had been using the powers of all four demons equally and Methis ensured that all four would feast on Jiroshi's soul.

"Oh, Candle!" Methis cried, rushing to his side with tears streaming down Her face.

Candle opened his eyes and looked up at Methis and with a spark of his usual dry sense of humor remarked, "Nice to see You again. Thanks for coming." His voice was not his usual, however. It rasped and was filled with pain.

"I promised I would, dear." Methis told him sadly. "I just never had the courage to look ahead to know the circumstances."

"Oh," Candle sighed as the others gathered around and knelt by his side. "Is it that time?"

"I'm sorry, my dear," Methis replied, not daring to take Her eyes off his for fear he would slip away before She was ready. She was keeping him alive by sheer will, "but even I cannot delay this much longer."

Candle sighed again and was silent for a while. Then he remarked, "At last I understand the burden of immortality. How do You bear it? To lose so many dear ones and still not retreat from the world?" Methis' only response was Her continued tears. Oceanvine put her arm around the goddess comfortingly, but she too was crying silently. Candle looked at Sextant and Aritos and while they were not weeping too, they were obviously pale-faced and stricken with grief. "I'm sorry to have to add to Your burden, dear. Forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive, Love," Methis told him, sobbing openly now.

Candle took only two more breaths, then opened his eyes and sighed, "Oh, Jillanda." They were his last words and as he said them his last breath escaped and he seemed to deflate as his spirit left his body.

Aritos reached out and closed the wizard's eyes as Sextant bowed his head in silent prayer. Oceanvine and Methis clung to each other, vainly trying to find some bit of comfort.

Finally, after a very long time, Methis looked up at Her husband and cried, "He was the only one. The only mortal who truly understood."

Epilogue

Renton

Once again Oceanvine found herself in the small graveyard behind the Renton School within sight of the home Candle had once shared with her great-grandparents. On her previous visits there were only a few people present, but this time the area was crowded beyond capacity. Nearest the grave into which Candle's coffin had been lowered stood his son and his immediate family. Oceanvine stood with Sextant between them and Their Royal Majesties Hacon Ancel and Melloise. Beyond the king and queen of Emmine stood Countess Ksanya, the Granomish ambassador and another of Candle's nieces. Oceanvine felt a stirring of anger that King Ksaveras had been prohibited from attending because of a long series of diplomatic niceties that Ksanya had unsuccessfully tried to explain the night before. The innermost ring of attendees was completed by Maia Denfirth and Crown Prince Helm who attempted to comfort Maia by placing his arm around her whenever she threatened to break down in tears, and finally Jollin stood with her father and several uncles, aunts and cousins.

Oceanvine's face was as moist with tears as anyone's there and as the priest and priestess of Emtos and Emmine droned on from behind the double gravestone Candle would share with Jillanda, Oceanvine looked around behind her. Methis and Aritos stood directly behind her and Nildar and Wenni were there as well to pay their respects. In that same second ring stood Madame Blizzard from the Isle of Fire, and Doctor Southgate from Querna and various nobles from all over Emmine. Behind them, the entire city of Renton had turned out to say farewell to their favorite son. Oceanvine remembered that Candle had not actually been born in Renton and had in fact been a native of the City of Tarnsa in North Horalia. But he had spent so much time in Renton that she did not think anyone actually remembered he had been Horalian by birth even though his skin was several shades darker than most people native to Renton. And there were still others there, more than Oceanvine could see from where she was.

The priest and priestess finished their services and then began the final ritual of filing in the grave. Candle's son, Thomas, emptied the first shovelful then stepped aside for his wife and family to do the same. Next should have been King Hacon Ancel, but he gestured to Oceanvine and Sextant to go first. Oceanvine filled the shovel and emptied it into the grave, resisting the urge to finish the task entirely by herself. Then Sextant emptied his shovelful and stepped back to allow Their Majesties to take their turns.

It was customary after having emptied one's shovelful to process back to wherever a reception was being held. Oceanvine, however, held back. She wanted to stay by the grave until everyone else had left. "Are you sure?" Sextant asked her softly.

“I’ll be along soon,” she promised.

A moment later someone slipped their hand in hers and she looked to her right to discover Sally Candleson, Candle’s youngest granddaughter, had stayed behind as well. Sally and Oceanvine had bonded from their first meeting. Sally’s older sister, Jillandette, had remarked that Sally had a talent for reading people and always knew who the good ones were. Oceanvine experienced one of the few warm feelings she had since Candle’s death as she remembered that.

As the king and queen left the grave, they paused by that of Silverwind and the first Oceanvine. King Hacon Ancel bowed deeply before their gravestone as Melloise curtsied. Helm and Maia dumped their shovelfull in too. Then Maia whispered something in the Crown Prince’s ear before joining Oceanvine and Sally. Helm nodded and he too bowed before the graves of Silverwind and his wife. After that nearly everyone else did the same.

As the three women kept their graveside vigil, Methis and Aritos emptied shovels into the grave and then Methis joined Oceanvine and Sally, waving Aritos off to join the processional. Next Madame Blizzard came and she too chose to stand with Oceanvine as did Southgate and Ksanya. After Nildar and Wenni took their turns, Oceanvine watched as the assembled nobles paid their respects. She recognized most of them, but had never met Norton, Duke of North Horalia so she was somewhat surprised when he came to her, held her hands in his own and then kissed her on the cheek.

“You own the name of a hero of my duchy,” he explained quietly while others continued to fill in the grave of Maiyim’s last wizard. “I hope you will consent to visit this autumn at our harvest festival.”

“I will,” Oceanvine responded warmly. It was the first of many times she would say those words that day.

A few minutes later Oceanvine was surprised to see her parents and brother approach the grave. Her father looked at her sternly, but nodded to her with more respect than he had shown her in years. Her mother, Erinne, stayed at the graveside with Oceanvine and the others, however. Earl Frederik nodded to her and walked away with his son, Clemen, although they too paused at the graves of Silverwind and the prior Oceanvine and bowed to them. Clemen reached into his pocket and drew out a small golden disk, which he left on top of the headstone. Later, Oceanvine discovered it was a religious medallion dedicated to Nildar. It made her glad that her brother had chosen to publicly honor their great-grandparents.

When it was her turn, Jollin also joined Oceanvine’s vigil

Still more people came by over the next two hours. Gerry Carter from Keesport and his wife, Karilyn, Sextant’s family, the Hardistys, The Mayor of Renton, who paused to recite a short prayer and many folks Oceanvine had never met. Most of them seemed to know her, however, and paused to nod in her direction before moving on to bow or curtsy to the other two greatest wizards Maiyim had ever known. Quite a few Granomen and Orenta arrived as well. Airblossom and Waterfall arrived late explaining their flight had been delayed, but Airblossom joined the women’s vigil while still others paid their respects.

Finally, when everyone else had left, all that remained were Oceanvine and her mother Erinne, Sally, Ksanya, Jollin, Methis, Maia, Southgate, Blizzard, and Airblossom. As Oceanvine had started the vigil they all turned to see what she would do. Taking a deep breath, Oceanvine walked around the now full grave and knelt in front of it. She paused, wondering if she was doing the right thing. She closed her eyes and looked deep into herself for the answer, which was echoed softly by Methis, “Go on, dear,” the

goddess told her. "You have it in you."

Oceanvine looked at Her questioningly. She had not discussed her intentions with anyone, but Methis was a goddess, after all. The Goddess' face was still as wet with tears as Oceanvine's own. Neither had completely stopped crying in the days since the disastrous victory in Merinne. Then Oceanvine nodded and closed her eyes once more and concentrated on what she knew she had to do. A moment later a rose appeared in her outstretched hand. She opened her eyes to see the bright pink flower in her hand, long-stemmed with a few sharp thorns.

She felt none of the elation she had hoped she might feel at her first act of creation magic. It was just something she had to do to honor her beloved uncle and teacher. Her joy from the act would come much later, if ever.

"Now plant it," Methis prompted her. It was above and beyond anything Oceanvine had planned. Creating a flower was one thing and it had exhausted her. Willing it to take root was much easier, but she had put too much of herself into creating the rose; something very few mortals had ever done. Encouraging it to sprout roots now would be far more difficult than when she had done the same earlier in the season. "Go ahead," Methis urged her.

Oceanvine pushed the flower's stem into the ground between the graves of Uncle Candle and Auntie Jillanda and then thought, "Grow!" at it. There was little visible change. The flower, which had only been about half open, opened completely but above ground that was all that had changed. However, beneath the surface Oceanvine could sense the new-grown roots. The rose would now continue to grow for years to come.

She looked at what she had done and tears streamed down her face once more. "Goodbye, Uncle Candle," she whispered even as her mother put her arms around her and hugged.

Oceanvine did not remember much of the trip back to Candleson's Inn. She had walked there with her friends and family, she supposed, but she did not remember doing so. All afternoon and evening people came up and told her how sorry they were. She thanked them. Several invited her to visit soon, especially His Majesty who wanted her to speak at a memorial service in Randona, Jollin's father who wanted her to do the same thing in Medda, and several others for a variety of reasons.

She told each one of them that she would, wondering how she would remember all these commitments, but Maia came to the rescue there. It turned out she had fallen back on old habits and had been taking notes without even being asked to.

The king and the queen only stayed an hour, begging off due to other commitments, although Crown Prince Helm stayed behind with Maia. Oceanvine thanked them for coming and saw them out, but soon returned to the corner in which she had been sitting. Most guests only stayed an hour or two and some of the other guests, like Blizzard and Southgate had gone to their rooms to freshen up so by dinnertime only Oceanvine, Sextant, Candle's family, Maia, Helm, Jollin, Ksanya, Methis and Aritos were left in the large social hall of Candleson's. At Methis' suggestion they all moved into the more comfortable barroom which Thomas had closed to the public for the evening. The restaurant was open, but, out of respect, no one from town came that evening so the only meals prepared were for guests of the inn.

"I never asked," Oceanvine admitted to Methis as they sat on a couch. "Did we stop One Maiyim in Bellinen? Did we get them all?"

"You got everyone that counted, dear," Methis told her.

“It’s not over, though” Oceanvine noted. “Will it ever be?”

“One Maiyim won’t last forever,” Methis assured her. “Nothing lasts forever.”

“Not particularly comforting,” Oceanvine replied sadly, “but I guess truth is better than a comforting lie.”

“That’s My girl,” Methis told her. Oceanvine tried to smile at Her, but did not quite succeed. Methis’ face was still tear-streaked although She seemed to have finally stopped crying. Oceanvine grabbed a paper napkin and wiped Her face off for Her. “Thank you, dear,” Methis told her. “I loved your uncle you know.”

“I know,” Oceanvine nodded.

“No, I doubt it,” Methis told her with a slight hug, “I mean I actually flirted with him a couple times before Aritos and I married.”

“No!” Oceanvine gasped.

“Yes!” Methis whispered back. “Don’t tell the priests though. If you think they’d be shocked to hear I married Aritos, it would shock them even more to learn I had flirted with a mortal, especially a human one. Of course, it was already far too late. He had been in love with Jillanda at first sight.” Methis sighed. “Excuse me, dear. I need to talk to Six.”

Methis was quickly replaced by Sally, who had always been happy to spend free moments with Oceanvine. To Oceanvine’s surprise, the teen was “wearing” one of Jollin’s silver beads around her head. “Showing off again?” Oceanvine teased gently.

“It seems appropriate,” Sally told her. “Vine, what was it like sailing around the world with Granddad?”

“Glorious,” Oceanvine replied automatically. “I think I learned how to live on that boat. She’s where I first became a mage. She’s where I found myself.”

“Granddad almost never spoke about what he did in places like Sutheria or Rjalkatyp. Can you believe it? I had to learn about some of the stuff he did out of history books and newspapers.”

“I guess he liked to keep his home life separate from his work,” Oceanvine remarked.

“Tell me about Sutheria,” Sally requested. So Oceanvine spoke about the tsunamis that had been started by the rogue mage, Adamant. And she told Sally about the scientists on Robander’s island and how they had refused to trade for the information Candle had requested, giving it freely instead when they learned why he needed it. She told her about meeting Maia for the first time and how they chased down and were nearly killed by Adamant. As the evening wore on, she found herself describing their trip to Rjalkatyp and about the revolution in Granom and finally about all that had happened this past summer.

“The *Maiyim Bourne* ’s still in Merinne, isn’t she?” Sally asked.

“Yes, she is,” Oceanvine nodded. “Sextant and I are flying there tomorrow to sail her back to Keesport.”

“May I come?” Sally asked. “I already asked Dad and Mom. They said it was up to you. They trust you

and Six.”

Oceanvine thought about that. She was not looking forward to the trip. It was bound to be filled with ghosts and memories, but it was also a trip she had to take. Looking into Sally’s eyes she realized it was a trip Sally needed as well. And maybe it would be good for both of them. “We’ll miss the reading of your grandfather’s will, you know.” That was traditionally done five days after the funeral. It was something else Oceanvine really did not want to experience. Retrieving the boat would spare her that pain.

“No we won’t,” Sally assured her. “Dad says he’ll wait until our return.”

Oceanvine looked down at the floor. *So much for avoiding the will reading*, she thought. “All right. We’ll be leaving before breakfast.”

“Thank you,” Sally told her solemnly. They sat together a long time in silence, but finally Sally got up and stood in front of Oceanvine who continued to stare disconsolately at a spot on the floor. Reaching out, Sally lifted Oceanvine’s head until they were staring eye-to-eye and requested, “Teach me.”

The young lady was completely serious. Her normally playful manner was absent and Oceanvine could tell she knew exactly what she was asking. Oceanvine knew immediately what that meant, too. It was the old traditional request by a prospective apprentice. Candle must have told Sally about it even as he had told Oceanvine and Sextant.

Oceanvine considered the request and as she did so she looked around the room. She spotted Methis watching her closely and there was a smile on the goddess’ face for the first time in days. She also noticed Sextant. He was speaking comfortably with Maia but as Oceanvine look up they both turned to face her.

Oceanvine owed him an answer, too. It had been a long time since Sextant had asked the question on the beach in Merinne and she had kept him waiting far too long. And now she knew the answer was the same as she had been giving all day.

“I will,” she told them both.

Author’s Afterword

You’ve just read two of the hardest scenes I’ve ever written; Candle’s death and his funeral.

Why did I kill Candle? That’s the question all my early readers asked me. First of all, I did not kill Candle; Senate President Jiroschi did. I just wrote the story. Seriously, this is something I realized would have to happen from the moment I started plotting this series. It is also a scene that has not changed one bit since I first imagined it.

This series has always been about Elie/Oceanvine and, to a lesser extent, about Six/Sextant and about the new generation of mages they represent. Candle was a necessary part of their education. Without him

there would not have been a new generation of mages; without him there would have been no “New Magical Art.”

But I also realized that Candle was not the sort to slow down. He’s more the sort to keep going at full speed until running head-long into a wall. He was eighty-three years old, but still running around as though in his twenties and it was obvious from the start of this series that it was only a matter of time. In *The Maiyim Bourne* his life in the climactic scene was saved by Oceanvine. In *The Staff of Aritos* it was Sextant who ultimately saved the day. This time he was on his own at the end and his luck finally ran out.

The hints were thick on the ground. He was having trouble keeping up with the “kids,” but he wasn’t trying to pace himself. If you didn’t catch those hints, go back and read again, I think they’re obvious.

So why did he have to die? Well, I suppose he didn’t have to die in combat. He could have died in bed as Silverwind and the first Oceanvine did, but that didn’t seem like Candle to me. In spite of his age, he was in good health so why should he settle down?

There’s also the thing about his wife, Jillanda. She was a character who only appeared briefly at the beginning of *Gods of the Air*, but her memory colored the first three books of this series. Candle was deeply in love with her and her death from Influenza affected him deeply. He started spending more and more time at University and out in the field doing all sorts of research after she died. His life after that was no longer in Renton and maybe on a certain level he was just keeping himself occupied while waiting for that day he might rejoin Jillanda.

I didn’t want to write his death. I tried to avoid it. I tried to imagine several other scenarios, but none of them rang true. Even up to the time I started writing the ultimate fight with Jiroshi, I seriously considered having Candle survive, but I knew it was not right. This was something that had to happen.

Curiously, once the scene was written, I no longer doubted. Candle was dead and there was nothing I could do to bring him back. I could have rewritten the chapter, but I would have known. Not quite what Omar Khaiyam meant, but the moving hand had written and it was time to move on.

Hard as it was to write Candle’s death, I found it more difficult to write his funeral. This series started with a funeral, that of the first Oceanvine and like that funeral, Candle’s was shown from Elie/Oceanvine’s point of view. The difference is in the elder Oceanvine’s funeral, Elie was at the back of the crowd. This time she was at the center of the action.

I suppose if I was enamored of symmetry, this series would stop here. Start with a funeral then end with one. Sounds good and if this had been Candle’s story it would have stopped here, but like I said, it’s not his story. So how will Oceanvine and Sextant move on? How will they next confront One Maiyim? What will they do with the rest of their lives? Find out in *The Book of Candle*.

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