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Ars Nova Magica – Book Four

The Book of Candle

by
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Author's Forward

Another series concluded... sort of. I've said before that my emotions are always mixed when I come to the end of a planned series. On the one side I have a good feeling of accomplishment, but on the other I'm forced to say goodbye to good friends I've been living with for years and the fact that they are

fictional characters that I made up myself does not really make it any easier. These are people in whose shoes I've had to walk more than the proverbial mile.

Interestingly, some of my favorites were not really planned. Maia Denfirth, for example, shows up once in the plot sketch for *The Maiyim Bourne* as an unnamed woman from the Sutherian governmental secretarial pool and yet she became a strong supporting character throughout the series. Countess Ksanya didn't even appear in the plot sketch for *The Staff of Aritos* and yet I honestly cannot imagine that book without her. I thought she was such a good character I wrote *A Promising Career* to give her a chance for character development, and also to team her up with Maia.

There were other characters, major and minor I also came to feel close to and I often felt they deserved their own stories as well, but I try to only write side stories that help to either tie up loose ends or illuminate background features from the main stories of a series. So *A Fine Adventure*, an attempt at a children's story gave readers a somewhat different view of Methis' home, and *Freshman Orientation* served to develop the character of Sally Candleson and to introduce her classmates who played important roles in the following story.

Well, this is the conclusion of *Ars Nova Magica* and I won't be going back to fill in still more stories related to them. When I write a series I always keep moving forward on its own timeline. However, just as when I finished *The Maiyim Tetralogy* some years ago, I knew there was more to come and, not wanting to say goodbye to my characters just yet I used some of my favorites to help set up for the next series. So coming soon will be one final story involving some of my favorite from this series although that book will stand alone and set the stage for the next series.

I have long-planned to write three series set on the world of Maiyim. The first was in a turn of the 20th Century sort of milieu. This was set in a cultural and technological world with parallels to the late 1960's and the 1970's and the final series to be set in a futuristic world. But enough hints of things to come. For now I hope you'll enjoy this story.

Jonathan E. Feinstein
Westport, MA
March 28, 2008

The Book of Candle

Prologue

Two and a half years ago...

He kept the room dark. No one ever saw his face clearly, not in this place. His desk was constructed of ebony and black glass and though the floor and walls were covered with dark green marble, there was never enough light for them to look anything but black. In fact the only light in the room was a translucent panel directly behind the massive black desk. It was there so he could clearly see the faces of those who came before him, but they could never quite see him.

Someone entered the room hesitantly. It was one of his local aides – one of several Orenta that worked for him in this place. “My Lord,” the tall, thin, dark man bowed nervously, “Senator Jiroshi is dead. Maiyim will be One!” he added belatedly.

“What?” the hidden master of this place asked, angrily. “With over half the organization’s masters and wizards at his disposal that has-been, Candle, still defeated him?”

“No, my lord!” the other man denied instantly, “Candle is dead too.”

“And well past time,” the hidden one sighed, starting to calm down. “It may have cost us dearly, but that old stoat has been a thorn in our side far too long. So they killed each other?”

“No, my lord. It seems another mage defeated Jiroshi.”

“Another mage?” the anger began to boil up once again. “Who?”

“I do not know, my lord.”

“Who did it?” the hidden one demanded again. He raised his hand and it began to glow an awful shade of fiery yellow.

“Uh... His students were seen leaving the building, my lord,” the Orent reported quickly.

“Students? Mere journeymen were able to kill an Arithan mage?” the hidden man raged.

“I think one has a masters degree, my lord,” the Orent attempted to correct him.

The hidden man screamed wordlessly. The horrid light turned bright white as he threw it at the aide. A moment later the Orent was a pile of ashes, but the hidden master was still casting destructive spells. He rose gradually in the air, feeling a surge of glorious power. Then his magic became even more lethal. He blasted the roof off the building and levitated away. Then, almost as an after-thought, he turned and concentrated on the remains of the steel and glass tower that had served as his remote base.

This place, he decided, had served its purpose. Now it had one more purpose to fulfill. With a thought, he cast another spell. An odd, twisted sign appeared, glowing in the air above the building and the building began to shake. He felt a jolt of elation when the screams from inside began. He laughed almost triumphantly as the building crashed to the ground. There was no one he truly needed left there, but he would have sacrificed them in this moment even if there had been.

The odd sign followed the building downward and, at the hidden one’s command, melted the wreckage of the building to reform it into a physical representation of the sign itself. Then he allowed himself to settle down into the middle of the newly formed sign and looked around.

The building had stood alone, just another modern steel and glass tower on a hill, overlooking the

tropical ocean, on a remote island in the Bellinen Archipelago. There were a few smaller buildings down by the water and he used the same spell that had destroyed the large building to wreck those smaller ones as well. He willed all the ruins to sink deep into the sand until neither they nor the odd sign were visible on the surface.

Then he concentrated for a moment and, from his perspective, the island disappeared. Now he was standing in the highest room of an entirely different tower. This was sheathed in dark brown sandstone and overlooked a large city that had been built among mountains. It was summer here, so it was only slightly cooler than it had been in Bellinen. *Modern air conditioning is the great leveler of climates*, he mused as he changed out of the Orentan business suit he had been wearing and, with icy calmness once more in his heart, donned an ornate robe that had been embroidered with a pound or two of gold thread.

He paused for a long time to look back over the mountain city and didn't hear the door open behind him until a high masculine voice asked, "How may I be of service, Eminence?"

"Bring me everything we know about the Wizard Candle and his students," he commanded.

"His students, Eminence?" the other man echoed. "We do not know much about his students."

"Then find someone who does!" he shouted.

"Yes, Eminence," the other man bowed, "Immediately, Eminence!"

Renton

A month later...

"I, Candle, once known as Ange of Tarnsa, being of sound mind and body, do hereby declare my last will and testament," Candle's own voice sounded throughout the room.

It had come as a surprise that Maiyim's last wizard has chosen to be trendy and videotape his will, but his attorney, a short, but massive Granomish woman from Randona, assured everyone it was perfectly valid.

Oceanvine smiled slightly to herself. It was so like Uncle Candle to hire one of the very few Granomen who were citizens of Emmine to act as his lawyer. Most Emmine were human and with the recently cool relations with the Kingdom of Granom, Emmine's Granomish citizens had suffered more than a little bit of prejudice against them in the last three decades. Most of them had been heavily scrutinized by the King's security agencies and several had even stood trial on charges of treason. It was not a thought Oceanvine liked to dwell on, but she was certain that Uncle Candle had barely noticed this woman's species and that he had chosen her solely for her ability. It was just the sort of person he had been. Uncle Candle had his prejudices too, just like anyone did, but they had nothing to do with species.

Thomas Candleson had chosen to hold the reading of his father's will in the tavern room of his inn. It was large enough to accommodate all the beneficiaries who had been able to attend and also boasted a large television screen they could all see. Oceanvine looked at the screen and noted that Candle did not look any younger than he had been when he died. She wondered when he had recorded this and decided

that it had to have been sometime last spring before they had left for Methis' Forge.

In her mind, she traveled back a month to the day after Candle's funeral. She, her cousin, Jollin Smith, and Candle's granddaughter, Sally, had rushed out of the inn before dawn and boarded a small plane to Keesport and from there a jet to Merinne, the capital city of Bellinen. All three women were still in shock over Candle's death, but someone had to bring the yacht *Maiyim Bourne* back home and Oceanvine had truly hoped to avoid the will reading. While such readings had been traditionally conducted five days after a funeral, Thomas had decided to wait for Oceanvine and Sally to return.

"Most of my worldly goods go, of course, to my son Thomas, with the following exceptions," Candle told everyone from the screen. "This is in no particular order, by the way," he added as an aside. "To Gerry Carter, I leave a book of jokes. This is the same book Windchime, or rather Geraint Carter, gave me after my dear Jillanda died so long ago. It helped me more than he ever realized over the years. Perhaps someday you will find someone else who needs it as badly as I did."

Oceanvine smiled again and thought back to her return to Keesport. Jollin had radioed ahead so Sextant and Gerry were at the dock to meet them. Sextant, her fiancé, had wanted to go with her to retrieve the yacht, but she had told him, "No, dear. Sally and I need some time alone and Jollin will be the perfect first mate, I think. Is that okay?" she asked nervously. They had been engaged for only a few minutes.

"Of course," he had nodded, "and it will give me a chance to go to Randona with Maia and see what we can do to get Candle's affairs in order."

"To Captain Jack Smith of Medda," Candle's voice brought Oceanvine back to the present. "I leave two paintings for you to share with your family. One is of my sister, Oceanvine, the first Oceanvine, of course, not her great-granddaughter. And the other is a painting of Meddaport I came across about fifty years ago."

Oceanvine looked at the paintings as Jollin got up to retrieve them for her grandfather. The harbor scene had been painted at sunset, but while fairly well-done to her eye, it was the portrait of her great-grandmother that got all her attention. The Oceanvine in this painting was a middle-aged woman. Her golden hair had begun showing traces of silver and there was a tiredness around her eyes that the younger Oceanvine decided were wrinkles the artists had decided to smooth out, but could not totally erase without losing the integrity of the portrait.

The trip from Merinne had been quiet and soothing, but the trip from Keesport had been anything but. Five of them had piled into Gerry's compact car, a vehicle designed for four passengers at best, leaving Sally mostly in Oceanvine's lap all the way to Renton. Sally had napped most of the time, but Oceanvine's legs had both fallen asleep so that each time they stopped along the way, she had trouble walking and needed Jollin's help not to fall flat on her face. As Oceanvine recalled, Jollin had helped her that way emotionally on the sea trip as well.

"To the three great Universities of Maiyim, I leave three collections of books," Candle announced. "To the University at Querna I leave my private biochemistry library, and also those works I have on oceanography. To Merinne my books on engineering and physics and to Randona my magic textbooks. These seem to be the subjects each school could use improvement on and I hope this will help."

On the trip back, while threading the chain of islands between Bellinen and Emmine, Oceanvine had found a notebook Candle had been writing in during their last voyage. It had been about half filled with Candle's notes and musings on a variety of subjects, most of which were magical in nature. She wondered if he meant this notebook, currently in her handbag, to go to the University as well.

“Maia Denfirth,” Candle seemed to address his secretary directly, “Pretty as a princess and, fittingly, destined to marry the prince. Helm, if you haven’t already asked her, you’d better do so quickly or Emmine could lose the finest queen of all time!”

“I have, Wizard,” Helm chuckled as though Candle were in the room with them. Most of the other attendees laughed and applauded as well. It was news to most of them. The lawyer put the tape on hold until they quieted down and then started it up again.

“To Maia I leave my sports car. Every princess deserves a little red two-seater to speed across the countryside in, even if you do drive even more conservatively than I do,” Candle chuckled. “And speaking of royals and their idiosyncrasies... Ksanya Renata Dorofea Petronelle, Countess of the House of Granom.”

“Me?” Ksanya asked out loud. She was sitting next to Jollin, two seats to the right of Oceanvine.

“Yes, you,” Candle replied as if he had heard her. “You are a magic null. There is almost nothing that is magical in nature that can work in your vicinity. You seem to have turned that from a liability into an asset, but I worked on this and finally came up with a piece of magic that not even you can nullify. This crystal globe,” he held up a clear model of Maiyim, about eight inches in diameter, in front of the camera. It was glowing with a soft golden light. A moment later the lawyer handed Ksanya the actual globe. “The light in this globe will never be extinguished so long as it receives at least an hour of sunlight or the equivalent thereof each day.”

Perversely, Ksanya, extended her null-magic field to encompass the globe, but to her delight it continued to glow. She smiled broadly and hugged the globe to her chest, murmuring, “Thank you, Uncle!” It was not the only magical item that continued to function in Ksanya’s presence. The goddess Methis had given her and Oceanvine a pair of pendants in which Methis’ divine sign was displayed perpetually. Both women had worn the pendants constantly ever since, but somehow the globe, mortal-made as it was, seemed even more special to the countess.

Candle continued to make a large number of small but meaningful bequests as Oceanvine’s attention wandered around the room. To her immediate left sat Sally Candleson. The teenager was leaning comfortably against Oceanvine, rather than sitting with the rest of her family. Sally and Oceanvine had bonded subtly from their first meeting, although it took several trips to Renton on Oceanvine’s part before she realized it. They had played and learned together during those visits and finally, during the evening after Candle’s funeral, Sally had taken the step of requesting an apprenticeship with Oceanvine.

“Teach me,” Sally had half asked, half demanded while looking Oceanvine straight in the eyes.

“I will,” Oceanvine had replied. With those same words and in the same instant she had accepted Sextant’s offer of marriage.

Sextant, known as Six to his friends, was sitting next to Sally, noticing Oceanvine looking at him, he turned, smiled and silently mouthed the words, “Love you,” back at her.

“To my old friend River,” Candle continued, using the goddess Wenni’s mortal mage name, “I leave a variety of Orentan orchid I developed some years ago. There are only two of them in my home in Randona, but I’m sure under your gentle care there will soon be many for all the peoples of Maiyim to enjoy.”

Oceanvine glanced over at Wenni, who sat, as always, with her husband, the god Nildar. Wenni was, she knew, an exacting goddess, a perfectionist who was rarely pleased by the acts of mortals, but there was a soft smile on the goddess' face just now. Candle had often gotten on her nerves, Oceanvine knew, but now perhaps he had at last done something Wenni truly appreciated.

"Mountain, I haven't forgotten you either," Candle assured Nildar. "For some years I tried to practice the Orentan art of bonsai with only vaguely successful results. In fact, I fear I have killed more trees than Fibrosistic Wilt, but I do have one that has somehow survived my tender ministrations." He lifted a small oval pot for the camera to capture. It was a small, but perfectly formed maple sitting on the side of a miniature hill. The initial chuckles at Candle's joke turned to more appreciative noises.

"I didn't know Uncle Candle practiced bonsai," Jollin whispered.

"Neither did I," Oceanvine admitted. "He may have killed a lot of trees, but that one looks like it may have been worth the effort."

"Fireiron," Candle continued, "I have something very special for you, dear. I have had this small statue of Methis for over fifty years. The man who sold it to me claimed it was over three thousand years old, although a colleague in the Archaeology Department tells me it looks more like something that would have been made two thousand years ago. Well for all I know it might even be a fake, but it has long been one of the favorites of my collection and I'm sure it will hold a special significance for you as well." Oceanvine, Sally, Jollin and Ksanya all had trouble keeping their faces straight as Fireiron accepted the statue. Along with Sextant they were the only mortals in the room who knew that Fireiron was actually the goddess Methis. "And to Artifice," Candle continued, mentioning one of the names the god Aritos used among mortals, "I leave my chess set, in the hope you will find a more worthy opponent than I to play with."

Oceanvine smiled broadly at that too. Candle had played many games of chess with Aritos over the years, but had hardly ever won any of them. In the short gap of time while Aritos accepted the marble board and pieces, Oceanvine looked back at Six. She had known him even before she had begun learning magic, before she even knew who Uncle Candle was or learned of her relationship with Silverwind and the first Oceanvine, the two most famous wizards Maiyim had ever known. She remembered with a slight amount of embarrassment that her studies had begun when in an attempt to keep a promise to the elder Oceanvine, she talked Six into helping her climb on board the *Maiyim Bourne* where it was on display in the king's museum. As it turned out, the boat there was a fake and only Candle's timely intervention kept her from having to explain herself to the Randona Police Department. She learned later that several others had tried getting in the boat as well and museum security had installed alarms.

Her reverie ended when she heard Candle name the two kings, "King Hacon Ancel and King Ksaveras XI. I don't suppose you're both here to today. If I thought you were, my bequests would probably be different. So as it is, I leave each of you one of a pair of sterling silver bookends. I'm sure I don't have to explain what I mean by that," he chuckled. He had also been correct. The King of Emmine was present for the reading but in Ksaveras' place, Countess Ksanya, as ambassador to Emmine, accepted the bookend meant for her royal cousin.

"Want to trade?" she asked King Hacon Ancel whimsically.

"Someday, perhaps," he told her with a tight smile.

Candle had dozens of small gifts for friends from all over the world and it was another half an hour

before he finally got to the last bequests. Finally, after giving a complete set of the books he had written as Ange of Tarnsa to the Tarnsa Children's Library, he got to the final two beneficiaries. "To Journeywoman Oceanvine... Hi, Vine!" he paused ever so slightly and then raised his voice to say, "That's Oceanvine!" at the same time Oceanvine said it softly herself. He chuckled and most of the people in the room joined him. When Oceanvine first chose her mage name she had, like her ancestor, been quite exacting about it, and intolerant of those who took the liberty of abbreviating it. Eventually, however, she decided she was being silly and also keeping good friends at arm's length and she started telling friends to just call her "Vine" for short. However, she knew it had been a life-long game between Candle and his sister and, because he seemed to enjoy the banter, the younger Oceanvine rarely let him call her by anything save her full mage name.

"Oceanvine, I know you've been very worried recently about where you might live, but that's silly. Didn't you realize you could always move the boat to Randona and live there? Come to think of it, I don't know why I didn't do that myself. Well, I did live on her, briefly while I was working on my master's degree in Merinne, but not afterward. Well, there was no place to moor her in Renton anyway, was there? Anyway, it's not really mine to give, but I have arranged with the University for you to live in my faculty cottage for as long as you want. Okay?"

"Now, I have things I want you and Six to share. For example I leave the *Maiyim Bourne* and everything on her to both you and Master Sextant. Use her together or take turns, it's up to you. You know what a responsibility the boat is and I'm sure you will never abuse it. Six, I am leaving you the staff, the golden one. You know the one I mean. I expect you to share it with Oceanvine. Remember there are things it will do better for her than they do for you, but there will always be a time you cannot be together and someone has to hold the staff and I think you're best suited to that.

"Oceanvine," he continued, "for you I have a very special book." The attorney handed her a leather-bound tome with a lock on it. It looked like an over-sized diary. The lawyer handed her a small brass key as well. "In there you'll find a lifetime's worth of magical research. There's some pretty advanced stuff in there, but I trust you'll be sufficiently cautious. There's also an addendum to that volume – a notebook I've been writing in for the last few months. If it isn't in my cottage, try looking in my cabin on the boat.

"Well, I think that's it. Thank you all for being a part of my life," Candle concluded. "May the Gods bless and keep you safe."

The tape came to an end, but everyone stayed seated quietly for a few seconds until Thomas got up and went to the bar. Others followed and he started serving drinks as the attendees began to talk to each other once more. Oceanvine, Sally and Sextant remained sitting as they looked through the book Candle had left to Oceanvine. "Some of this we already know," Oceanvine remarked, "but only because we stayed with Methis this summer. Oh, I found the addendum he mentioned. I was going to show it to you later, Six, but..." She pulled the notebook out of her bag and handed it to Sextant while Sally took a private look at the book.

"I think this stuff is way too advanced for you to try yet," Oceanvine advised her apprentice.

"Looks it," Sally agreed. "Most of this seems to presuppose I know how to do other things I didn't even know were possible."

"Well, we'll get you there in time, Sally," Oceanvine assured her. "Please promise me you won't try this stuff before I say it's okay. I mean some of it is too advanced for me to try without supervision. See your grandfather's notes?"

“I promise,” Sally told her instantly. “Hey, are these really the gods’ personal phone numbers, Vine?”

“I don’t think you need to know those yet either,” Oceanvine laughed, “and they probably are. Methis and Aritos are still here, we could always ask.”

“I don’t think Methis would mind it if I called just to chat,” Sally remarked.

“Probably not, but it’s polite to wait until you have an invitation, understand?” Oceanvine asked. Sally nodded.

“I knew Candle was constantly researching new magic,” Methis admitted a few minutes later when Oceanvine got her alone in a quiet corner booth of the tavern, “but I didn’t realize he had compiled his notes in such an organized format. I think I’d like to read through this sometime too. It’s one of the few books I don’t have in my library, you realize, and it’s possible Candle had some insights I never considered.”

“Well, it looks like I’m still going to need supervision,” Oceanvine shrugged, “Uncle Candle wrote a lot of warnings in here.”

“Hmm, let’s see,” Methis requested. “Some of these he’s being over-cautious about. Don’t get cocky, but with care I think you would be safe enough. Still, my home is always open to you.”

“Thank you,” Oceanvine nodded. “Is it okay if I call from time to time? He put your phone number in here. The others’ numbers too.”

“Call whenever you like,” Methis told her gently. “You’re looking much better than the last time I saw you, by the way.”

“I still miss him,” Oceanvine sighed. “Part of me always will, I think. It’s just like the way I miss my great-grandmother. Two close relatives I knew for such a short time and yet I miss them so much because I keep wondering about all the time I might have had with them had things been different.”

“You’re thinking about it all wrong, dear,” Methis advised her. “Think instead of the time you actually had with them. You really are looking better, though. You’ve gotten back that glow of spirit you usually have.”

“They do say sea voyages are therapeutic,” Oceanvine shrugged, “and it was good to spend the last month with Sally... and Jollin, of course.”

“Of course,” Methis agreed, “and it is good you’ve had the time to spend with your apprentice. She’s looking better too.”

“Jollin helped us both,” Oceanvine admitted. “She seemed to know just how to draw both of us out. We could have been back sooner, you know, but it was on her suggestion that we took our time and it was a good idea. She’s decided to go into politics, but I think she’ll be wasted there. Jollin is a natural therapist.”

“Yes, she is,” Methis agreed, “but you’re wrong. She won’t be wasted in politics.”

“Huh?”

Methis smiled and replied, "Wait and see."

Methis' Forge

Now

One

There was pop music playing softly on the radio on the reception desk in Randona University's Magic Department office. Kara Fording was younger and trendier than her predecessor, the lady now known worldwide as Princess Maia even though the royal wedding had been so recent there were still stray bits of bunting in some parts of the city.

When Kara had first started working there in the middle of the fall semester, there had been a week best described as discordant while she and the department head, Master Sunray came to terms over what music would be considered proper in the office, but once she understood it was only the loud and raucous music Sunray objected to, an armistice had been declared and she kept her radio carefully tuned, at least while Sunray was in the office.

Oceanvine entered the office and greeted her. "Good morning, Kara."

"Good morning, Master Oceanvine," Kara replied politely.

"Kara, it's okay to just call me Vine, you know," Oceanvine told her with a smile. She noted the bowl of hex nuts sitting on the reception desk. It was a legacy from Candle's administration. Magic students could use them to practice telekinesis. With barely a thought, she caused one to float up and out of the bowl to start circling her head

"Yes, ma'am," Kara replied. Oceanvine rolled her eyes and continued on. "Oh! Your students are waiting for you in the conference room."

"They're early," Oceanvine remarked. "Well, that's good, I think." She continued on to her office, dropped some books on her desk and continued down the corridor to the conference room. "Hi, kids!"

There were several students sitting in the conference room. Sally, who was already at the head of her class, had picked up Oceanvine's habit of using telekinesis to keep an object floating around her head. In Sally's case it was a clear glass marble she frequently referred to as her crystal ball. "Hi, Vine!" Sally greeted her along with the others. "You usually use a pearl for that," Sally continued. "What's with the hex nut?"

"Old time's sake," Oceanvine chuckled. "Your grandfather bought these hex nuts when Six and I started learning."

A young Orentan man, named Leotawa, was playing chess with a Granomish chap who was already

using the mage name, Balance. Oceanvine always thought the two friends were a study in contrasts. Leotawa, like all Orenta, was tall, dark-skinned and had pointed ears, while Balance was short, massively built and had the chalk white skin of a healthy Granom. In deference to the Magic Department, however, they were moving the pieces with their minds. Leotawa was a grandson of Airblossom and Waterfall, two old friends of Wizard Candle, and Balance was the grandson of Madame Blizzard of Rjalkatyp on the Isle of Fire. Also at the table was a young, dark-skinned Merintan woman named Misana Tintawao. She was nearly as tall as Leotawa and if anything her pointed ears seemed to stand out a bit more as they poked through her long, black hair. Unlike the others she had not originally matriculated with the notion of majoring in general magic. Her first declared major, in fact, had been political sciences, but after two semesters of rooming with Sally and associating with Leotawa and Balance, she had decided to double major. Like Sally and Oceanvine, she habitually floated an object, in this case a silver bead, around her head.

At least a quarter of the young men and women on campus had taken up the exercise over the past year, a practice that annoyed most professors when trying to teach a class. However, very few other students did it as effortlessly as Sally and Misana did. And while they might have complained about the distraction, most professors had to admit that the students who practiced it also seemed to do better on their exams as well. Many argued this was coincidence, but in truth the ability to relax and concentrate together, which enabled the practice of magic, also empowered students to retain more of what they studied.

“I hope you haven’t been waiting long,” Oceanvine commented.

“Not really,” Sally replied. “We got here early, figuring this was as good a place to study for finals as any, and maybe better than most.”

“I suppose it is at that,” Oceanvine agreed. “Well, I was going to wait for Six to arrive, but since you’re all here, we wanted to discuss the summer session if you all are interested.”

“We’re going to Methis’ Forge?” Sally asked excitedly.

“Yes, among other places,” Oceanvine chuckled. “No surprising you, is there? Six and I think it would do you all a world of good to spend the summer session as we did a few times; cruising on the *Maiyim Bourne* and taking the class Fireiron calls, ‘Life 101.’ It’s not required, of course, but we can arrange for three hours of academic credit with the University. It will be hard work, but...”

“Oh, no, Vine!” Leotawa laughed. “You aren’t going to talk us out of it that easily. Sally’s told us all about Fireiron and everyone’s heard about the *Maiyim Bourne*. Right, guys?”

“Count me in,” Balance added. “I understand Fireiron is one of the few remaining teachers from the Renton School. Grandma Blizzard would turn in her grave if I passed this chance up.”

“How about you, ‘Sana?” Leotawa asked their Merintan classmate. The Merinta were the same species as Orenta, but by culture, they were a people apart. They lived simple lives in their isolated group of islands and until the current generation, only a very few ever attended the civilized schools of their more sophisticated neighbors. Misana was, in fact, the first of her people to attend the University at Randona.

“I should really go home for the summer,” Misana replied. “I’m needed for harvesting the yam crop and fishing, of course.”

“Well, the least we can do is give you a ride home,” Oceanvine offered. “I know what the *Maiyim Bourne* means to your people. Half your nation came out to greet us when we were there almost three

years ago. I don't suppose you were there too?"

"Unfortunately, no," Misana shook her head. Amusingly the bead circling it rocked back and forth with her movements. "My family lives on the far side of the archipelago, but I would love to sail with you. Thank you."

"That's settled then," Oceanvine nodded. "Finals start tomorrow morning and run through next week. We'll leave as soon as that's over."

"My last test is two days before that," Leotawa noted. "I think that's true for all of us."

"Yes," Oceanvine nodded, "but then Six has to grade your tests. Besides we're required to keep office hours until the official end of semester. We can leave that evening, however."

"Excuse me, Master Oceanvine," Kara stuck her head in the door, "but there's another royal herald here for you and Master Sextant."

"Again?" Oceanvine asked. "That joke is starting to get old." Some years earlier when Oceanvine had not yet become acclimated with the notion of being invited to the royal palace, she had shyly tried to avoid answering an invitation until it was nearly too late. However, the king was having none of that and in case the royal mail had gone awry, sent a second invitation to be directly delivered by one of the junior pursuivants. Since then it had been his delight to do so whenever inviting her. It had been a long time since the heralds of Emmine had been commonly used as official messengers and, in fact these days only did so with official documents to be delivered to foreign embassies and to Oceanvine.

She walked back to the front office to find an older than usual herald wearing an ornate tabard over his business suit. "Sir Ranoulf," Oceanvine greeted him warmly, "It's very nice to see you again. His Majesty doesn't normally send his senior heralds out with invitations to tea."

"My Lady Oceanvine," Sir Ranoulf replied with a slight bow, "it is a pleasure to see you in good health, as always, but I'm afraid my business today is a bit more serious." He unfolded a piece of paper and read, "His Royal Majesty, Hacon Ancel, King of all Emmine, hereby summons the Lady Oceanvine and Sir Sextant to attend him this afternoon at the fourth hour."

"That's it?" Oceanvine asked, checking her watch. "Sounds like tea time to me. He usually just has someone call for the serious stuff."

Sir Ranoulf looked around the office, took a step closer to Oceanvine and whispered, "I got the impression this involves a matter of some sensitivity and that perhaps His Majesty was concerned your phone line might be tapped."

"Not my phone line," Oceanvine laughed. "I defy anyone to even try listening in on a call from this office. Uncle Candle did something to all the equipment in this office, I'm still trying to figure out what, but believe me, the lines here are even more secure than they are in the palace."

"That may be," Sir Ranoulf agreed, "but it wasn't my duty to question why, just to deliver the message."

"Of course," Oceanvine smiled, giving the older man a light kiss on the cheek. She had only a few encounters with him over the years, but on her first presentation to the royal court it was Sir Ranoulf who arranged for her to be announced by her mage name. She had continued to think of him fondly ever since. "Please tell His Majesty we will be there in," she checked her watch, "just under an hour. Um,

should I be dressing for the court?"

"No need, my lady," the herald shook his head. "I believe this is a come-as-you-are affair."

"Thankfully I've never been in the bath when getting one of those invitations," Oceanvine chuckled. "I'd better find Six, though. Thank you!" Sir Ranoulf nodded and left while Oceanvine turned to the receptionist, "Kara, do you know where Master Sextant is?"

"His last class should have just let out," Kara replied. "He had a lab session downstairs."

"More like semester review," Oceanvine laughed, "Maybe I'd better rush down to the lab in case his students feel the need to keep asking questions. Six won't stop until they do, you know."

She headed for the door and just narrowly avoided getting hit in the face as it opened. "Six!" she exclaimed.

"Sorry," Sextant replied. "I didn't know you were there. Maybe we should get a glass door?"

"Or I should be a bit more cautious when running out of the office," Oceanvine admitted. "We've been summoned to the palace."

"Again?" Sextant laughed. "I thought I saw Sir Ranoulf leaving the building."

"Sounds a bit more serious than the Spring Ball this time," Oceanvine told him. In fact last time we got a summons like this was three years ago, just before..."

"Well, we haven't heard much from One Maiyim lately," Sextant admitted. "They're due, I suppose."

"They are, but I suppose it could be anything," Oceanvine admitted. "Why don't you drop your stuff off in your office, I'll grab my bag and we can be off."

"Um, Vine?" Sextant stopped her.

"What?" she asked innocently.

"Don't you usually wear your pearl to the palace?" Sextant asked, pointing at the hex nut still circling a bit above eye level.

"Hmm? Oh, I'd forgotten about this," she admitted. The nut floated back to the bowl even as they hurried to their offices.

"What do you think of the situation in Methis' Chain?" King Hacon Ancel asked them just over an hour later. Until he did, they might have just thought His Majesty really had decided to invite them to tea in a dramatic fashion. Queen Melloise was "Playing mother," with Crown Prince Helm and Princess Maia completing the circle around the small table.

"What situation is that, Your Majesty," Oceanvine asked politely. "Has One Maiyim done something in the Granomish colonies?"

"Not every problem on Maiyim has that organization behind it," Hacon Ancel replied. "It appears Royal Granom is building a nuclear reactor outside New Querna."

“I doubt that’s a problem, Your Majesty,” Oceanvine told him. “Veras claims it’s only for peaceful purposes after all.”

“My lady,” the king replied seriously, “your Veras might say so, but given the nature of international politics, I am afraid he might say so even if the opposite were true.”

“Not Veras,” Oceanvine denied, shaking her head emphatically. “Ksanya is a political creature that way and she might say such things regardless of their veracity if it was in the service of Granom, but I seriously doubt Ksaveras ever would. He’s an amazingly honest and forthright man. I doubt you will ever hear him say something he doesn’t mean.”

“Quite unusual in a monarch,” Helm murmured.

“I have had the occasion to speak with Ksaveras on the phone,” Maia admitted. “I would tend to agree with Vine’s assessment. This Ksaveras is definitely not his grandfather.”

“Besides, Your Majesty,” Sextant added, “That reactor is not capable of producing weapons-grade fissionable materials.”

“You have seen this for yourself, Sir Sextant?” Helm asked.

“I have spoken to people who have, Your Highness,” Sextant replied. “People who designed the reactor and were consulted on the design. The major problem with this reactor will be in finding a safe way to dispose of the spent fuel rods.”

“What about its construction?” Hacon Ancel asked. “Is it safe?”

“Ah,” Sextant hedged, “now there you have me, Your Majesty. It’s a new design, incorporating a lot of new and exciting ideas, but while it looks good to me on paper, I must admit it is untested. It’s like any new design that way; until you try it out for real you cannot know for certain.”

“So should we be worried?” the king asked.

“The Granomish engineers seem fairly confident it is a vast improvement over previous reactors,” Sextant informed him. “And from what I have seen, they have taken all imaginable precautions. Besides, you have to admit that when it comes to engineering, the Granomen have always been the best.”

“And,” Oceanvine added, “they aren’t likely to intentionally build an unsafe reactor so close to a major population center.”

“No they aren’t,” Hacon Ancel considered, “but as Six here has pointed out, it is a new design. Still I think you have managed to put my mind at ease for now. We shall just have to keep a weather eye on the situation. You are aware that Ksaveras attempted to build up a stockpile of nuclear weapons there during the first year of his reign, aren’t you?”

“I recall the air raid drills and the duck-and-cover practices we used to have to go through at school,” Oceanvine remarked. Sextant snickered.

“What is so funny, Sir Sextant?” the king asked.

“Duck-and-cover,” Sextant replied. “That had to be the most useless advice we ever gave anyone. It wouldn’t save anyone and about all it would accomplish is that you wouldn’t see it coming when you were killed.”

“It had the benefit of keeping the people a bit more calm than they would have been,” Hacon Ancel replied. “It made people think there was something they could do to protect themselves.”

“It might have been better not to engage in the actions the newspeople are calling a Cold War,” Oceanvine told him. “Relations with Granom have warmed considerably. Why can’t we call a conclusion to this Cold War, Your Majesty?”

“I would truly like to,” the king admitted, “but it isn’t as easy as just saying so.”

“It would start with a handshake, Your Majesty,” Oceanvine told him tartly. “I think you’re physically up to it.”

Hacon Ancel stared at her for a long moment before starting to laugh. “For a moment there you reminded me of your great-grandmother. She used to say pretty much the same thing.”

“And you didn’t listen to her?” Oceanvine raised an eyebrow. “That must have made for some amazingly uncomfortable conversations.”

“Oh, I listened to her,” Hacon Ancel replied. “I always listened and usually agreed, once I had time to think it through, but political expediencies did not always allow me to act on her fine advice. Besides I do have a Parliament to work with, you understand.”

Two

“We probably ought to be flying directly to Granom,” Sextant pointed out as he and Oceanvine started packing their bags eight days later. “It’s going to take us a month to get to Methis’ Forge and a month to get back. We won’t have more than a couple of weeks with Methis and Aritos this way.”

“It shouldn’t quite take three weeks to make the trip, Six” Oceanvine argued.

“If conditions are perfect maybe,” Sextant allowed, “and if we put in full days of sailing every day. But what if the wind is against us or slacks off to dead calm?”

“Then we all get lots of practice with the piloting spell,” Oceanvine pointed out. “Dear, except for Sally, who has gone sailing with us every summer, the rest of the kids have never been on the Maiyim Bourne. I think we owe it to them. They’re really quite good, you know. And I think they’re likely to go much further in the field than the older students.”

“And I suppose they earned a treat for the way they exposed that student front for One Maiyim last fall,” Sextant allowed, “but wouldn’t it be better for them to get more time with Methis?”

“I don’t want to take advantage of Her like that,” Oceanvine admitted.

“Take advantage?” Sextant laughed. “She loves teaching. You know that.”

“Yes, but She is also a goddess,” Oceanvine pointed out. “I don’t think it’s fair to monopolize Her for an entire summer. Besides there’s a lot to learn on board the boat as well and if it turns out Methis wants to give them more time, they can fly back at the end of the summer. I just wish we could get Misana to come with us. She’s not as talented as Sally, but she’s even more industrious than any of the others and can do more with what she knows.”

“That could come from having grown up in a tribal culture. Her people had less so they learned to make more of it,” Sextant suggested.

“That doesn’t sound right to me,” Oceanvine disagreed. “I think she’s just the sort who is going to apply herself completely to anything she chooses to do. If all her people were like that, she’d hardly be the first one to come to Randona.”

“Maybe,” Sextant allowed. Then he returned to their original subject, “Maybe we should at least be flying from here to Keesport.”

“We’re not in that great a hurry and Sally wants to spend a few hours with her family in Renton. To tell the truth, it’s been a while since I visited... uh...”

“Since you went to the cemetery there,” Sextant finished for her. “It has been a year since either of us were there, and I know you snuck off with Sally on the first morning. All right, we’ll rent a car.”

“We could create one,” Oceanvine suggested.

“No need,” Sextant shook his head. “We’re not hauling bodies out of town surreptitiously this time and there’s no shortage of rental agencies in Randona. We’ll rent a station wagon one-way to Keesport.”

“We might be more comfortable in a van,” Oceanvine suggested.

“All right, a van then,” Sextant agreed. “I could still create one of those.”

“Yes, but it’s harder to get rid of safely than to create in the first place,” Oceanvine told him, “and we can afford to rent a van.”

“Take money from the *Maiyim Bourne* ?” Sextant asked.

“Six, we may never be truly rich,” Oceanvine laughed, “but we are gainfully employed, make a fair amount on the side and can certainly afford to rent a car for two or three days. I’ll admit I was worried about where the money would be coming from a couple years ago, but that was before we started getting the same job offers Uncle Candle used to get. I see now why he never worried about paying his bills. We don’t need the money bags on the boat. We earn more than enough to live comfortably.”

“We do,” Sextant agreed easily. “Most summers we don’t get much of a vacation, though.”

“I think this should count as a vacation,” Oceanvine told him. “You know I used to go off to whatever vacation spot was the ‘in’ place to be. I would sit on the beach all day and go to parties at night. I honestly couldn’t bear that sort of thing anymore. It’s just being useless, if you ask me. What we do is so much more interesting. If I need a rest, I can sleep in for an extra hour. More than that and I’m bored.”

"I always did wonder how the idle rich could stand being idle," Sextant admitted.

"It didn't seem so bad at the time," Oceanvine admitted, "but I wouldn't go back to that for anything."

The trip to Renton was uneventful and, at the students' insistence, done over night. "Wouldn't you rather travel after a full night of rest?" Sextant had asked them before setting off.

"Heck, no!" Leotawa laughed in response. "This sort of trip is best done at night."

"You have a lot of experience with all night road trips, do you?" Oceanvine asked him pointedly.

"Well, no," he admitted sheepishly, "We've been too busy keeping up with our class work, but some of the other kids in the class would leave town for the weekends."

"We did go surfing last fall before our course loads got in the way," Balance pointed out.

"Yes," Oceanvine agreed. "Sally borrowed my board as I remember."

"That was in Sollen," Leotawa recalled. "The surf wasn't anything to write home about, but the swells were enough to keep us up. That was just a couple of hours away, however. We left in the morning and returned the same day. This is a real trip. Besides some of us can sleep along the way and take turns driving."

"We'll see about that," Sextant decided. "Very well, throw your bags in and we'll be off. Sally, don't you think you're packing a bit heavy?"

"I brought too much stuff here last fall," she admitted. "My folks seemed to think I was going to need more than I really did. I'm also taking my dirty laundry home."

"We're not going to be in Renton long enough to do your laundry, you know," Sextant told her.

"I know," Sally replied with a smirk, "but Jill owes me for doing her school laundry several times."

"That's between you and your sister," Oceanvine warned her, "but in your place I might have held out for a bigger favor."

"Nah!" Sally laughed. "The big stuff we would do for each other any time. It's the little things, like laundry, that we count as favors."

"Well, we're ready to leave," Sextant told her. "You want to put that marble away for the duration of the trip though." Both Sally and Misana had their usual satellites circling.

"Why?" Misana asked.

"Because while they may not bother you, they can be very distracting to the person driving," Sextant explained. Sally shrugged and both she and Misana put their toys away before sitting down in the van."

They arrived in Renton in time for a late breakfast. Then, while Sextant took the opportunity to catch up on his sleep, Oceanvine and Sally led the others to the small cemetery behind the local high school.

"That was originally the Renton School that my great-grandmother founded and ran," Oceanvine told the

others, “although that structure that looks like a manor house was the original school.”

“It’s a museum now,” Sally remarked as several people walked up to the house from the same parking lot where Oceanvine had parked the van. “There’s a lot of the original furniture still in place. Well, it’s original to the time when the building was donated to the town anyway.”

“Silverwind and Oceanvine lived there?” Misana asked.

“And my grandparents too,” Sally informed her. “That’s why all four of them are buried here.”

“Could we go inside?” Misana asked.

“I suppose,” Sally shrugged, “That’s what it’s here for. It’s been a while since I saw the place. They bring all the local school kids here on field trips, so I’ve been inside a few times.”

“I haven’t,” Oceanvine admitted. “Let’s pay our respects first, however.”

Sally had brought flowers to leave on the graves. She calmly visited each grave in turn; first those of her grandparents, Candle and Jillanda, and then the graves of Silverwind and the elder Oceanvine.

The younger Oceanvine knelt at each of the graves and inspected the small rose bushes she had planted there a few years earlier. There were a few dead branches, which she pruned with a quick spell, but in all, the bushes seemed strong and healthy. They were not, however, in bloom yet, so she concentrated on each one in turn to induce a branch to bloom early. Like a time-lapse recording, the buds appeared, swelled and opened colorfully. “Too bad I can’t make these bloom perpetually,” she mused. She paused to consider how such a thing might be done, but decided it might not be best for the plants even if she could figure out a way to accomplish it. *I’ll ask Methis*, she decided silently. *She’ll know how to do it if anyone does.*

“That’s neat!” Leotawa enthused.

“It is impressive,” Balance admitted a bit more soberly. “How long before we can make flowers grow like that?”

“Probably another two or three years if you apply yourselves,” Oceanvine told them. “I didn’t so much make them grow as encourage the plants to come into bloom. They would have blossomed in a month or less, so it did not take much encouragement. Just a bit of energy along with the right instructions.”

While she had been giving her impromptu lecture a middle-aged man wandered over from Silverwind’s house. “Please continue,” he told Oceanvine, “I can think of no place more suitable or appropriate in which to teach magic.”

“Good morning, Mayor Wainwright,” Sally greeted him.

“Good morning to you as well, Miss Candleson,” the mayor returned the greeting.

“You remember my teacher, Master Oceanvine?” Sally asked. She also introduced the others.

“Of course,” the mayor nodded. “You pretty much dominated the funeral, you know,” he told Oceanvine.

"I wasn't trying to," she replied. "I was trying to see everyone who attended. Then I had a small ceremony to perform after most everyone had left."

"You didn't move our favorite son, did you?" the mayor laughed.

"Never," Oceanvine smiled. She understood he was referring to how Uncle Candle had moved the body of her great-grandmother from Randona and not making a suspicious accusation. "I just planted the rose bush."

"Ah," Mayor Wainwright laughed. "And there I thought you cast a spell of some sort."

"She did," Sally volunteered. "She created the rose before she planted it."

"Created?" the mayor asked. "You really are Silverwind's descendant then, aren't you? My grandfather used to tell a story about how Silverwind created a living dove in Old Jack's tavern."

"That one's beyond me," Oceanvine admitted. "At least I can't imagine ever trying to do that. You see, it's very hard to create a living creature. Plants are fairly easy, but animals? It's something about cellular shock. If you don't bring an animal into existence very carefully, the shock of creation will kill it. Plants are tougher that way. They can take the shock, but not animals, and I'd hate to kill something before it had even had a chance to live."

"A good point, Master Oceanvine," the mayor admitted. "So will you be in town for long?"

"I'm afraid not. We were just stopping over on our way to Keesport," Oceanvine replied. "We'll probably be leaving in an hour or two although I would like to see my great grandparent's home. I've never been here before when the house was open to visitors."

"Then you all must be my guests," the mayor insisted and started leading them toward the sprawling house.

Oceanvine was not quite sure what she had been expecting, but the house didn't quite come up to those expectations. It was interesting enough to see how the house had been furnished, but the house itself was not quite seventy years old and some of the furniture was as much as twenty years younger. Styles had changed since then, but not all that much. It was not all that different from the manor Oceanvine had grown up in, except for one critical detail.

"What's wrong?" Misana asked Oceanvine.

Oceanvine had been staring at nothing in particular and shaking her head sadly. "This house is dead," she almost whispered to the Merintan student. "It's been too long since anyone lived here. It's just a shell; there's no life left here."

"I know what you mean," Misana agreed. "On my island there was an old hut that had belonged to an old shaman who was an elder when my parents were young. It was never demolished and my friends growing up used to tell each other it was haunted. It wasn't, of course. It had just been left unused – that and the roof leaked because no one had re-thatched it in a lifetime."

"Do your people usually just wait for an old hut to rot away and fall down on its own?" Balance asked.

"No," Misana replied. "Normally we demolish our homes and reuse what materials we can to build new

ones. This was an exception. We often allow an elder's home to remain standing until we are sure his or her spirit has moved on to the next world. When one is especially revered and had been what you might call a pillar of the community, someone who was such a part of the life of everyone in it, we believe they might take years to move on. I think you do the same thing with houses like this although your explanation for it is different. This house feels the same as that hut felt – empty in spite of everything inside it.”

“Yes,” Sally agreed, “that’s what has always bothered me about this place, I just didn’t know how to describe it. Um, guys, I think I’ll wait for you outside, if you don’t mind.”

“I’ll join you,” Oceanvine told her and the others made similar sounds of agreement. “It’s odd,” Oceanvine confided as they drove back to Candleson’s Inn for lunch, “but I feel more connected to the lives of my great grandparents at their graves than in their old home.”

“The old classroom and laboratory were interesting,” Balance remarked. “Not all that different from the ones at University, but a bit more... rustic maybe?”

“That was considered quite modern sixty years ago,” Sally informed him. “And as you say, it’s not all that different. My Granddad used to tell me wizards had been using stone countertops in their laboratories since the world was young. An exaggeration, I’m sure, but given some of the materials our ancestors worked with, it was a sensible precaution.”

“Even Silverwind didn’t practice pure magic,” Oceanvine told them, “He had a fascination for explosives, I understand. That’s why he had to build that house we just toured. The older one was set on fire and the materials in his lab did the rest of the work.”

“Who set it on fire?” Leotawa asked.

“The children of Aritos,” Oceanvine replied, “the demons, were still free and in the world at the time and one of them, Arithan, had convinced some particularly gullible people to worship him. It was some of those demon cultists who burned the original house down.”

“There really were demons?” Leotawa asked.

“If you had grown up in Rjalkatyp you wouldn’t have to ask, old boy,” Balance responded. “Our city was destroyed twice by the Demon Arithan.”

“And the old wizard’s final exam used to involve going to one of the Five Demons,” Sally added, “the archipelago, that is, to see if they could accurately say whether or not the demon was present. Wasn’t that stupidly dangerous?” she asked Oceanvine.

“It was before my time,” Oceanvine laughed. “Way, way before my time, but as your grandfather told me; normally the demons had either been imprisoned on their islands or were free to roam the world. The chance of catching one free, but on the island, was probably quite slim. It did happen at least once, however. Uncle Candle told me it happened just before he and Silverwind and Oceanvine began their quest that resulted in the final demonic imprisonment. It was pretty nasty and there was only one survivor from the encounter and, if you ask me, he must have been extremely lucky to get away.”

After lunch, they got back into the van and drove the rest of the way to Keesport.

Three

Keesport was as modern a seaport as any on Maiyim, but Gerry Carter maintained his offices in the historic district where the streets were still paved with cobblestones and the lamps had been modified to simulate old-fashioned gas lamps.

“Coming in the front door for a change?” Gerry laughed as Sextant and Oceanvine entered the building.

“We had to park on the street,” Sextant explained. “I didn’t think the van would fit through the old archway into the inner courtyard.”

“It should have,” Gerry shrugged. “I’ve managed to squeak a truck or two through there in my time, but if it made you nervous, it’s probably just as well you didn’t try. You’re early, though. I didn’t expect you until tomorrow morning.”

“The kids didn’t want to wait,” Sextant chuckled.

“Kids?” Gerry asked and then spotted the students standing out on the sidewalk. “You know you really aren’t all that much older than they are, not from my side of the hedge.”

“Only a few years,” Oceanvine agreed, “but they are fairly critical years.”

“I doubt we’ll even notice in a decade, though,” Sextant shrugged. “Anyway are we too early? We could find a hotel to stay in overnight.”

“You’re not that early,” Gerry laughed. “I never took the boat out of the water except to have her hull inspected for barnacles. She doesn’t seem to get any, however.”

“Probably just one of the enchantments on her,” Oceanvine remarked.

“Gerry,” Sextant changed the subject. “I really think we ought to start paying you for keeping her in your slip and for the port fees and all.”

“Nonsense, Six,” Gerry told him. “I wouldn’t hear of it. Besides, that bag Candle gave me three years ago was enough to cover several lifetimes of port fees, storage and maintenance, not that she ever needs maintenance, of course.”

“Well, the least we could do is take you sailing on her sometime,” Oceanvine offered.

“I’ll tell you a secret,” Gerry leaned closer although he didn’t quite drop his voice to a whisper. “I get seasick very easily and the pills just make me too drowsy to enjoy the trip. Now go ahead. You’ll find her in the usual place. I’ll call the harbor master to let him know you aren’t trying to skip out without paying his fees. And have a good summer!”

“Yes, sir!” Sextant laughed.

“Remind me to find him something nice this summer,” Oceanvine requested as they left the office. “One way or another I’m going to make at least a token payment.”

“Good idea,” Sextant replied. “Tell you what, though. The harbor is only a few blocks away. Why don’t you all go open up the boat and air her out while I drop the van off at the rental agency?”

“I’ll come with you, sir,” Balance offered.

“Don’t you want to pick out your own bunk,” Sextant asked.

“From what you’ve told me,” Balance replied, “any bunk I get is likely to be absolutely perfect. Hey, ‘Tawa, pick us a good cabin!”

“You can have the big one in the bow,” Sally offered as she picked her sea bag off the sidewalk. “I’ve always preferred the small cabin anyway. It’s cozy and it used to be Vine’s.”

“Are you sure you and ‘Sana don’t want the extra space?” Leotawa asked.

“Our dorm room isn’t much bigger,” Sally shrugged.

“It’s at least three times the size,” Oceanvine pointed out, “and while the *Maiyim Bourne* offers a lot of amenities, varying cabin size is not one of them. However, I’ve shared that cabin with Jollin and Maia. I think you two will be comfortable enough. Besides you won’t have much time to do anything but sleep in there anyway.”

“Right,” Misana agreed, “and I’ll be leaving about halfway through the trip anyway. Shouldn’t we be buying some supplies though? Food and water?”

“That won’t be necessary,” Oceanvine replied. “I’ve told you how the boat supplies us with everything we need.”

“I thought you just meant clothing and sanitary facilities and the like,” Misana admitted.

“No,” Sally cut in, “absolutely everything. Food, medicine, navigation equipment. Seems to me if we really wanted her to, the boat would steer herself.”

“Not quite,” Oceanvine shook her head. “The whole point of a sail boat is to be sailed. I think Nildar and Wenni had some very firm feelings on that subject. We’ll raise and lower the sails and centerboard manually, steer her by making sure someone is always at the helm and so forth. I’m not sure I’d be entirely comfortable aboard a boat that steered herself, in the same way the closets dole out clothing. Too much would be left to one’s subconscious and I really wouldn’t want to see where we ended up with if we told the boat to surprise us. That works well with the food box, but not with navigation. At least I’d rather be in firm control of where I’m going.”

“Ooh! Look at the tall ship!” Leotawa gasped as they rounded a corner.

“Ah, that’s the *Skate*,” Oceanvine informed them. “Gerry’s aunt used to be her captain and part owner along with his parents. They also owned the largest tall ship ever built, the *Windchime*, but she went down in a storm I think. The *Skate*’s a relatively small ship even for her time – a brigantine, that’s with two masts, one square-rigged and the other fore-and-aft, but she’s been well-maintained. The City of Keesport sails her around the area once or twice each summer.”

“I was on her a few years ago,” Sally added. “She’s almost as alive as the *Maiyim Bourne*.” It was an exaggeration, Oceanvine knew, but she decided not to take issue with Sally over the statement.

“I’ve been on board her too,” Oceanvine admitted, “but only here at the dock, but we’ll be getting a

much closer look at the *Skate* in a few minutes. She's docked at the same wharf the *Maiyim Bourne* is."

"Cool!" Leotawa sighed, keeping his eyes so firmly glued to the *Skate*'s rigging that he stumbled over the next curb and only Misana's and Sally's quick reflexes kept the tall Orentan boy from falling on his face. "Oops!" he muttered, but adding, "Thanks."

"Try not to do that at the helm," Sally chuckled.

"And that's why I insist on driving," Misana added. She actually had never driven a motor vehicle before coming to Randona, but had taken lessons during her first semester and received a license in time to join Sally in Renton for the winter break. Leotawa laughed ruefully. His occasional tendency to get distracted was a long-standing joke between the students, although he almost never lost his concentration when using magic.

They soon arrived at the dock and Sally was the first to scamper on to the deck. "Better let me drop the locking ward," Oceanvine warned her.

"May I try?" Sally asked.

"Go ahead," Oceanvine shrugged as Leotawa helped her on board

Sally concentrated for a moment, but was unable to undo the ward Oceanvine had set the previous summer. It would not have harmed anyone had they tried to force their way in, just convinced them it was high time they be somewhere else. "Hey!" Sally complained. "This is a tough one."

"When I saw how easily you got in last spring I decided to try something different this time," Oceanvine explained. "Look at the ward closely. See how the energy flow curves in on itself. I found that was a lot harder to disrupt than a conventional ward."

"Neat!" Sally enthused. "Let me try again now." She sat down on the deck with her legs crossed and willed herself into a state of self-hypnosis. That was a technique all the students were taught early on, but were encouraged to grow out of as soon as possible.

The trance state allowed one to maximize their concentration and thereby accomplish more with magic, but as Candle had always told his students, "You'll rarely have time to get yourself into a self-hypnotic trance in an emergency." It was however a good way to get a handle on a new spell and a moment later Sally had the door unlocked.

"That wasn't as bad as I thought, Vine," she reported.

Oceanvine smiled and replied, "I'll have to come up with something else then. I do have to stay ahead of you kids, you know."

"Maybe my granddad's book has some techniques," Sally suggested.

"That's where I got the idea for this one," Oceanvine admitted as they climbed down into the cabin. "I think it was actually from my great-grandmother, although Uncle Candle didn't actually describe how to do it. He just wrote down some theoretical notes."

"I think it would have kept most mages out," Sally told her as she opened the door to the small cabin she would be sharing with Misana. She tossed her bag onto one of the bunks and continued, "If you hadn't

told me what to look for, I doubt I would have figured it out. That was a multiphase ward, wasn't it?"

"It was," Oceanvine agreed.

"That settles it, then," Sally decided. "Most other mages still don't know a multiphase ward from their elbows. I know the upperclassmen don't. I tried asking Stingray about them and he didn't know what I was talking about."

"Well, your grandfather used to call them alternating current wards and taught the theory as such," Oceanvine explained.

"Oh," Sally nodded. "Are they the same thing?"

"Exactly," Oceanvine nodded. She yawned. "Am I the only one who's tired?"

"Not hardly," Leotawa laughed from the bow cabin. "Except for a few cat naps we've been up for nearly two days. Maybe we should put on a pot of coffee."

"We don't have to put it on," Sally told him. "I'll just get some out of the food box." She walked back into the galley and opened the refrigerator-like box and pulled out a large pot of coffee and a plate of doughnuts. "There, that should take care of it. I'm going to change into something more appropriate to the boat," she announced.

Oceanvine decided that was a good idea and stepped into the master cabin she would be sharing with Sextant. Opening the closet, she found it was filled, as it so often had been in the past, with Orentan silk shirts and cream-colored skirts. The cut was different, but the color scheme was exactly the sort of thing her great-grandmother would have worn. "Of course," she shrugged and pulled a blouse and a skirt out and closed the door again.

She paused to unpack her personal gear, and placed Candle's book and notebook, which she carried with her anytime she left Randona, on a shelf. Then she stepped back out into the galley to find Sally and Misana had donned identical outfits to her own. "And the meaning of this?" Oceanvine asked suspiciously.

"I thought it was the school uniform," Sally replied teasingly. "You've seen me wear this sort of outfit before. It really is one of those classics that's always in style."

"Yes," Oceanvine allowed, "but those blouses are absolutely identical to the one I'm wearing right down to the placement of the design."

"Well, we asked for whatever you were wearing," Misana admitted quietly. "I guess the boat took us literally at our word."

"The *Maiyim Bourne* isn't sentient," Oceanvine replied, "or at least I've never seen much evidence that it might be."

"What about when you ask the food box to surprise you?" Sally asked. "It comes up with something and Granddad told me it can come up with stuff that hasn't been invented yet."

"I also just assumed it works with one's own subconscious," Oceanvine replied uncertainly. "Sure it can come up with something we've never actually seen, but people can be remarkably creative especially

when our subconscious is given free reign. But in this case something had to have known which blouse out of several I chose. Maybe I ought to ask Methis about it, although She is just as likely to advise me to ask Wenni. At least I think Wenni did the cornucopia spells. Uncle Candle always said they were more her style.”

“Should be interesting to find out, in any case,” Sally nodded and offered, “Coffee?”

“Thanks,” Oceanvine replied, turning around to pull some mugs and plates from the correct galley cupboard. “Misana, Sally and Leotawa already know this, but since this is your first time on board, you should know that every cupboard drawer, and so forth on this boat has a special property. Your closet, you know, provides whatever sort of clothing you require or desire. If you let your mind wander a bit, you may be surprised with what you get. Of course you may not be particularly embarrassed to wear a topless bathing suit in public...”

“I’m not Orentan,” Misana replied primly. “My people have somewhat more modest standards of clothing than our cousins.”

“Then you’ll understand how I felt when it happened to me my first time on board,” Oceanvine smiled. “While the bathing suits were not topless, I could have put several in my purse with room to spare. I thought Uncle Candle had filled the closet and I was about to give him a piece of my mind until he explained what had happened. Anyway, you’ll find the drawers in your rooms will launder whatever you put in them. Um, Sally, you did remember to warn her not to put any favorite clothing in the closet, right?” Sally nodded, “Good, and the medicine cabinet in the head will dispense any medicine you might need. Well, each drawer and cupboard in the galley and chartroom is special. Plates come from the one I just used, for example. In this case I got some small dishes for the doughnuts and some mugs. This drawer over here dispenses silverware. We can cook if we want to and you’ll find pots and pans in here and various utensils over there. Behind you is a drawer that will give you any form of paper you want, and the charts to use will always be accurate right up to the moment. We can even get street maps from the chart drawer. The trick is in knowing where to look, so if you can’t find something just ask, okay?”

They sipped at their coffee, but then, eager to get going, Sally showed Misana where the jibs were stowed and they started preparing the boat to set sail, so that by the time Sextant and Balance arrived, all they had to do was cast off. Sally and Leotawa eagerly demonstrated the piloting spell that would propel a vessel without engines. Finally, as they reached the main harbor channel, Sextant gave the order to hoist the sails. Shortly thereafter, the boat was flying over the water on her hydrofoils and they began to settle down into a normal at-sea routine.

Four

It had been Sextant’s intention to establish round-the-clock watches and sail all night, but when they ran into a dense fog bank just before dusk, he and Oceanvine agreed it would be better to find a safe place to set the anchor and wait until morning. Balance and Leotawa tried staying up longer than the others, while playing their usual game of chess, but as soon as they heard snores coming from the other cabins, they gave up and went to sleep themselves.

Oceanvine and Sextant were up first the next morning. “I see the fog has lifted,” Sextant noted as they entered the galley. Oceanvine plucked the pearl, already revolving around her head, out of the air to get a less distracting look outside.

“That doesn’t look like Rallena out there, Six,” Oceanvine observed. Sextant took another look, then climbed up on deck to get a better view. “Well?” she asked when he had been silent a little too long.

“Could you get me the octant, dear?” he requested. She reached into a drawer and picked up the navigation tool. “Thanks,” he told her distractedly as he accepted it, absently noting she had sent her pearl back into orbit once more.

She followed his gaze and saw a familiar looking pier jutting out into the sea about four hundred yards or so up the coast from their current position. “Well, I won’t say that’s impossible,” she remarked and trailed off.

“Well, I think we both know where we think we are,” he told her, “but, just in case, let me do my sums and find out for certain.”

“What’s happening?” Sally asked a short time later as she joined them in the galley. Her crystal marble was not just orbiting her head, but tracing a wavy motion as it went. She reached into the food box for a pot of coffee. “You both look so tense.”

“Just checking our position,” Oceanvine explained.

Sally peeked outside and commented, “Oh, that was nice of Her.”

“What?” Misana asked, stepping out of their cabin.

“Methis translocated us during the night,” Sally explained. “See that pier? That’s Hers.” Misana looked too, then seeing nothing that seemed unusual, she decided to start her morning magical exercises with her silver bead just as Oceanvine and Sally had done.

“We don’t know that for sure,” Oceanvine told her. “And how would you recognize it? You’ve never been here before.”

“She’s standing on the dock waving at us,” Sally replied. “I’ll pilot us in.”

A few minutes later they came along side the pier and as they always did, two lines snaked down and secured the boat. “Hope I didn’t startle you,” Methis told them, “I just couldn’t wait for you to get here.” As a goddess, Methis had the ability to appear however She wished. However She invariably, in Oceanvine’s experience, appeared as a Granomish woman in her mid to late twenties. She was short compared to humans and Orenta, with dark brown hair and chalk white skin. She wore her hair somewhat longer than most Granomen in a style Oceanvine had learned had been most popular two centuries ago. It was not entirely unknown in the modern world, however, and, in fact was currently in vogue among the female students at the University in Querna.

“No problem,” Oceanvine replied, hugging Her, “but we were planning to drop Misana off in Merinta on the way here.”

Methis thought about that a moment. “Sorry,” She apologized at last, “but this way she can study here for a couple of weeks and then I’ll take her home. Deal?”

“Great!” Sally exclaimed.

“Well, I did want to come here,” Misana admitted, “but I have responsibilities at home.”

“And this way you can still meet those responsibilities,” Sally convinced her. “Coffee?” she offered Methis.

“Thank you, dear,” Methis nodded, “and some of those Sahrenese pastries, if you don’t mind.”

“What’s a Sahrenese pastry?” Misana asked.

“You’ll see,” Sally promised as she opened the food box.

“Where are the boys?” Methis asked.

“Sleeping in, it appears,” Sextant chuckled.

“Don’t they know this is their first day of class?” Methis asked, with a mischievous smile. Sally placed a large platter of small spherical pastries on the galley table and then went to find another mug.

“I doubt it,” Sextant replied, “and neither did we until we woke up and looked around.”

“There is that,” Methis admitted, “but I would have thought at least one of them might be up and on watch. Thank you, dear,” She added when Sally placed a full mug in front of Her.

“When we ran into the fog bank,” Oceanvine explained, “we figured we may as well all get some sleep. Convenient that, since it had to make it easier for you to move us here. Was that your doing?” she suddenly asked suspiciously.

“Only a little,” Methis smirked. “It was naturally foggy where you were already, I just made it seem a bit thicker.”

“You changed the weather?” Misana asked in awe.

“No, dear,” Methis laughed. “I suppose I could have, but it was really so much easier to employ a simple illusion. I just made it seem more foggy. That way I didn’t have a moving target to translocate here. That made it much safer since I was here and you were there.”

“You could have translocated yourself to where we were first,” Sally pointed out.

“And if I miscalculated,” Methis replied, “something very easy to do when trying to land on a moving boat, I’d have landed in the water. It would have done nothing for my dignity.” She finally took a sip of the coffee and helped Herself to some of the pastries. “Ah ha!” she laughed when she saw the door to the bow cabin open. “Here they come at last. You’re late, boys!”

“Not exactly the way to impress one’s favorite goddess,” Balance noted ruefully.

“I’m your favorite?” Methis asked. “Perhaps I’ll forgive you then. Well, eat up. Classes start right after breakfast.”

“Don’t we even get to unpack?” Leotawa asked.

“What makes you think that’s not part of the class?” Methis shot back.

In spite of the threat, Methis did not really start her special class until after they had settled into their rooms in her house. Leotawa and Balance were happy to each have their own room after nearly a year of rooming together in the University dormitory, but to Oceanvine's surprise, Sally and Misana elected to continue sharing a room. "By now I would have thought you two would be tired of living in each other's pockets."

"I've hardly ever had my own room," Sally admitted. "I used to share with Jillandette until she went off to school and even then I only had the place to myself until vacations and most weekends. Besides I get along better with Misana than I do with Jill, most of the time, anyway."

"That's because you don't try tricking Misana into doing a semester's worth of laundry," Oceanvine laughed.

"And I love having someone to talk to at night," Misana added. "I didn't have a sister growing up, just a little bother... oops, I mean brother."

"Psychological slip?" Sally teased her.

"Perhaps," Misana shrugged. It was a gesture remarkably like one of Sally's and not the sort of thing Oceanvine had noticed in the Merintan woman when they originally met. Obviously the two of them had rubbed off on each other. In return, Sally had become a bit more serious since attending University while Misana, who had treated her education like a mission on behalf of her people, loosened up a little.

Methis wasted no time before throwing advanced concepts at them. On the first day she sat the four students in a ring and started them on a complex exercise in cooperative magic. It was similar to the practices Oceanvine and Sextant had done on their first visit to Methis' Forge, but when accomplished between four mages, there was a pattern of energy between them that formed a sort of web.

"Maybe I should be trying that as well," Sextant wondered out loud once they had started. "It looks well above anything Vine and I did."

"This is nothing," Methis told him. "It just looks complex because of the number of people involved. You progressed past this stage years ago. So what were you planning to study this summer?"

"I'm working on my dissertation," Sextant replied, "I guess it's actually getting back to one of my original specialties, astrophysics."

"What are you trying to do?" Methis asked.

"I want to devise a spell that can be used to map the cosmic radiation across the entire sky," Sextant explained. "It's a large project and I know I can't do it by myself, but this would be a start."

"You're going to use your dissertation as a feasibility study?" Methis asked, amused."

"At least it will have a better use than propping up a table that rocks," Sextant replied with a chuckle.

"All right," Methis conceded. "What are you hoping to learn?"

"Well, you loaned Oceanvine a book on cosmology a few years ago," Sextant recalled, "one more than just a bit out of its time."

"I should have realized you would want to read it too," Methis nodded.

"It was harder getting it away from Wizard Candle," Sextant laughed, "but at least I didn't keep tossing it away in disbelief. Anyway, I figure that if the Big Bang Theory is valid, then we ought to be able to detect some sort of traces from that initial explosion. I'm not really the one to interpret those traces, but I've spoken to cosmologists at all three universities and they think my idea might work. If I can devise the spell I want, we can test it out at the South Pole, in the heart of Robander's Island. If that works, we can incorporate the spell in a satellite and take what I think will be even better measurements, certainly more than just half of the sky, in space. What do you think?"

"It sounds feasible if you do it right," Methis told him. "You'll find the appropriate books downstairs," she pointed to a doorway on the side of the large room the students were practicing in, "third door on the left."

"Great! Thanks," Sextant smiled, "and it looks like there will be room to spread out up here when I find what I want."

"No need, dear. The room has a large desk and a comfortable reading chair. You may treat it as your office for the duration of your stay,"

"Thank you!" Sextant replied, trying to hide his anxiousness to get to work.

"And you, dear?" Methis asked.

"I'm having as much trouble finding a dissertation subject as I did with my master's," Oceanvine admitted. "The only difference is this time I'm the one disapproving of the topics, not Uncle Candle."

"I thought you found a topic years ago," Methis noted.

"An advanced study of amulet theory?" Oceanvine asked. "I thought about it, but we really just don't know enough about the ancient amulets to take it any further than I did in my thesis. The only way I would get more is using You as my primary reference source and how would that look? Most of the footnotes would say things like 'Methis. personal conversation,' with the date or 'Ibid.' I doubt any of my examiners would believe me."

"I'm not sure where you're going to find three examiners who are truly qualified to judge your work," Methis replied.

"They don't really have to be, so long as the University thinks they are," Oceanvine pointed out. "Oh, that sounded terribly cynical, didn't it?"

"Yes it did, dear," Methis agreed, "but true."

"Um, do we need to stay here to supervise the kids?" Oceanvine asked.

Methis chuckled, "Do seven or eight years really make that much of a difference?" She did however lead Oceanvine into the main living room. "Let's take a walk," She suggested.

"Gerry Carter said pretty much the same thing the other day," Oceanvine admitted. "About relative age, that is. Am I taking myself too seriously?"

“You have a lot of responsibilities you didn’t have when you were their age,” Methis pointed out.

“I was still majoring in liberal arts when I was Sally’s age,” Oceanvine admitted.

“And now you’re a wizard candidate and at a remarkably young age,” Methis pointed out. “Neither of your great grandparents were that far along and Silverwind was the second youngest wizard of all time. Candle was the first, of course. Sextant may equal him and you might even beat him, although there’s no rush, you realize. It’s just a degree. What really counts is in your head. What did you want to talk about, or was that it?”

“Actually it’s about the *Maiyim Bourne*,” Oceanvine told her. “Yesterday, I told Sally and Misana that the boat was not sentient, that its apparent ability to read our minds was actually just our subconscious minds instructing it on what we wanted. But then I started thinking about the times the food box would serve up things we had never heard of, like the pastry from Sahren or some of the exotic medicines or even the charts. There had been times we’ve been places none of us have ever been so charts and maps can’t have come from our minds.”

“No,” Methis shook Her head, “they wouldn’t. And that certainly wouldn’t keep those charts up-to-the-moment accurate either. The *Maiyim Bourne* isn’t actually alive, but it is a remarkable simulation of life. I understand there are experiments in artificial intelligence going on in Querna and the Orentan scientists have been studying models of artificial life. The boat is similar in many ways to those experiments, although considerably more complex. Wenni invested those cornucopia spells with as much knowledge as she could from her own, not inconsiderably large mind. I’m sure Nildar helped along those lines as well. So the boat has a large... well your computer engineers would call it a database, to draw from. So you instruct the boat, either consciously or unconsciously, as to what you want and it supplies it from the onboard database.”

“That would explain the pastry,” Oceanvine argued, “but what about the pizza? Uncle Candle told me he had pizza from the food box years before it was invented.”

“Yes, he told me the same thing, but the ingredients already existed in the world,” Methis replied. “I suspect when he told the box to surprise him, his subconscious supplied various things he liked and put them together in a logical form. It might well have rolled that pizza up into a long cylinder, or put the toppings inside a loaf of bread, but instead it made what we call a pizza. Of course you have to realize that similar sorts of bread and vegetable combinations had existed on Ellisto for a century or two before that. They just didn’t use cheese or tomato sauce the way pizza does. Is that really all you wanted to ask in private?”

“Well, I was sort of worried what sort of experiments they might get up to onboard if they thought the boat could actually think for herself,” Oceanvine admitted. “So it really can’t, right?”

“No it can’t.” Methis assured her. “Oh, she’s close to a true artificial intelligence, but in spite of appearances she does not actually have a mind of her own. That would take an entirely different sort of spell; something that would give it a sort of seed that could grow into sentience.”

“Oh, good,” Oceanvine replied, showing a little relief.

“But?” Methis prompted.

“About the boat? Nothing,” Oceanvine denied. “Oh, okay... One Maiyim. They’ve been quiet lately haven’t they?”

Methis grinned slightly. "Yes, they have," She replied simply. After a moment She relented and added, "but they're not gone yet. You really are too polite sometimes, dear. Your uncle would have called to ask a dozen times in the last year."

"And you would have told him to 'Wait and see,'" Oceanvine replied, "just like you did with me when I asked about Jollin's political career. She's on the Medda City Council now, you know."

"Good!" Methis replied. "Right on schedule."

"You like teasing me like that, don't you?" Oceanvine accused.

"It is fun," Methis admitted. "Besides you're the one who plotted Jollin's political course. I really don't have to tell you what's going to come next."

"I'll find out soon enough," Oceanvine nodded, "and you know what? I don't think I really want to know the future. It's tempting, sometimes, but along with seeing the joy that's ahead you also see the pain and it's the anticipation of the pain that I think would weigh on me the heaviest. No need to suffer a tragedy more than once."

"Some memories never leave us," Methis replied bleakly and Oceanvine suddenly realized she had opened a box filled with sad memories in the goddess.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she apologized at once.

"It's all right, dear," Methis replied, a wise smile on her face. "It's a part of life and I wouldn't have the sadness if not for all the happy memories as well. Now let's really get down to business. You brought your uncle's books with you, didn't you?"

"Of course," Oceanvine nodded, "but they're on the boat."

"Where, by chance, we seem to have found ourselves," Methis pointed out.

Oceanvine looked and saw they had, indeed, walked back to the pier at which the *Maiyim Bourne* had been docked. She briefly wondered if this really had been by chance, but decided it didn't really matter since there was so much in the book and its addendum that she wanted to ask about.

"I've been trying to look up new ways to counter and maybe nullify the Bond of Aritos," Oceanvine told her a few minutes later as they sat with the books between them. They were drinking more coffee, although without the pastry now. "The problem is, I know how to do most of what Uncle Candle wrote down and the stuff I don't really know I can't do because it involves using the Seal of Aritos."

"Let's see what he has to say about that," Methis suggested. Oceanvine opened the relevant sections. There were several pages devoted to the subject in both volumes. "He does tend to repeat himself a bit, doesn't he?" She observed.

"I think he was trying to make sure Six and I knew some of these things just in case we never got the main book," Oceanvine replied. "It's always possible it could have been lost in a fire."

"Good point," Methis agreed. "That's how your great-grandmother lost her copy of her thesis. There's some interesting stuff in these pages," she continued. "I'll admit I know nearly everything he wrote. When

you have a hundred thousand years, give or take, to work on your education, almost everything soaks in after a while, but he had some observations that, frankly, never occurred to me. Do you mind if I make a copy?"

"If you can, I'd appreciate it," Oceanvine admitted. "I keep worrying about what I might do if something happens to this. If you have a copy then I'll know it's safe."

"You could have copied it at University," Methis pointed out.

"There I worried about random pages falling into the hands of undergrads," Oceanvine replied. "They could kill themselves trying some of this. I could kill myself for that matter."

"I doubt you would," Methis replied. "You're too careful. Well, the one key thing that Candle made a note of here is in how to use the seal of a god. He was absolutely right; you will be most effective when your thoughts and actions emulate mine."

"Yours?" Oceanvine asked.

"I gave you a copy of my seal," Methis pointed out. "I expected you would need it someday and I know you've been studying it. By now I think you know it fairly well, almost perfectly, in fact."

"Yes, but you haven't given me permission to actually use it yet," Oceanvine pointed out. "I mean Candle had to study Aritos' seal for decades before he was given permission."

"True," Methis admitted, "of course he did not need it for decades either."

"But you think I will?"

"When you truly have need of my seal, it will be yours to use," Methis replied serenely.

"I suppose I'd better think of that as a test," Oceanvine noted after a very long pause to consider what Methis had just told her. The gods, Oceanvine knew, were constantly testing the mortals they loved and the bond between her and Methis was very warm, indeed.

"We do need to get to know each other even better than before, however," Methis told her, "but we have time, I think, and there are other ways to deal with the Bond that I and Aritos will coach you and Sextant in. Your students too, perhaps. I don't want to throw them directly in front of One Maiyim's Inner Circle, but I'll do them no service by denying them means by which they can defend themselves."

"Are they ready for that?" Oceanvine asked.

"We shall have to make them ready," Methis replied.

Five

Sally opened her eyes. It was still dark but she was wide awake. Glancing at her watch, she saw it was only 3:30 am. The sun wouldn't rise for another three hours. She tried going back to sleep but soon realized that was not going to happen, so she got up and wrapped a thick woolen robe around her. She caught sight of her glass marble and willed it to start orbiting her head again. It was something she did as

naturally as breathing these days.

“Mmph?” Misana mumbled from the other side of the room.

“Can’t sleep,” Sally replied softly.

“I’ll get up,” Misana offered only slightly more distinctly.

“Go back to sleep,” Sally told her gently.

“Mm’okay,” Misana mumbled again. A moment later she was snoring softly. Sally smiled and left the room as silently as she could.

Methis looked up from her reading chair as Sally descended the stairs. “There’s always one,” she mused.

“What?” Sally asked, puzzled.

“I was wondering when it would be your turn,” Methis explained. “So far Sextant had been unable to sleep twice, Vine was up five times and Balance and Leotawa came down together last night. Misana is the only one who hasn’t had at least one night she could not sleep.”

“I told her to go back to sleep,” Sally remarked.

“Ah.”

“I could go get her if you like,” Sally offered.

“It’s not a requirement,” Methis laughed.

“What are you reading?” Sally asked.

“Would you believe me if I told you it was your wizard’s dissertation?” Methis asked.

“It’s not, is it?” Sally asked suspiciously.

Methis chuckled. “No, not really. It’s Vine’s.”

“Ooh! May I read it?” Sally almost begged.

“Of course,” Methis agreed. “In two years.”

“Oh,” Sally put a world of disappointment into the syllable.

“She’ll be running bits and pieces of it past you, dear,” Methis explained. “It wouldn’t be fair if you read the final product first.”

“I suppose,” Sally agreed reluctantly, still trying to sneak a peak inside the pages.

Methis marked her place and decided, “I’ll let you read the dedication.”

“She’ll dedicate her dissertation?” Sally asked. “Is that done often.”

“Some do, some don’t,” Methis shrugged and handed her the book.

“To all those who came before me,” Sally read, “especially...” She trailed off and looked up disbelievingly. “An interesting mix of people. Are you having me on?” she asked suspiciously.

“No dear,” Methis denied. “That’s the real thing.”

“But she hates her,” Sally argued.

“I’m not sure if hate is really the right word,” Methis disagreed. “I’m not sure I have enough words to describe what she feels, but keep this in mind; nothing lasts forever and everyone has the ability to change. Now don’t tell Vine you saw this. Promise?”

“I promise,” Sally replied solemnly.

“Good. Now let’s talk about your mage name,” Methis suggested.

“I don’t have one yet,” Sally replied.

“Have you thought about it?” Methis asked.

“Passingly,” Sally shrugged, “but I don’t need to come to a decision anytime soon. I just finished my freshman year. It wouldn’t really be mine officially until graduation.”

“You could be announced in the royal court by it now,” Methis pointed out. “Vine set that precedent.”

“Hah!” Sally laughed delightedly. “Like that’s about to happen.”

“Why not?” Methis asked. “Your father is Lord Tamollen and you are on a first name basis with the Crown Princess. It could happen.”

“Is it going to, though?” Sally countered skeptically.

“You know I won’t answer that sort of question,” Methis teased. “The thing is, you know as much and more than most journeymen did two centuries ago. You already can do as much as most of your grandfather’s classmates, dear. You deserve a mage name.”

“It’s not a requirement,” Sally argued. She finally put Oceanvine’s book down.

“Wizard Sally doesn’t quite have the properly serious tone,” Methis laughed.

“Maybe I could start a fashion,” Sally laughed with her. “Is that what you discussed with Balance and Leotawa?”

“Your mage name?” Methis continued to laugh, “Actually, I showed them how to smelt copper.”

“That would explain why they smelled like coal at breakfast yesterday morning,” Sally replied.

“You, I think, ought to learn marlinspike seamanship,” Methis decided.

“I’m going to need to know how to use marlinspikes?” Sally asked.

“Yes, right now. Marlinspike seamanship is the art of tying knots, splicing, lashing and doing other various important things with ropes and canvas. I’m surprised you didn’t know that after a few summers on the *Maiyim Bourne* .”

“We don’t have to do a whole lot of splicing on that boat,” Sally pointed out. “Everything we need is right there for us, and I’m very much an inland girl. Until I went with Vine to retrieve the boat from Merinne, the closest I’d ever come to a sea voyage were the swan boats at the pond in Renton Commons.”

“You know, I don’t think I’ve ever ridden in a swan boat,” Methis considered. “Well, let’s go into the next room and I’ll teach you how to make an eye splice.”

By the time the sky was lightening, Sally had managed several splices of varying quality. Methis told her she was doing fine for the first time, but Sally continued to work on the splices for the rest of the morning until she was satisfied.

“Time for a break,” Methis told her just before lunch. “Come on in and watch the television.”

“I’m not really into TV,” Sally commented. “I prefer a good book.”

“I do too,” Methis agreed, “but this is part of class. History is being made today.”

Sally left her knots and splices behind. She discovered everyone was seated in front of the largest television screen she had ever seen. After her experiences on the *Maiyim Bourne* , the sudden appearance of new fixtures seemed mild although this was a bit of a surprise. “What’s going on?” she asked.

“At the moment the noontime news,” Oceanvine told her. “It appears the recently-deposed president of the Transporters’ Union in Emmine has gone missing.”

“He’s dead,” Sextant commented flatly. “He’s been consorting with organized criminals for decades, I think someone decided to bump him off. It will be a minor miracle if anyone even finds the body.”

“The list of missing persons continues to rise in Molla on the Island of Ponar,” the anchorman was announcing. “A ninth disappearance, a young man of college age, has been reported although the name of this young man has not yet been released. In sports . . .”

“What are we supposed to be seeing?” Sally asked.

“It’ll be on in a few minutes,” Methis promised. “Have a sandwich and something to drink. You skipped breakfast, you know.”

“I did not,” Sally denied, then stopped to think about it. “I couldn’t have, could I?”

“You were busy with your knots, Sal,” Leotawa told her.

“I’m making a monkey fist after lunch,” she growled, getting up to help herself from the pile of egg salad and tuna-fish, “just so I can hit you with it.”

“And finally,” the newscaster concluded, “we take you live to Honnea Space Center. Nill?”

Another newsman was seated at an outside desk across a wide field from a launching pad. The pad was not currently in use, but such fixtures had become a staple of news broadcasts from both the Granomish and Emmine space agencies. “Thank you, Dimi,” Nill replied. “In just a few minutes the first temporary space platform will be created when the Gran 15 spacecraft docks with Emmine’s new Skybird, Maiyim’s first reusable spacecraft.”

“Someone bought into the hype,” Sextant laughed. “The Skybird is an impressive vehicle, but this one won’t be reusable unless they completely dismantle it, put it back together to replace the entire heatshield. They rushed the bird’s development just for this event. The next one will probably live up to the planned specs, but not Skybird I.”

“It’s a safe craft, isn’t it?” Balance asked.

“As safe as we can make it,” Sextant replied. “She’s the most complex space vehicle ever built, so I suspect we still have some surprises ahead, but my reservations aren’t over safety. I really think they should have gone with the original plan to allow it to make powered landings. As it is, the bird is a giant glider and if, by some chance, it misses the landing strip, there’s no chance of circling around for another shot.”

“A dead stick landing?” Balance asked.

“Every time,” Sextant replied. “It’s not as bad as it sounds, but after the Gran 4 and some of the other space disasters, I tend to like back-up systems and a lot of them.”

They watched the broadcast as it turned to a live camera mounted in the Gran spacecraft. The Skybird was already in sight and slowly moving toward the Gran. “So slow?” Leotawa asked.

“When docking in space, the slower the better, old boy,” Balance replied. “A mistake could be lethal.”

They continued to watch until the two craft were finally docked and the hatch between them was opened. The captains of the Gran 15 and Skybird reached out and shook hands and then they each made brief speeches about how they hoped this would signal a new era of peace and cooperation between their kingdoms.

“And is this the end of the Cold War?” Oceanvine asked Methis.

“Not yet,” Methis replied, “but it is a harbinger of things to come, and, no, I’m not going to tell you more.”

“I’m surprised You told me that much,” Oceanvine laughed.

“Then why did you ask?” Methis inquired.”

“If I don’t ask, I won’t know, will I?”

“So Misana’s home safe and sound?” Oceanvine asked a few nights later. The other students had all gone to bed an hour earlier and Sextant was busy working in his temporary office so Oceanvine had a rare moment to share with Methis and her husband, Aritos.

“Well, actually I had to drop her off on Miorn,” Aritos told her. Aritos, one of the elder gods who had created Maiyim, looked vaguely human although his skin had an unusual grayish tone. “If I brought her directly home there would have been questions as to how she had gotten there without a boat. But I made sure she had enough money for a hotel room and to hire a water taxi to take her home.”

“The Merinta have water taxis?” Oceanvine asked, surprised. “I thought they still practiced a barter economy.”

“Only among themselves,” Aritos informed her. “These days they understand how to take money from Orenta and other tourists and the water taxis are generally for the tourists, but if she had to hitch rides in Merintan canoes, it would probably take her a week to get home hopping from island to island. This way she’ll be home tomorrow morning.”

“Good,” Oceanvine nodded. “Any new signs of One Maiyim?”

“That’s the third time you’ve asked since you got here,” Aritos laughed.

“I know neither of you are going to give me details,” she admitted, “but I keep thinking it’s been quiet too long. We cannot possibly have damaged them so badly in Bellinen that they’re afraid to try something else.”

“Well, you did wipe out a little over half of their top mages,” Methis admitted.

“We did?”

“It wasn’t the proverbial stroll in the park,” Aritos pointed out. “They were really trying to kill you.”

“Me or Uncle Candle?” Oceanvine asked pointedly.

“Both of you, I’m sure,” Aritos told her. “Candle was their main target, sure, but they were out to kill you and Six too, not to mention your cousin Jollin, Airblossom, Waterfall and anyone else who got in their way.”

“The thing is,” Methis added, “One Maiyim is a very modular organization. There’s the Inner Circle, but the members don’t all work together well. They’re a contentious lot at best, so while they all agree on their joint goals, as individuals they often work at cross purposes.”

“But that was in the past,” Aritos warned. “I suspect the Inner Circle has not bothered to promote anyone to refill their ranks since the death of Jiroshi and his colleagues. Not now anyway.”

“Why not?” Oceanvine asked.

“Yes, we may as well tell you this,” Methis decided. “You already know how the Inner Circle desires to rule the world.”

“Whether directly or from behind the scenes,” Oceanvine agreed. “Yes.”

“Well, they have another goal as well,” Methis continued. “They want to live forever.”

“Doesn’t everyone?” Oceanvine asked.

“The young do, at least,” Aritos noted. “But would you want them living forever?”

“Can’t say I would,” Oceanvine admitted, “but by what means do they seek to live forever? Are they researching some sort of youth spell?”

“There’s no such thing,” Methis told her. “Not the way you mean it. It’s just a common element of cautionary tales and myths. If there were such spells, don’t you think I’d have used it on my friends?”

“I don’t know,” Oceanvine replied. “There may be some wisdom I haven’t yet learned in letting a mortal live out his or her natural lifespan.”

“Uh, right,” Methis nodded uncomfortably. “Anyway there’s no simple spell you can cast that will just make you younger. There is magic, however that will allow you to extend your life, by stealing the life force of another and that is what they are trying to do.”

“The ultimate leader of One Maiyim has been doing it for the last decade,” Aritos added. “Fortunately that one is not very good at it. He gains maybe a month or two of life each time he kills someone. It’s hard to measure, really, since one body is not like a battery and life force is not like electricity that can be stored, but some of his body functions are revitalized and it takes a while for them to settle back down to the way they were.”

“In short,” Methis told her, “He feels like a teenager again for a brief while each time he kills someone. The sensation doesn’t last longer if he kills more than one, but it is more intense and I fear he may be becoming addicted to the sensation. He was never a good person, but he is now a ruthless cold-blooded murderer.”

“Of course he is,” Oceanvine replied in earnest. “He’s the leader of One Maiyim. Who is he?”

“We don’t know,” Methis admitted. “That, like so many things about One Maiyim, is being kept hidden from us. It’s why we feel we can tell you as much as we have.”

“It is one thing to run a secret society bent on world domination,” Aritos commented. “It’s another thing entirely to keep that society secret even from the gods.”

“You mean they’re not playing fair?” Oceanvine asked, “Or you just can’t stand not knowing.”

Aritos chuckled a bit. “Maybe both. It bothers me because until One Maiyim came along only my children were able to hide from me.”

“And One Maiyim’s mages use the power of your children extensively,” Oceanvine observed. “Is there a relation between that and their ability to hide from you?”

Aritos looked very thoughtful. “Could be.”

Classes continued at Methis’ Forge for the next two weeks during which time the students progressed amazingly. Methis decided they should all be able to translocate, an ability they had gained some halting

proficiency even before Misana had returned to Merinta. But they were also encouraged to progress along their own natural specialties. Balance, with the natural mechanical aptitude associated with many Granomen, found he could work with machinery better than the others. Leotawa had an affinity for living plants. Misana had already shown a natural talent for empathy and had been sent home with a number of exercises Methis encouraged her to work at. Only Sally was still unsure of where her specialties lay.

“You’ll know when the time comes,” Methis assured her one afternoon. “The thing is you’re so good at a number of things that I think, like your grandfather, you’ll end up being a true generalist. Vine is the same way, that’s part of why I was so happy she accepted you as her apprentice. There will always be some things you can do better than other things, but for now it just doesn’t seem so.”

“But ‘Tawa is better at plants than I am,” Sally protested. The marble whizzing around her head started to bother her and she plucked it peevishly out of the air. “And Balance does stuff with mechanical devices I barely understand.”

“But neither of them are as proficient at translocation as you are,” Methis pointed out. “Your wards are far superior, and I’ll bet you’ll be up to creation magic in a few years. It’s possible neither of them will be, although I think it’s not completely beyond their abilities if they apply themselves.”

“But that’s all fairly general magic,” Sally pointed out.

“I said you were a generalist, dear,” Methis smiled. “But don’t worry, you’ll find areas in which you can specialize. Just be patient and keep working with those exercises I gave you.”

Oceanvine and Sextant took the opportunity to work with Methis on various advanced techniques that Candle had written down in his book. Some of them involved the golden staff and they soon found that Sextant’s abilities with the staff seemed strongest when dealing with direct power use and transmutation while Oceanvine’s strength seemed more generalized and subtle. Like Sally had found with magic in general, Oceanvine’s talents with the staff seemed fairly even with anything she tried. She was unable to gain the same mastery of direct power Sextant had or the intense mental abilities Candle had professed to have when using the staff, but she could, with effort, accomplish most of those things.

“It’s probably best Uncle Candle gave you the staff,” she decided. “Aside from raw capacity, I doubt I can do anything with it I can’t do with my own wooden one.” Oceanvine had kept the staff she had used in Bellinen. She liked the feel of its smooth wood, and the bronze bands of metal Candle had created at its ends made it fun to spin around. She had, in fact, taken a course in an ancient Orentan martial art over the previous winter, just because much of it involved fighting with staves.

“Well, you seem to be picking up the advanced techniques from the book faster,” Sextant pointed out. Privately, he believed Oceanvine was discounting her ability to gain extra stamina and self-healing from the staff. It had functioned that way for her at need twice in the past. They had never explored that property since it appeared to only happen when she was injured or exhausted.

“Those we could try here,” Oceanvine admitted. “I’m not sure some of that stuff will ever be useful, though. Those techniques for discouraging a serp from attacking, for example. They may be extinct. Hasn’t been a serp sighting in decades, you know.”

“None anyone survived to tell about in any case,” Sextant agreed, “but you know Methis says no knowledge is ever useless.”

“That remark is hardly original to me,” Methis told them, entering the living room. “The kids are working

on the midterms I set them to, so we have two or three hours.”

“You know, I think I’d love to be able to provide an opportunity like this to all our students,” Oceanvine told Her wistfully, “not just our favorites. This is the sort of training that any mage can benefit from, but you don’t have the space for dozens of students here and it would hardly be fair to you since they would all figure out who you were in no time.”

“Only if we hold classes in my home,” Methis replied. “What you need is something like your great-grandmother’s school in Renton.”

“That would be lovely, but while I’m no longer worried about making a living, I can hardly afford to run an entire school,” Oceanvine remarked.

“You have the money,” Methis told her. “There’s no shortage of cash on the *Maiyim Bourne* .”

“I thought that was supposed to be a test,” Oceanvine shot back.

“I guarantee Nildar and Wenni won’t complain so long as you invite them to join your faculty,” Methis retorted.

“Money is just one problem,” Oceanvine realized. “I can’t just reopen the Renton School. It belongs to the city now. They use it as their high school.”

“And the original building is a museum,” Methis agreed. “No, you need to find some new place. If you truly want to emulate your great-grandmother once again and found a school for advanced magical training, I’m sure you can work all that out.”

“Something to consider then,” Oceanvine sighed.

Just then Methis’ phone rang and She got up to answer it. “It’s probably just Aritos wondering if he should bring in pizza or something,” She told them. “Hello? Yes, she is. Who may I say is calling? Vine, dear, it’s your brother.”

“Clemen?” Vine asked as she took the phone.

“Yeah, hi, Sis,” Clemen greeted her tiredly from the other end of the line. “Your receptionist gave me this number.”

“Clemen?” Oceanvine asked again, worried about the weariness in her brother’s voice, “What’s wrong?”

“It’s Dad, Sis,” Clemen told her. “He’s very sick and nothing the doctor tries works worth a damn.”

Olen

One

“You’re having mixed feelings about this aren’t you?” Sally noted as she helped Oceanvine pack. They were on the *Maiyim Bourne* and filling Oceanvine’s bag with various outfits from the closet. “It’s kinda obvious, you know?”

“A part of me still hurts from all the years of punishment I got for levitating a simple rubber ball,” Oceanvine replied, “and another part hasn’t quite forgiven him for the snubs since I became a mage.”

“Your father didn’t quite banish you from the manor,” Sally pointed out.

“He didn’t exactly insist I come back over the holidays either,” Oceanvine reminded her. “Still, he did give me his respect at Uncle Candle’s funeral, and he bowed before the graves of his grandparents. And, well, he’s still my father and even if I hated him, which really I don’t, I’d go for Mom’s sake.

“Well,” Oceanvine concluded, “that’s about as much as I can fit into my bag. I think I have enough clothing for almost any situation.”

“I don’t see any ball gowns,” Sally remarked.

“I don’t expect to need one,” Oceanvine told her sourly. “Besides, I haven’t gained much weight in the last few years. I’m sure I can still squeeze into anything left in my closet at home.”

“See?” Sally pointed out, “You still think of Olen as home.”

“Only if grandmother isn’t there,” Oceanvine admitted. “She probably will be, you know. Are you sure you want to come too?”

“I’m your apprentice, Vine,” Sally told her seriously. “You accepted me in the old ceremony. I’m with you all the way. Remember that. Besides Balance and ‘Tawa are enough to help Six sail the boat home, though they’re taking her the long way, aren’t they?”

“Six of one, half dozen of the other,” Oceanvine shrugged. “They’ll be crossing the Methis Ocean which means most of the way they’ll be able to set the autopilot at night and keep sailing so long as they don’t get caught in a storm. I think Six is right and that way will be faster than sailing through Bellinen and threading the chain to Emmine.”

“Well, we’d better get going,” Sally prompted. “Our flight leaves in less than an hour and I’m sure you want a few minutes at least to say, ‘Bye,’ to Six. I have a few choice comments for the boys and do want one last chance to talk to Methis. It’s not like I can do more than hug her at the airport.”

Oceanvine tried to sleep on the flight to Jarvic International Airport and she imagined she must have at one point or another, but she kept giving up on sleep to read from Candle’s book. After a while she would tell herself, “Okay, I’m tired now,” and would try to sleep again, but aside from Sally’s attempts to draw her out, Oceanvine spent the entire trip dreading her homecoming in Olen.

“Oceanvine!” they heard someone shout as they entered the main lobby of Jarvic International. “Over here!”

“Kara?” Oceanvine asked, seeing and approaching the Magic Department’s receptionist. “What are you doing here?”

“Master Sextant called ahead and asked if I might facilitate your trip home,” Kara explained. “He told

me to call Her Highness, you know, Maia? And she arranged for military transport directly to your father's estate, but we both felt it would be best if someone you knew met you here to tell you so."

"Thank you," Oceanvine nodded politely. "That was well above and beyond anything in your job description."

"Not according to Princess Maia," Kara replied. "We have a helicopter waiting at Gate Nine. Now will you want me to travel with you?"

"Whatever for?" Oceanvine asked. "You have responsibilities at University."

"Princess Maia felt you might need a personal assistant in Olen," Kara explained.

"That won't be necessary," Oceanvine smiled, "but it's kind of you to offer."

"Besides," Sally chuckled, "that sounds like apprentice work to me."

"I've only ever asked you to keep up on your studies," Oceanvine told her.

"Maybe," Sally laughed, "but that hasn't stopped me so far."

"No, I suppose it has not," Oceanvine smiled, thinking back to all the small errands Sally had performed in the last few years without being asked directly. The teenager had taken apprenticeship seriously, endeavoring to fulfill all the ancient responsibilities in a modern world where such relationships were practically nonexistent among mages. Oceanvine wondered how much of that was because of Candle's stories of his own apprenticeship, but quickly discounted that explanation. Uncle Candle had told her fairly early on that apart from normal household chores Silverwind had never required him to do anything beyond keeping up with his studies.

Bidding farewell to Kara, they boarded the helicopter for a quick flight to Sloan Naval Air Base and from there they flew in a small jet directly to Olen County Airport where Clemen was on hand to drive them to the family estate in a shiny black sports car.

"I could have sent Dad's chauffeur, I suppose," Clemen told her as Sally squeezed into the spot behind the seats, "but I really needed to get out for a few minutes. Are you all right back there, Miss Candleson?"

"Sally," she corrected him, "and it's a little tight but with the roof down I fit well enough. Besides I always wanted to sit in the back of a two-seater like this. It looks like such fun in the cinema."

"Just be sure to keep your mouth closed or you could end up picking bugs out of your teeth," Clemen advised. "Still, it's extra protein..."

"Eww!" Sally wrinkled her nose.

"Don't listen to him," Oceanvine told her. "Besides you can use a ward to deflect any on-coming insects."

"I think I ought to warn you, Elie, I mean, Oceanvine," Clemen continued as he got into the driver's seat. "Grandmother is in."

"I figured she would be," Oceanvine shrugged, "and call me whatever you like. I'm not as picky about my name as I used to be. My friends mostly call me 'Vine,' but as Uncle Candle used to say, it's all right for family to call a mage by his or her birth name."

"Just don't call you Elinor, right?" Clemen laughed.

"Only Grandmother does that," Oceanvine replied flatly. "Oh, Clemen, I've missed you these past few years. Why don't you ever come to Randona?"

"Someone has to keep the county going while Dad's busy in Parliament," Clemen shrugged.

"We have people for handling the day-to-day details," Oceanvine pointed out. "All you're doing is supervising most of the time. You could take a week or two off. Besides as heir to the county you ought to be better known in court. What about vacations? What about your fiancée?"

"What vacations?" Clemen asked. He stopped to pay for parking, before moving on. "What fiancée for that matter?"

"Lady Ioanna?" Oceanvine prompted him.

"The Lady Ioanna Vense, and/or her family," Clemen replied emotionlessly, "broke off the engagement last year."

"What? Why?"

"I don't really know, if you want to the truth," Clemen admitted. "I think it was something Grandmother said, not that she would ever admit to being wrong about anything. The first time I knew anything was wrong was when Io stopped accepting my calls. Since then, I haven't exactly had an active social life."

"That's not right," Oceanvine told him. "Everyone deserves some time off."

"When was your last real vacation, Vine?" Sally asked from the back.

"Huh?" Oceanvine started.

"You haven't really taken any time off in almost three years," Sally pointed out. "You're either teaching, or going from job to job or working. I couldn't even get you to join us when we went surfing last fall. The closest you come to a vacation is tea or dinner at the palace and lunch with Ksanya."

"So I enjoy my work," Oceanvine shrugged, "but, Clemen, regardless of my own habits, you really ought to get some time off away from Olen."

"Maybe when Dad gets better," Clemen shrugged.

"How is he?" Oceanvine asked worriedly.

"Not well," Clemen told her soberly. "He just lies there in bed as though his life is draining away."

"Is he having trouble keeping food down?" Oceanvine asked. "Is he drinking fluids? What sort of medications is he taking?"

“He’s barely eating,” Clemen replied. “No trouble keeping down what he does eat, but he just doesn’t feel like eating. He’ll drink almost anything, though. He’s always thirsty, but he just doesn’t have much energy. It’s as much as we can do to get him to sit up in bed. I brought in a hospital bed yesterday, just so we could crank it up with Dad already in it. That seems to help his morale, anyway. Medications? His doctor’s tried all sorts of stuff, none of it seems to help and a few of them made him sicker.”

“Any strange rashes?” Oceanvine asked. “Is his mind clear? Any vivid, but disturbing dreams? Is anyone else in the household exhibiting the same symptoms? Any strange behavior?”

“Rashes?” Clemen echoed. “Not that I know of... Elie, do you know what this is?”

“I thought maybe...” she started. “No, I’ve had to deal with other cases of mysterious ailments in the last few years, but this is nothing like those. They were all terribly contagious. This sounds like some sort of wasting ailment. Did the doctor consider cancer of some sort?”

“Oh, it was his first guess,” Clemen informed her, “but all the tests came back negative. So far as he can tell, Dad’s body is just slowly shutting down.”

Oceanvine was not sure what else to say, so she changed the subject, “How’s Mom?”

“Healthy, but worried, of course,” Clemen reported. “It may be the first time she and Grandmother agreed on anything.”

“First and last, if you ask me,” Oceanvine remarked. “You know Grandmother won’t allow me to see Dad, don’t you?”

“Dad called for you, Elie,” Clemen told her. “You leave Grandmother to the rest of us.”

Two

Oceanvine opened the door to her parents’ room quietly, “Dad?” she whispered in case he had fallen asleep.

“Elie?” Earl Fredrik Jenynges responded weakly. “Please come in.”

It was dark in the room as the curtains had been kept drawn. “Does the light hurt your eyes, Lord Olen?” Sally asked softly from just behind Oceanvine. Oceanvine turned, unaware her apprentice had followed her.

“Not especially,” he replied. “I believe the curtains are shut because that’s what one does in a sick room. You may open them if you like.”

“Well, just in case I’ll try one at a time,” Sally promised.

“Thank you. Elie, are you going to introduce your friend?” Fredrik asked.

“Oh, sorry, Dad,” Oceanvine apologized. “This is Miss Sally Candleson, my apprentice.”

“Candleson...” Fredrik mused. “Ah yes, Tamollen’s daughter, is that right?”

“Yes, my lord,” Sally replied. “There, that seems a bit better. Is it too bright?”

“No,” he replied. “Why don’t you get the other window too?”

Oceanvine took a close look at her father. He was looking, if anything, worse than Clemen had described. His skin was pale and his cheeks sunken. If it hadn’t been for the fact that his mind and memory were still clear, she would have despaired completely. She knew it was a stupid question, but asked it anyway, “How are you feeling?”

“Tired,” he replied. “So very tired, but thank you for coming. I was not sure you would.”

“We’re family, Dad,” Oceanvine assured him. “Of course I would come.”

“But I have not always treated you as you deserved,” he told her. “I realize that now, but your grandmother has her prejudices, and I fear I learned them all too well at her knee. Thank the Gods His Majesty knows better. How is he, by the way?”

“His Majesty is hale and healthy,” Oceanvine reported, “or at least he was a few weeks ago when I last spoke to him. I haven’t heard otherwise.”

“Hacon Ancel is a wise man,” Fredrik noted. “He recognized the value of your accomplishments before I ever did. I’m sorry, dear.”

“It was your upbringing, Dad,” Oceanvine told him gently.

“Forgive your grandmother, dear,” he nearly begged. “She is merely being true to her own ideals.”

Oceanvine’s eyes hardened for a moment. “If only she would realize what her precious One Maiyim has become, Dad. It’s not the benevolent organization it once was. It wasn’t really that by the time she joined, but I doubt she ever realized it.”

“We all make mistakes, Elie,” Fredrik remarked.

“I know, Dad,” she nodded, “but we’re supposed to learn from them. I might never have known my great-grandmother because of her prejudices.”

“I never knew your great-grandmother, Oceanvine,” Fredrik replied.

“Dad? You called me...”

“Oceanvine, dear,” he smiled wanly. “It’s a good name and I’m glad you chose it. It reminds us all of who we truly are. I should probably commission a portrait for the hall.”

Oceanvine smiled. “I have a thaumagraph of Oceanvine and Silverwind when she was about my age. It’s in Randona, though.”

“We’ll use that as the model then,” Fredrik decided. He yawned and added slowly, “Forgive me, dear, but I need to rest a bit.”

“I’ll come back later, Dad,” she promised.

She turned back at the door to take another look. Then Sally pushed her gently the rest of the way through the door and closed it quietly.

“How is he?” Oceanvine’s mother, Erinne asked.

“He’s sleeping, Mom,” Oceanvine reported. “How long has he been like this?”

“Just two weeks, dear,” she replied.

“Two weeks? He looks like he hasn’t been out of that bed in a year.”

“I know,” Erinne sighed.

“Where’s Grandmother?” Oceanvine asked with a hard tone in her voice.

“Packing,” Erinne replied. “Your brother found a subtle way to suggest she should put in an appearance in court. Show the flag and all that. If you’re careful, she won’t see you before she leaves.”

“Perhaps I should take a walk,” Oceanvine considered. “Is that pub still down in the village? I like their chips.”

“It is,” Erinne replied, “but if you’re hungry you could try the kitchen. You know she never goes in there.”

“Maybe I’ll do both. Do me a favor and have the festival flag hung from the third floor rail after she’s gone,” Oceanvine requested.

“The festival flag?” Erinne asked.

Oceanvine chuckled, “Clemen and I used to use it as a signal. It was mostly for him, but how else do you think I know about the pub? Not exactly the sort of place Grandmother would have approved of.”

Erinne smiled. “Nice to know I brought you up so well, then.” There was a noise like someone walking around just upstairs. “Hmm, better take the servants’ passages to the kitchen, dear.”

“I would have anyway,” Oceanvine winked. “A better chance to run into old friends.”

She led Sally to the kitchen but the back halls were empty and they saw no one until they reached the kitchen itself. “My little Elie!” a cheerful voice greeted her. A large woman dropped a wooden spoon on the counter and rushed to give Oceanvine an almost bone-crushing hug. “All grown up. We’ve missed you, we have!” Two maids in the kitchen got to their feet as well.

“Hi, Sella,” Oceanvine gasped in the woman’s strong grasp. “I missed you too.” She greeted the other two women in a similar manner and introduced, “and this is Sally, my apprentice.”

“So are you a wizard like your great-grandmother yet?” Sella asked. “You two look too thin. I’ll fix you something. Wizards must be too busy to eat, I guess.”

“Not a wizard yet, but I’m working on it,” Oceanvine told her. “Wait, how did you know about my great-grandmother?”

“Clemen told us, the dear,” Sella replied. “We all chipped in for the medal he promised to leave on your great-grandparents’ grave. He didn’t forget, did he?”

“No,” Oceanvine recalled. “I saw him do it at Uncle Candle’s funeral.”

“Yes, poor Candle,” Sella sighed. “I knew him when he used to visit your mother’s father. I think they had some sort of business together. He was always very nice to the kitchen staff, just like you, and had coffee with us most mornings. Here, honey,” she added giving both Oceanvine and Sally cups of coffee heavily laced with cream and sugar.” Now what would you like to eat?”

“A salad, perhaps?” Oceanvine suggested hopefully. She knew better. Sella would never let her get by with a mere salad as a meal. Eventually they settled for huge bowls filled with quahog chowder with thick, crusty slices of bread.

“I’m not going to lose weight here, am I?” Sally asked. Oceanvine laughed and shook her head.

“Now where’s this young man of yours?” Sella asked.

“You heard about my wedding too, I take it?” Oceanvine asked. “Clemen again?”

“Your mother, bless her heart,” Sella replied. “She showed us the pictures.”

They continued to chat until Oceanvine and Sally managed to finish their bowls. Then, when an order for a meal for Countess Myrrha arrived, the two mages excused themselves and left by the manor’s servants’ door.

“We’ll take the shortcut into the village,” Oceanvine told Sally. “I used to like walking this way all the time. It takes us past quite a few of the renters; farmers who work the land, and Dad’s gamekeeper’s cottage.”

“Sounds like something out of the Age of Faith,” Sally commented.

“No, back then the renters would have been serfs,” Oceanvine disagreed. “These are free people, mostly dairy farmers, actually, who rent the land they live on. They don’t pay Dad anything beyond the agreed-on rent. Their products belong entirely to them.”

“Tell me, though,” Sally asked, “are most noble girls on such friendly terms with the household servants?”

“I am,” Oceanvine replied. “Some are, some aren’t. I think mostly they aren’t, but I’ve always loved the people who work for us. They’re as much a part of my family as those related by blood. Some people don’t really see their employees as real people, I think, and sometimes fail to treat them as such. It has nothing to do with nobility. It must be the same at your Dad’s Inn.”

“You forget at the inn I’ve always been one of the help,” Sally laughed. “I was working there as soon as I was old enough to reach the table tops and make the beds.”

“There is that,” Oceanvine nodded. “Well, growing up, I would have traded lives gladly. Oh, hi, Mrs.Gardner!” she waved at a woman who was busily weeding her kitchen garden.

“Elie?” Mrs. Gardner asked. “Good Gods, girl, you’re looking good! Where have you been the last few years?”

“Long story,” Oceanvine replied. “Let us help you weed while I tell you.”

They spent half an hour with Mrs. Gardner, catching up on the last few years and then moved on again, stopping every so often to chat with people. One elderly man invited them in for a cup of coffee and another gave Oceanvine and Sally a basket of freshly picked peaches after they spent a few minutes helping him repair a section of fence. Finally, they made their way down to the village where Oceanvine continued to wave at and greet people.

“They make the best chips here,” Oceanvine told Sally as she entered the pub, a cottage-sized building with the arms of Olen county on the sign. She waved to various people, ordered two pints of bitter ale at the bar and joined Sally in one of the booths. “The chips will be ready in a few minutes.”

“I’m really impressed, Vine,” Sally told her.

“Huh? Why?”

“Well, I knew you were good people the moment we met,” Sally told her, “but I guess I never considered the environment you grew up in. The people here really love you, don’t they?”

“We get along, I guess,” Oceanvine shrugged, “but I’m the earl’s daughter.”

“No, that’s not it,” Sally told her. “They don’t call you ‘The Lady Elinor Jenynge.’ They don’t address you as ‘my lady,’ they call you ‘Elie.’ Everyone seems genuinely happy to see you. You help them weed their gardens, fix their fences and pass the time of day. In short, you aren’t just the landlord’s daughter to them. You’re a friend.”

“Well, I guess,” Oceanvine shrugged uncertainly.

“I don’t have to guess, Vine, I can see it for myself,” Sally told her. She reached out and squeezed Oceanvine’s hand for a few moments. “I’m glad you’re my master! Best decision I ever made, probably the best I ever will make.”

“You’re young yet,” Oceanvine laughed, trying to break the mood. She suddenly understood why Uncle Candle had always seemed to make everything a joke, at least everything that wasn’t really deadly serious. It was a defense mechanism; not against the people around him, but to keep his own head from swelling like a balloon.

“That’s usually followed by, ‘plenty of time to make mistakes,’” Sally pointed out.

“It’s also plenty of time to make great decisions,” Oceanvine told her and was spared from having to continue the conversation by the arrival of their fried potatoes.

Three

As they left the pub, Oceanvine glanced toward the manor and saw the festival banner had been draped over the rail as she had requested. “Neat trick, that,” Sally remarked as they walked back uphill.

“I used to do that for Clemen whenever he wanted to sneak out to see one of his local girlfriends,” Oceanvine explained. “If the banner was there, he knew he had to sneak back in through the servants’ door or risk getting caught by Grandmother or Dad.”

“They would have worried about that sort of thing?” Sally asked curiously.

“Dad would have let it go with a quick lecture on proper behavior,” Oceanvine explained. “This isn’t the Age of Faith and Clemen does not have the right to sample the local girls as it were, though I really don’t think he was doing anything beyond normal teenage dating. The village girls did think he was cute too, so that helps. Grandmother, however, would have decided that if Clemen was old enough to date, he was old enough to be married. Even at the age of fifteen she was trying to arrange marriages for him – both of us really, but Mom and Dad stopped her. They wouldn’t hear of such a thing until we’d been to college. It may have been the only point at which Dad refused to be influenced by Grandmother.”

“I only knew one of my grandmothers,” Sally commented. “Grandma Jillanda died before Dad was even married.”

“You can have mine,” Oceanvine told her.

“Um, no thanks,” Sally laughed.

Oceanvine split the rest of the day visiting with her brother and parents, but the next day she spent the entire morning keeping her father company. He could only stay awake for a few minutes at a time, but she had Uncle Candle’s book with her and a notebook of her own, so there was always something to do.

Sally brought them both something for lunch and decided to stay and visit since the earl was awake at the moment. “Your father keeps a very good inn, Miss Tamollen,” he told Sally.

“Thank you, my lord,” she replied politely, biting back a correction of her name. Technically, she supposed the address was not incorrect, but she had grown up with the surname Candleson and that was how she thought of herself. Oceanvine had used her family’s name, Jenynges, not the county, after all. Then she decided it could well be that the earl was more likely to remember the name of her father’s barony and decided to let it go. She would be using a mage name soon enough anyway.

“It’s a shame it will still be sometime before he can sit in Parliament,” Fredrik continued. “He seemed a sensible man to me and we could use one or two like that in the House of Lords.”

“I can see that Vine gets her view of politics honestly,” Sally chuckled.

“I probably am at fault for that,” he admitted. “It is not easy to attend each and every session and yet still not be heard by my fellows.”

“Really?” Sally asked. “Helm and Maia tell me you’ve become one of the leading voices among the Lords.”

“Very recently only,” Fredrik admitted. He looked around and saw his daughter deeply involved in writing something down and whispered. “I think I have Elie to thank for that. Had she not become one of the King’s favorites, I doubt my voice would be heard even if I showed up with a megaphone.”

Sally smiled, "And all she has to do is tell His Majesty he's wrong."

"Wrong? About what?"

"Anything, I gather," Sally replied. "Evidently the first Oceanvine never failed to correct him when she disagreed with whatever he had on his mind, so he asked Vine to do the same for him. I don't imagine a king talks to many who will do that."

"Even His Majesty needs some perspective, I suppose," Fredrik sighed. "It's a shame I did not know my grandmother." It was an echo of her earlier conversation and before Sally could think of something to say, Fredrik was sleeping again.

Sally looked at the ailing earl. From what she had heard, none of the tests had found anything wrong with him, and yet here he was, dying. Without consciously trying, she found herself checking his aura and got a shock. Instead of one nimbus of pale light surrounding Oceanvine's father, there seemed to be two and they were flickering, sort of as though each one was trying to be the only aura he had.

"Vine?" she called softly. "I think there's something wrong here. Did you check your Dad's aura?"

"No," Oceanvine admitted. "That always feels like such an invasion of privacy and... oh. I see what you mean. This is very wrong. Let me see. Ah yes. See this little whipping bit that goes back and forth. It's a sort of, well rudimentary isn't the word really since it's fairly new to magic."

"Vestigial, perhaps?" Sally suggested.

"Yes," Oceanvine nodded. "It's a vestigial spell string. It's a thin thread of energy by which a mage could pass 'instructions' or programming, if you prefer, to a spell. Well, you know about strings and how they connect two objects via what the ancients referred to as the Property of Contagion. They were wrong about Contagion lasting forever, of course. It's more of a special case, but this is how most spells work.

"Somebody put a curse on Dad," Oceanvine continued. "It's not a Bond of Aritos curse, thank the Gods, but this would have killed him had you not spotted it. Anyway, it used to be that almost any spell that was not self-contained would leave a spell string leading back to the source, usually the mage who cast it, but it could be an amulet like the ones I researched for my thesis. These new spells have only this small vestigial string. We first noticed them being used by One Maiyim, but Uncle Candle quickly figured out how to do it. Originally, we thought they had no strings at all, but we just weren't noticing these vestigial traces is all.

"There!" Oceanvine concluded. "That's gone. Now maybe Dad can start to recover."

"Hmm," Sally remarked thoughtfully, "Let me try something."

"What?" Oceanvine tried to interrupt, but Sally was already at work. The younger woman placed her hands on Fredrik's face and allowed a delicate surge of energy to flow into him. When she took her hands away, the earl's aura appeared much healthier and he was breathing deeper than he had before. "How did you know how to do that?"

"It just seemed right," Sally replied.

"Well it seems to have done something," Oceanvine told her. "Let's get the doctor in here to have a look

for himself.”

An hour later, they were in the kitchen for an early tea. “I’m very impressed, Sally,” Oceanvine told her apprentice around a piece of pastry. “You seem to have a natural talent for healing spells.”

“I didn’t do so much,” Sally replied modestly.

“Actually, you did,” Oceanvine disagreed. “You very quickly and gently replaced a lot of Dad’s vital energies and gave his own system’s recovery mechanisms a kick start. I’ve never had more than an average aptitude with healing. I wouldn’t actually kill a patient, but I doubt I could have done what you did without a fair amount of coaching. Methis was right.”

“She’s a goddess,” Sally laughed. “I imagine She is right about a lot of things.”

“She was right in that you should be considering your mage name. It really isn’t too early,” Oceanvine told her.

“Everyone seems to want me to choose a new name,” Sally laughed again, then got abruptly serious. “Vine, I haven’t found one I liked yet and I think mage names are a bit like getting married. They’re supposed to be for life, so if you don’t mind, I’ll take my time before jumping into that particular commitment.”

“It’s your name, kiddo,” Oceanvine told her fondly. “I just think it’s time you thought about it. Evidently you have been and that’s good enough for me. I didn’t just jump into the name Oceanvine either, so I’m not going to push you on this. Okay?”

“Okay,” Sally nodded. “I just don’t like feeling rushed.”

“I’ve noticed that,” Oceanvine remarked. “Is that why all your term projects were done a week early?”

“Um, yeah,” Sally grinned. “That and because it really annoys ‘Tawa when I do it.”

“Leotawa is another very good student,” Oceanvine noted, “but I get the impression he likes to wait until the night before a project is due.”

“Uh, that would be telling tales, I think,” Sally grinned again.

“That, I think,” Oceanvine mimicked her, “tells me more than enough to let me know I was right.”

“Thought it might, Vine,” Sally nodded, “but so long as he gets the work done, isn’t that enough?”

“Technically, but when he gets out of school he’ll find that sort of behavior can cause more problems than it solves,” Oceanvine lectured. “Do him a favor this year and see if you can push him into starting his projects a little earlier. I think if you get Misana to help you, he’ll turn around soon enough.”

“If Misana batted her eyelashes at him, he’d turn the world inside-out just to get her to do it again,” Sally laughed.

“And how about Balance?” Oceanvine asked. “I get the impression he is living up to that name.”

“Oh yeah!” Sally agreed. “Balance is a year ahead of us officially, but since we all started at University at

the same time we think of him as being in our class. He's very good at keeping us all from letting our enthusiasms get the better of us. That's especially important in 'Tawa's case. He came close to burning down or blowing up the dorm a few times last semester just because he thought he had a good idea. Balance has learned how to sit on him until he's thought his ideas through."

"I notice you call Leotawa by his nickname, but not Misana," Oceanvine observed.

"Merinta believe that to change a name is to change the person. She tolerates 'Tawa when he calls her 'Sana, but I know that deep down it bothers her a bit, so I don't do that," Sally explained. "I'm not sure if she will take a mage name at graduation or not, but then she's planning to go on to law school anyway, so maybe not."

"Everything she does is for her people, isn't it?" Oceanvine remarked. "I met quite a few Merinta when we sailed through their archipelago. Nice people, very hospitable. They really work together as a community. Did you know they are a single tribe, but with four sodalities?"

"Uh huh!" Sally nodded and took a sip of coffee. "Misana is a Turtle. Her culturally preferred marriage would be to a man in the Porpoise clan, but she may marry a Hawk or a Monkey if that suits her. She just cannot marry another Turtle because that would be like marrying her brother."

"I understand a lot of Merintan kids don't hold by that anymore," Oceanvine remarked. "What you're describing is called the anthropological present – the way the people were when first described."

"Misana is from one of the more isolated islands. They are still very traditional there," Sally explained. "If you ask me, it's amazing she did something as radical as ever leaving to come here. I'm glad she did, though. I couldn't ask for a better roommate."

Five

Fredrik was up and able to join the family at dinner that evening, but the next morning he suffered a relapse. "The curse is back," Oceanvine noted even as she dispelled it once more. "We had better check this room carefully. Whatever is causing this must be in here with us."

They helped the earl move into a guest room and then came back to conduct an extensive search. Clemens tried to help, but Oceanvine stopped him. "I don't know what's causing this," she explained, "but you may be susceptible too."

"And you aren't?" Clemens asked acidly.

"I probably am," Oceanvine admitted freely, "but I'm trained to look for such things and you are not. If you want, I'll give you a few lessons and then next time..."

"Better there should not be a next time," Clemens replied quickly.

"Naturally," Oceanvine nodded. "I know you want to help, Clem, but right now the best thing you can do is keep anyone else from coming in here. Please?"

"All right," Clemens finally agreed, "but I guess I'd better start learning how to levitate a rubber ball."

They searched the room for several hours before finding the root cause of the curse in the suite's sitting room. "Look at this vase," Oceanvine instructed Sally.

"The vase is carrying the curse?" Sally asked after a moment.

"Or something in it is, and look around the flowers. See how the curse is all integrated into the scent," Oceanvine told her.

"Then why didn't we all get sick?" Sally asked.

"The scent is not very strong in this sort of blossom," Oceanvine explained, "so the reach of the curse does not go very far, but when Dad's healthy he likes to start his morning by taking a sniff of the fresh flowers that are brought into the sitting room. When he was ill, the flowers were brought into the bedroom, but since he recovered I guess they came back out here."

"So someone knew about his habit of stopping to smell the flowers?" Sally asked.

"Perhaps, or maybe they expected smellier flowers to get everyone sick," Oceanvine conjectured. "I don't know, but let's take this apart and see how it's happening. No, not with your hands. Allow me."

Oceanvine used just a trace of concentration to telekinetically lift the flowers from the vase and place them in a nearby wastebasket. "That probably wasn't necessary since the maids were probably pulling them out by hand every day as they changed the flowers, but you can't be too careful. This vase is new, I think. I wonder where it came from."

"I can't see anything special about the vase," Sally remarked. "Maybe it's the water inside it?"

"Could be. Let's take the flowers and vase outside and we'll give them a thorough going over," Oceanvine suggested. They picked up the items and left the suite, running into Clemen just outside.

"Find something?" he asked anxiously.

"No, we just decided to take up floral arranging," Oceanvine snapped, before instantly apologizing. "Sorry, Clem, I guess it's all getting to me a bit. I think it's safe to let Mom and Dad have their rooms back now though."

"What caused it?" he asked.

"Not sure yet," she admitted, "but it had something to do with this vase and the flowers in it. Where did this vase come from. It's not one of the antiques, I can see that."

"Vine, I'm a guy," Clemen laughed. "I don't keep track of vases or new shoes or things like that."

"I just thought it might have come from a florist and then got reused," Oceanvine explained.

"Ask Mom or the maids," Clemen suggested. "They may know."

"I will," Oceanvine nodded. "Just as soon as I figure out what's going on and how to stop it permanently."

It was raining as they got outside, so Oceanvine brought Sally to the green house where Mahten the

gardener was working on the sprinkler system. "Hello, Elie!" he greeted her familiarly as all the other servants did. It reminded Oceanvine of the conversation she had with Sally in the pub. "It's about time you came to visit old Mahten."

"You're not that old, Mahten," Oceanvine laughed. "I'm fairly sure Mom and Dad are older. Do you know where these flowers came from, by the way?"

"The gladiolas?" Mahten shrugged. "From the garden. We have a large bed filled with them. You know how your mother likes the pink ones. I've been planting the corms every two weeks so we'll have them fresh right up to frost."

"Hmm, I may have to go take a look. Do you have a basin we can use for a few minutes?" she asked.

"Of course," Mahten nodded. "Help yourselves to anything you can find in the workshop."

"Thank you, Mahten!" Oceanvine told him brightly.

They emptied the water from the vase into the basin and quickly dispelled the vestiges of the curse from both the water and the flowers Sally had been carrying. "Still either the vase or something in it," Sally noted.

"What's left in it?" Oceanvine wondered.

"A bit of water, maybe?" Sally suggested.

Oceanvine concentrated a moment to dispel the curse from the vase and its contents. "Something still in there is resisting me," she announce and up-ended the vase completely. A small golden coin fell out and plopped into the water. They watched the curse begin to spread through the water once more. "Interesting," Oceanvine noted sourly.

"You sound like Granddad," Sally laughed.

"I guess he taught me well then," Oceanvine remarked, not taking her eyes off the water. Once more she dispelled the curse and watched as it spread out from the coin, swirling through the water on its currents. She concentrated on keeping the curse dispelled and then telekinetically plucked out the stopper that had been holding the water in the basin. The water that drained out was clear of the curse, but the gold coin continued to pulse angrily at the bottom of the sink.

"Can't you dispel it?" Sally asked.

"It's a tough one," Oceanvine replied. "Let me think. Uncle Candle's book mentioned something about this sort of thing. I read it back at Methis' Forge, but he was talking about how to make a spell harder to dispel."

"At least it's not the Bond of Aritos," Sally commented.

"Well, no..." Oceanvine stopped. "How would you know? I've intentionally not taught you about that yet."

"Well, first of all, you didn't tell me to stop looking at it," Sally replied. "Even Granddad warned me about that, but as it happens Methis gave us all some training along those lines just last week."

“She did?” Oceanvine asked. “I missed that.”

“I think you were working on a creation exercise out in the yard at the time,” Sally told her. “You’re getting very good at that, even Aritos was impressed, but then he laughed and said that Oceanvines always found ways to impress him. Anyway, we learned how to identify each type and how to defend ourselves against them. In theory we know how to combat and dispel them too, but we had to promise not to try unless there was no alternative or if you or Six gave us permission.”

“Thank the Gods for that,” Oceanvine remarked. “Oh, I have it now. It is similar to dispelling the Bond. Oh heck, I need my staff for that and I left it on the boat.”

“Use something else,” Sally suggested, looking around that gardener’s workshop. “This pitchfork, maybe?” She held up the indicated tool.

“Um,” Oceanvine considered the matter. She didn’t really like using a pitchfork as though it was a staff, but it was no better or worse than a shovel or a hoe. “Okay,” she finally decided, but called, “Mahten?”

“Yes, Elie?” the gardener answered.

“Would we have something, a tree branch or a pole, hanging around that could be turned into a staff?” she asked sweetly. “You know, like the ancient wizards used to use?”

“There are a few trees I’ve been meaning to prune,” Mahten considered. “I could probably find a branch that would be about right. How long would you want it?”

“About my height,” she replied, “more or less, and something I can grasp firmly, but comfortably.”

“Will ash wood be acceptable?” Mahten asked.

“Ash would be wonderful and very authentic, in fact,” Oceanvine replied. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, my little wizard,” Mahten told her fondly. He picked up a few tools and set off immediately.

“I should have asked for one for you too,” Oceanvine realized.

“You haven’t shown me how to use a staff yet,” Sally pointed out.

“Methis didn’t show you?” Oceanvine asked.

“Was she supposed to?”

“Well, maybe not, but I was using a staff before I could reliably translocate something,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“I like Methis a lot,” Sally told her, “but I get the impression she doesn’t like working from an established syllabus.”

“You have that right,” Oceanvine laughed. “She pretty much teaches whatever strikes her fancy. Well, I guess we’ll make the use of staves part of the lab sessions this semester, but in the meantime there will be

no harm in giving you a head start. The whole point of a staff is to give you a convenient object in which you can keep an emergency reserve of energy. However, it can also be used as a repository for the energy you siphon off a spell you are attempting to cancel. Since this pitchfork is entirely uncharged, it is actually optimally suited to the purpose, as silly as it makes me feel to use it this way. So what I'm going to do is siphon power from the cursed coin and into the staff."

As Oceanvine went to work, Sally asked, "Is the coin a form of amulet?" Oceanvine's master's thesis has been on amulets.

"Not really," Oceanvine explained as she monitored the slow energy flow from the coin and into the pitchfork. "An amulet stores a spell held inactive until invoked. This is an active spell that is attached to the coin. The coin is behaving like a battery for the spell. It has a store of energy and the spell is using it as a power source."

"But could it have been an amulet originally?" Sally asked. "Could it have been inactive until placed in the water, perhaps?"

"It may have been," Oceanvine told her. "Probably was, come to think of it. Why?"

"Well, aside from you, who else knows how to construct an amulet?" Sally asked pointedly.

"Uncle Candle could have," Oceanvine replied, "and there's Six and I don't see any reason why you couldn't by now. I suppose we should add that to next year's curriculum too."

"And who else knows how?" Sally prompted her.

"Methis and the other gods, of course," Oceanvine replied, noting the energy reserves in the coin had been completely drained and the curse was now dissipating. "But I guess the reason Uncle Candle and I were so interested in knowing how it was done is that the mages of One Maiyim had been using amulets of one form or another for..." she trailed off and belatedly added, "decades."

"Yeah," Sally nodded. "I think they may have been behind this one too."

New Querna

One

"Ready about!" Sextant called over the rising wind and driving rain. He waited until Balance and Leotawa signaled their readiness and gave the next command. "Hard alee!" he spun the wheel around and brought the *Maiyim Bourne* directly into the wind. "Strike the mainsail!" he ordered and the two younger men pulled the sail down as fast as they could. "Good! Now deploy the sea anchor!"

Leotawa rushed to the bow and pushed the large sailcloth sea anchor overboard. Balance was right behind him and together they observed the anchor filling with water. "Good thing we had this ready to go before we dropped the mainsail," Leotawa remarked as they double-checked that all the lines had been properly attached by their snap shackles.

“If it hadn’t been, you would have thrown away our sea anchor, old man,” Balance replied dryly. Behind them, Sextant was furling the sail. They rushed to help him and then, as a large wave washed over the bow of the boat, they jumped down into the cabin and secured the hatch behind them.

“Just our luck to get caught in a hurricane,” Leotawa remarked.

“This is no hurricane, ‘Tawa,” Sextant replied. “We’re too close to the equator for an organized storm. This is just a bit of wind and rain.”

“With twenty foot swells,” Leotawa added.

“It is a bit choppy out there, isn’t it?” Sextant asked jovially as a wave washed over the entire boat. “Nothing to do until this blows over. Don’t worry; I’ve been through worse than this. Try not to look out the port holes. It won’t seem as bad.”

“And if we start feeling seasick, there’s always the medicine chest, right sir?” Balance asked.

Sextant smiled. A part of him always wanted to tell the serious-minded Granom, “‘Sir’ is what you call adults,” but then he would remember that he had constantly called Wizard Candle ‘Sir’ too. Of course, Candle had also tried to encourage him to be less formal, but that had been part of Sextant’s upbringing just as it had been part of Balance’s.

They took turns showering off the salt water and were soon all back in the galley in dry clothing. “I’m hungry,” Leotawa announced.

“That’s no surprise,” Balance remarked, smiling.

“I don’t eat *all* the time,” Leotawa replied defensively. It had become an old joke between him and his friends.

“No, you don’t,” Balance agreed, “but it does seem to be your default state. Whenever you reach a point at which you don’t know what to do next, you generally suggest we stop to eat. I never have been able to figure out how you stay so thin. If I had dinner every time you suggested it, my body could double for a beach ball.” Leotawa looked thoughtful at the comment. “But, go ahead, grab a pizza or something from the food box.”

“What do you want?” Leotawa asked.

“Just something to drink,” Balance replied. “A diet sweet seltzer, I guess.”

“Anything for you, Six?” Leotawa asked.

“I’ll hold off for a bit,” Sextant replied, “but thanks.”

“What’s that noise?” Balance asked a few minutes later.

“Wind and rain, mostly,” Leotawa replied around a mouthful of cheese and sausage.

“Not that,” Balance shook his head. “It’s a kind of scratchy wavering sound.”

They all listened for a moment until Sextant identified the sound Balance’s ear had detected. “It’s the

radio,” he told the students.

“The marine band set?” Balance asked, looking toward the bank of navigational equipment. “It sounds like it’s coming from somewhere else.”

“It is,” Sextant smiled. “It’s a special radio Vine decided to move into the master cabin.” He got up and was back a few seconds later with a simple-looking black box. The box had a speaker and two controls; volume and channel and appeared to be set to Channel One. There were only three other channels.

Six turned the volume up and they heard a woman’s voice, “...Seven. Six. Niner. Graday.” There was a brief pause, then she continued. “Niner. Six. Eight. One. Three. Four. Seven. Niner. One. One. Three. Five. Seven. Seven. Eight. Three. Zero. Zero. Two...”

“What are you doing, sir?” Balance asked when he saw Sextant staring at a piece of paper.

“Taking notes,” Sextant replied. “Artifice has been collecting these broadcasts for years.”

“Why?” Leotawa asked, but Sextant held up his hand to stop the questions while he worked.

Finally the series of numbers paused for a moment and then the voice concluded with, “Adamant. Niner, Seven. Bravo. One. Delta. Seven. Six. Niner. Graday.” That was followed by a trumpet fanfare that wavered a bit as had the voice, and eventually faded out rather than coming to an actual conclusion.

“I’ll radio this off to Artifice as soon as we make port,” Sextant told the other two.

“What was that?” Leotawa asked.

“A coded message, old boy,” Balance replied dryly. “The question is who is sending the message and to whom.”

“We would like to know what it means as well,” Sextant remarked, “but this isn’t my forte. So Vine and I and a few others send them to Artifice and he’s been working on translations.”

“Why do you keep calling Him that?” Leotawa asked. “We know His real name is Aritos.”

“Yes, but very few others do,” Sextant replied. “You’ll find that using his real name as a matter of course is not a good idea, especially since most people also think He is the ultimate evil.”

“So you’re going to call him up from New Querna to send him this message, sir?” Balance asked.

“That’s right,” Sextant agreed, “except I plan to use the radio. We have a secure frequency we use to talk over. It used to be this one until whoever is making these broadcasts started using it.”

“Then why can’t you call him right now?” Leotawa asked. “Any pressing appointments?”

“Not even lunch in the faculty lounge,” Sextant laughed. “Sure.” He turned the channel control to number four and went back to the cabin to get the microphone that went with the set.

“Why did you move this to your cabin?” Balance asked.

“Vine felt it would keep you guys out of trouble,” Sextant replied. “Talking to the Gods is something

most of us only do in temples, you know. And if we had it out in the usual place, you might get curious. Wenni, especially doesn't like to be disturbed without good cause."

"You could have just told us about it," Leotawa replied.

"There were so many things to tell you about, Vine figured this radio could wait until we'd been at sea a few days," Sextant explained. "And of course, we weren't at sea for more than a few hours."

"Oh, that makes sense, I guess," Leotawa admitted.

Sextant picked up the microphone and spoke into it, "Sextant to Artifice. Come in Artifice."

He kept that up for a few minutes until Methis replied, "Good afternoon, Six. Artifice is in Midon today. Can I help you?"

"We intercepted another numbers broadcast," Sextant replied. "Just a few minutes ago."

"Did you get the whole thing?" She asked anxiously.

"Unless the preamble was different than the tag at the end, yes," Sextant told her.

"Good I missed most of that one, unless there were two going on at once," Methis admitted. "Okay, I'm ready to take notes, shoot."

Sextant read his notes to her as clearly as he could and finally concluded with, "and that's it."

"Thank you, Six. This was a long one, wasn't it? We don't have many complete messages. So how's the trip home going?"

"We're stuck in the middle of a storm at the moment," Sextant reported.

"It can't be much of one if you're getting through as clearly as you are," Methis replied.

"I'm fairly certain it's just a bad squall," Sextant opined, "although I probably should have checked. The forecast didn't mention any major storms in this area."

"I don't suppose it will do any harm to admit you're in no particular danger," Methis replied. "Setting the sea anchor was a good idea and the storm will be over for you at least, by the time you wake up in the morning, dear."

"That's good to know," Sextant replied. "Thanks. I've been caught in stuff like this for days in the past. On a fishing boat it's dangerous. On this one, it's just boring. Well, they do say that boring on a long trip is at least safe."

"Very true," Methis agreed.

"And we do expect a nice quiet voyage home," Sextant continued.

There seemed to be a slightly too long pause before Methis replied, "Yes. Safe voyage," but Sextant decided his mind was playing tricks on him.

“Thanks,” he replied at last. “Sextant out.”

Two

“Ah! Back in the tropics!” Leotawa proclaimed as he stretched in the sun. The *Maiyim Bourne* sailed ahead of the wind with her colorful spinnaker catching the breeze like a pregnant banner. She was up on her foils and traveling as fast as Sextant reported he had ever seen her go. “I have to admit that I still haven’t grown used to winter in Randona and getting a second winter in Granom was a bit of too much.”

“Methis’ Forge is at the subtropical end of the island, old boy,” Balance pointed out. “It wasn’t all that cold there, you know.”

“It wasn’t all that warm either,” Leotawa shot back. “I grew up in this sort of weather.”

“I wouldn’t feel right if I didn’t see at least some snow each year,” Balance told him. “Right, sir?” he asked Sextant.

“I could live without it once in a while,” Sextant admitted from the helm. “You try fishing in a winter gale with the saltwater freezing to everything – the rigging, your clothing, your face and hands – and then try telling me how much you love winter weather. I remember one trip our boat came back with a coating of salty ice eight inches thick over most of the boat. I wasn’t on that trip, thank the Gods, but I’ve been out on trips when we collected an inch or two.”

“Brr!” Leotawa shivered in spite of the intense tropical sun overhead.

“Is that an island ahead, sir?” Balance asked. “Just to port of our bow?”

“I hope so,” Sextant nodded. “According to my sightings this morning, that should be Gan and if you’ll take another look, you should see Troba just to starboard of the bow. It’s nice to see I can still navigate with just a chart and a compass.”

“And the Loran doesn’t count?” Leotawa asked.

“I’ve been using Loran and the octant as well,” Sextant admitted, “but mostly just to verify our heading. For the most part I’ve just kept an eye on the compass. If the wind keeps up like this, I think we’re going to be able to make a grand entrance into New Querna harbor. In fact I think it’s time I radioed the harbormaster there. ‘Tawa, take the helm, please.”

“Gladly,” Leotawa replied, springing up from his sunning spot by the mast.

Even at top speed it took over an hour and a quarter to reach the mouth of New Querna’s harbor at which point they had to drop the spinnaker and raise a jib in its place. The harbor turned out to be much larger than Sextant had expected from a colonial port. “This may be larger than Keesport,” he remarked. “The city is definitely larger. I didn’t realize it was such a big city.”

“A lot of people have been moving here, sir,” Balance told him. “It’s predominantly a Granomish colony, but the colonists are coming in from all over the world and the population is as mixed as it is on the Isle of Fire. There’s a lot of opportunity here in the new islands and a lot of people are trying to cash in on it.”

“I really did not expect so many glass and steel skyscrapers,” Sextant admitted, “although on second thought, I don’t know why not. It’s not that different from Sutheria, although bigger... much bigger. I guess they really don’t do anything small in Granom.”

“Sure they do,” Leotawa added. “Their watches are small.”

“But with a big industry behind them,” Balance pointed out. “It is a big port, however. How do we know where to find our slip?”

“The harbormaster told me to look for a large white yacht with blue and brass trim with the name, *Wave Regis*,” Sextant told them.

“That name sounds familiar,” Balance remarked, “but I just cannot place it.”

They continued to sail up the long harbor, passing dozens of industrial wharfs, until they reached an island in the middle of the wide estuary that formed the harbor area. The city itself was thickest on the island, but there were many tall buildings on either shore as well. “Port or starboard?” Leotawa asked from the helm.

“Stick to starboard,” Sextant instructed him. “The harbormaster told me it was on the south side.”

“The south side of what?” Leotawa asked. “The river or the island?”

“Yes,” Sextant replied unhelpfully.

“There she is,” Balance spotted the *Wave Regis*. “That’s pretty large for a yacht, you know. Even a motorized one. Normally I’d call her a ship, she must have dozens of crewmembers, just to keep her afloat.”

“Who could afford such a big pleasure boat?” Leotawa asked.

“Ahoy, Six!” a deep voice called from over the *Wave Regis*’s gunwales. “Is that you, old man?”

Sextant squinted upward and thought he recognized the man hailing him from above. “Zak? What are you doing here?”

“I’m on Veras’ yacht, Six,” Earl Zakhar Arron shouted back. “What do you think I’m doing? Hey, dock just to our stern and I’ll be right down.”

The *Maiyim Bourne* looked ridiculously small when docked just astern of *Wave Regis* especially since she was the only small craft in this part of the harbor. “Are you sure we’re in the right place, sir?” Balance asked.

“Harbormaster told me to dock by *Wave Regis*,” Sextant replied. “Now I guess I know why.”

“Permission to come on board?” Zak requested while Leotawa and Balance were securing the boat to the wharf’s cleats.

“Jump on, Zak,” Sextant invited his friend and then introduced the two students.

“Delighted,” Zak told the two younger men. “So, Six, old man, what brings you to New Querna?”

“I was going to ask you the same thing,” Sextant replied, “In fact I think I already did.”

“Ah,” Zak breathed. “Well, it’s no great mystery. Veras is touring the colonies, out to watch naval maneuvers and in general showing the flag.”

“Naval maneuvers?” Sextant asked. “You do realize we’re half way to Emmine and Parliament has been rather nervous of late.”

“You know, I have noticed that,” Zak replied as though he had just gotten the joke, “That’s probably why we’ve been keeping the fleet to the north of Methis’ Chain. Anyway, Veras decided that if he was going to go walkabout, I might as well get a bit of exercise as well. Speaking of that, you’ve lost weight, haven’t you?”

“It’s all your fault,” Sextant told him. “You got me started with regular morning work-outs. Now I use the school gym every morning.”

“You look good this way,” Zak told him. “Glad I could help, old man. Now, I showed you mine, so why are you here?”

“Sailing from one place to another,” Sextant replied. “You remember Fireiron and Artifice, don’t you?”

“I was camped out in their house long enough,” Zak nodded. “Strange couple; I always got the impression I was missing something. But they were gracious hosts, I’ll give them that.”

“Well, we stayed with them for a few weeks,” Sextant told him. “It gave our students some new perspectives.”

“Hah! I’ll bet it did. Maybe it was just me, but could have sworn some of the rooms in their house kept moving around,” Zak admitted.

“Well, they are powerful mages,” Sextant reminded him. “Almost anything is possible. So Ksaveras is here too?”

“You didn’t think that tub was my boat, did you?” Zak laughed. “Come on, he doesn’t know you’re here yet. Let’s go surprise him.”

“Sure, why not?” Sextant shrugged. “You two want to tag along?” he asked Balance and Leotawa.

“I’ve never met a king,” Balance remarked.

“Just the crown prince and princess,” Leotawa amended.

They followed Zak to *Wave Regis*, but were distracted by several girls near the end of the dock who were skipping rope and chanting a poem or song of sorts. It was sing-song and oddly syncopated but seemed to go with the jumping they performed.

I have diamonds, I have pearls,
I am one of Oceanvine’s Girls!
Don’t you hurt me,

Cause no pain!
Or Oceanvine will return again!

“The heck?” Sextant asked amazedly.

“Oh that,” Zak shrugged. “It seems most of the girls all over Granom have been jumping to that one in the last few years.”

“Do they even know who Oceanvine’s Girls were?” Sextant asked.

“Who?” Leotawa asked as well.

“During the Counterrevolution, Oceanvine led nearly a brigade of women in defense of the kingdom,” Zak explained. “The original few had been local prostitutes whom Oceanvine had hired to scout out curse victims, but when the Wurra Palace fell, they and their friends joined with the more conventional military to fight for the Crown. I imagine these young ladies have heard of the heroes of the Counterrevolution, but perhaps not how they made a living previous to that.

“Almost none of them returned to prostitution afterward either,” Zak continued, steering them back toward the royal yacht. “There aren’t many prostitutes left in Querna these days and those you do encounter weren’t around back then. You remember Melondia and Columbine, Six?”

“I think they were the first two of Oceanvine’s Girls,” Sextant recalled.

“Right,” Zak nodded. “Well, now they run an employment agency in Querna and their employees, mostly former Girls, are considered the best in town. They used their profits and the rewards Veras gave them to set up an endowment fund for orphaned and abused children too. I suspect Querna is going to be a very different city from now on.”

“Well, good for them!” Sextant replied. “Give them Vine’s and my regards when next you’re in town.”

They had to climb a ramp up to the deck and then up an internal stairway until they reached a large room on the deck just below the bridge. The room took up most of the deck and had a fine view of the harbor. King Ksaveras was seated at a desk, with a dozen people, Granomen and Orenta, standing on the other side of the desk. Ksaveras appeared quite solemn until he spotted Zak and Sextant just beyond the others.

“Look what the catamaran dragged in, Cousin,” Zak announced.

“Sir Sextant!” Ksaveras rose from behind his desk. “What a marvelous surprise, old friend!” He took a few quick steps and swept Sextant up in a bear hug. Several of the people gasped at the king’s behavior, but Ksaveras must have been expecting the reaction. “This is a true hero of the kingdom,” he told the assembled, and if not for him I would not have been king today. You will all understand if I choose to spend the rest of the day with my friends here.” He didn’t wait for them to respond but immediately dragged Sextant aside and asked. “Is the Lady Oceanvine with you as well?”

“We came to Granom together, Your Majesty,” Sextant replied formally. Ksaveras had long ago given Sextant leave to address him informally, but while the room was starting to empty out. Sextant did not feel they were in private just yet. “But she was forced to fly back to Olen because her father had fallen ill.”

“Really?” Ksaveras asked seriously. “We must send him our best wishes for a speedy recovery. Zak, the Earl of Olen is your kin, is he not?”

“He is a fairly close cousin,” Zak replied. “Amazingly close considering we’re not even the same species and I see where you’re headed. I’ll make the arrangements. I could deliver it personally if you like. I’ve only met one of my human cousins after all, well two now that Six and Vine got married.”

“Yes,” Ksaveras nodded. “I am sorry I was unable to attend the ceremony, a fact both Zak and Ksanya seemed to delight in rubbing in my face.”

“Veras, I understand the problem was political in nature,” Sextant replied. “Maybe you can help us celebrate our anniversary sometime soon.”

“We can only hope,” Ksaveras nodded. Sextant went on to introduce Balance and Leotawa and the king greeted them as though they had been childhood playmates. “Well, since you’re here,” he turned back to Sextant, “what say you all have dinner with Orya and me this evening?”

“Better yet,” Sextant replied. “Why don’t you and Her Majesty have dinner with us on the *Maiyim Bourne* ? I’m sure you’ve heard the stories, after all.”

“Hmm, I have at that,” Ksaveras agreed, “but are you sure you have sufficient provisions onboard? I would hate to put you out.”

“Not only are we well-stocked,” Sextant laughed, but I would hazard a guess that our supplies are more varied than yours are.”

“That’s hard to believe on a normal-sized yacht,” the king replied.

“Then put me to the test,” Sextant suggested. “Come on over and if you order anything to eat or drink that I cannot serve, it will be a first.”

“Sounds like a challenge to me,” Zak noted.

“To me as well,” Ksaveras agreed. “Very well, Six. You’re on!”

“Zak, are you with anyone these days?” Sextant asked.

“I am, but the Lady Lenora stayed behind in Querna this time around,” Zak replied, “so I’m the happy bachelor this trip.”

“Oh, listen to him!” Ksaveras laughed. “As though he hasn’t been calling her every day just to hear her voice.”

“That reminds me,” Sextant told them, “I promised to call Vine when we made port.”

“Do it from here,” Ksaveras invited him. “We had a line run in for the duration of our stay here.”

“Thanks,” Sextant replied. “If you don’t mind I’ll do it now.”

“Be my guest,” Ksaveras laughed, “and after that I’ll be yours.”

Sextant had a bit of trouble convincing the overseas operator to place his call to Emmine, but after a few minutes he got through. “Hi, Vine! We’re in New Querna.”

“How was the trip?” Oceanvine asked.

“We ran into some stormy weather along the way,” he replied, “but otherwise it was uneventful. How’s your father?”

“Still weak, but on the road to recovery,” Oceanvine reported. “We still don’t know who did it, though.”

“Who did it?” Sextant echoed. “Was he poisoned?”

“Sort of,” Oceanvine replied grimly. “Cursed, but I’ll tell you about it when I actually know more. There’s not a lot you can do from where you are.”

Sextant caught a motion from out of the corner of his eye and saw Ksaveras waving. “Oh, Veras and Zak are here too – on tour, I guess. They say, ‘Hi.’” Even as he said that, someone came in and spoke quietly to the king.

“Give them both my love,” Oceanvine replied. “Oh, got to go. Sally and I are brainstorming. She says ‘Hi’ to everyone too. Love you, Six!”

“I love you too, Vine,” he replied and hung up.

“Everything all right, Six?” Zak asked. In the background Ksaveras dismissed the man he had been speaking to.

“The Earl is getting better,” Sextant replied, “but Vine thinks someone was trying to kill him. No, that’s all I know. Anyway, whatever the cause was, Vine’s working on it and as she pointed out, we’re too far away to help. She sends her love, by the way. Why don’t we collect Orya and settle down for the cocktail hour?”

“Orya’s still in town,” Ksaveras told him, “but I’ll make sure she knows to join us. Let’s go. At least there we’re likely to have some privacy. To tell the truth, I’m surprised we haven’t been inundated with more messengers in the last few minutes.”

“Is something up?” Sextant asked as they started back.

“As a matter of fact there is a small problem going on at the moment, but I am assured it is nothing to worry about,” Ksaveras replied. “That’s part of the problem. The more they go out of their way to assure me there’s nothing to worry about, the more nervous I get.”

“Well, really, old man,” Zak chuckled, “how often do people come to you to report there is no problem on an emergency basis?”

“What’s the problem?” Sextant asked.

“We’ll discuss it later,” Ksaveras put him off. “That’s something else I’d like privacy for.”

“How much privacy do you expect with Leotawa and Balance onboard?” Sextant asked. “I know you

wouldn't come to the *Maiyim Bourne* and ask my crew to leave."

"I'm not worried about privacy from your students, Six," Ksaveras replied, "it's just that I have to watch my tongue constantly. Back in Querna there are probably a hundred functionaries who might be running around the palace at any given moment, ready to misinterpret something, anything I say. Here there are at least a dozen or two. On your boat, I can just relax and say what I please, just as I might in my private chambers back at the Wurra Palace."

"I'd say better you than me, old man," Zak told him, "but it really isn't all that much better for me these days."

"You could visit one of our remote estates if you wanted to," Ksaveras replied.

"So could you," Zak retorted.

"Perhaps, but most of the court would follow me," Ksaveras shook his head.

"Not if you command them not to," Sextant advised.

"I could," the king agreed as they made their way down the ramp, "but these are mostly people who proved themselves loyal during the revolt. It would be cold courtesy on my part to dismiss them so readily."

"Then have Zak do it for you," Sextant advised.

"Huh?" Ksaveras grunted.

"Let him hint to those people every now and then that they could best demonstrate their loyalty by giving you a bit of breathing space," Sextant explained. As they reached the bottom of the ramp a long limousine with a convoy of police cars and motorcycles arrived at the wharf.

"That might work," Ksaveras nodded. "Part of the problem, you know is that I have far more direct control over my kingdom than Hacon Ancel does of Emmine. Our Parliament creates the laws, but we have the ultimate veto power. We also have direct control over the judicial system and the military. It's a lot for one man to control, but after the events surrounding the People's Party, we're not particularly eager to cede power to the other branches of our government."

"You're going to have to trust somebody sometime," Sextant pointed out, as Queen Orezhda exited from the limo. He bowed politely.

"I trust my family, Six," the king replied. "My darling!" he called to the queen. "We have been invited to dine with Sir Sextant and his students aboard the *Maiyim Bourne*."

Orezhda took an appraising glance at the men and gave them a quick, but knowing smile. "It looks more like I would be disrupting a boys' night out, dear. It's nice of you to ask, but I believe I'll take a, what's the phrase? I'll take a rain check on the invitation if you don't mind, Six."

"Of course," Sextant replied and stood aside to let the queen pass with her retinue.

"I really hoped Orya would join us," Ksaveras admitted a few minutes later once he had a glass of ale in his hand, "but she was looking tired. Hopefully she'll use this opportunity to get to sleep early. Goodals ,

by the way and I don't think I've had better *kamo* biscuits on Marga. How do you do it?" Sextant explained about the *Maiyim Bourne* and the food box. "So these really are gifts from the gods?" Ksaveras asked. "Remarkable. I know the old books said so, but I thought they improved the tales a bit."

"From what Candle used to say," Sextant laughed, "They were mostly complete fabrications. He was never certain whether Silverwind's first wife actually knew what the *Maiyim Bourne* really was, or if she had just been making it up and by coincidence wasn't too far off. She wasn't entirely correct though."

"So you cannot merely think of where you want to go and the boat takes you there?" Ksaveras asked.

"I think that would have taken all the fun out of her," Sextant replied.

They continued to make small talk throughout the meal. It was only later as they all sat around the galley smoking cigars and drinking whisky that Ksaveras brought his own local problem up again.

"You probably know that for the sake of peace," the king began, "I had all the nuclear weapons removed from Troba and Missabillon here in Methis' Chain years ago. Putting them here was a foolish mistake and to tell the truth the colonists were none too happy to have them in any case."

"Why did you think they were necessary in the first place?" Sextant asked curiously.

"Truthfully, I never liked the idea," Ksaveras admitted, "but they were a sop to my generals and admirals, all of whom were hold-overs from Grandfather's reign. They assured me installing the missiles here would be a strong statement of support for the colonies."

"They were a strong statement all right," Sextant agreed, "but Emmine was in a tizzy over it."

"I noticed, old man," Ksaveras replied dryly. "Even had I been too dense to notice, it was politely hammered into me by the twice daily visits from your ambassador and two or three special envoys. The round-the-clock bomber flights that traced a course just outside our territorial waters kind of got my attention as well. Well it was a foolish mistake on my part."

"In your defense, Cousin," Zak put in, "you hadn't been on the throne very long and had not yet realized that you did not have to let your Grandfather's ministers push you around. Sanya's been making nice-nice with Hacon Ancel for the last few years, though."

"Those ministers and generals did like to have their way though, didn't they," Ksaveras observed. "Isn't it amazing how many of them turned out to later join the People's Party?"

"So the whole nuclear missile base establishment was a ploy on the part of One Maiyim?" Sextant asked.

"So it appears," Ksaveras admitted. "None of this came out until after the Counterrevolution, of course. At the time of the missile crisis, it just seemed I was being advised to take an aggressive stance since Dad had never been well enough to, and you know I hadn't had much contact with humans aside from the various ambassadors."

"And Uncle Candle, of course," Zak added.

"Strange," Ksaveras mused, "I never thought of him as being human. He was just an old family friend

who came to visit every once in a while. Funny how your mind can play tricks on you like that. I mean he was obviously human, but humans were those people who live in Emmine and we didn't get along with them. I liked Candle, therefore I guess in my mind he was an honorary Granom."

"Well, he was the Marquess of Sentendir," Zak added.

"Marquess is a fairly high rank, isn't it?" Sextant asked.

"Just below the Dukes," Ksaveras agreed.

"Didn't it ever seem odd that Candle was given such a high title?" Sextant asked.

"Well, it belonged to Silverwind first. Great-grandfather gave it to him, I'm not really sure why. All mentions of the reason were erased from the records. It must have been something really big," Ksaveras admitted. Perhaps he saved Great-grandfather's life. That's why Candle was named Silverwind's successor by Grandfather."

"I think it must have been something more than that," Zak conjectured. "Something embarrassing, perhaps. You know both our grandfathers were born very late in the reign of Ksaveras VIII, and we have been encouraged to marry further outside the family than we used to..."

"Are you thinking there was a problem with..." the king trailed off.

"Inherited genetics?" Zak suggested. "Impotency? Maybe a bit of both. Doesn't seem to be a problem these days, though."

"Hmm, could be, I suppose," Ksaveras nodded. "Back then the king was expected to be near perfect."

"You still are, Cousin," Zak replied. He noticed his cigar had gone out and paused to relight it. "Something's wrong."

"I got the impression that's what you and Veras were leading up to," Sextant remarked.

"Not that," Zak told him. "Well, yes there is a problem, but what I meant was where's the smoke?"

"Smoke?" Sextant asked.

"From our cigars," Zak clarified. "Here we are; five men smoking cigars in a relatively small space. Why can't I smell the smoke?"

"Well, Vine and I don't normally smoke and neither did Candle, so I've never noticed before, but even when we've been caught in a storm at sea and had to close the hatches for a few days, the air in here is always fresh," Sextant explained. "Come to think about it, even after sitting all locked up in Gerry's warehouse for several decades the air inside was fresh."

"Is that possible?" Ksaveras asked.

"I would have to say, 'Obviously,' but if you want to know how, I'd have to think about it a while. Even then I might not figure it out. It doesn't seem to be a matter of keeping the air circulating, since the smoke doesn't seem to be moving very much."

“Oh, wow!” Leotawa exclaimed suddenly. The others turned to look at him and saw he had his eyes closed. “You ought to see this!”

“See what?” Ksaveras asked. “You sure you’re just smoking tobacco there, Or?”

“Hmm?” Leotawa asked, opening his eyes. “Oh you just have to look at the spells in this boat.”

“And how do we do that, my friend?” Zak asked. “Magic runs fairly thin in the House of Granova. I have no talent to speak of. How about you, Veras?”

“Never tried,” Ksaveras admitted. “It wasn’t encouraged, but then as you say, my line is not known for its magical aptitude.”

“There’s always been a tendency toward magic-nulls in the Granomish royal line,” Sextant explained. “Countess Ksanya is possibly the strongest magic-null person alive today. Of course she trained that ability in herself so she can control it most of the time.”

“We met her during freshman orientation,” Balance told him. “Maia was having lunch with her and invited us along and ‘Tawa ought to remember since he’s the one she demonstrated on, but I have to see what he is talking about.”

Both Leotawa and Balance closed their eyes to examine what was happening inside the boat but Sextant merely chuckled as the two students went silent. He took another puff on his cigar and explained, “They’ll probably be unresponsive for the next hour or so. I’m kind of surprised Leotawa came out of it at all. What they’re seeing is the spell complex that runs everything in the *Maiyim Bourne*. It’s a mesmerizing view the first time you see it, if you can. There are all sorts of little threads of energy pulsing all over the place, all interwoven and in many layers in such a way that you really can’t help but try to follow them and see where they all go in the hope of understanding how it works.

“What ‘Tawa saw at first, however, was the way the boat is treating the smoke,” he continued. “I’m not sure exactly what is happening either, It could be transmuting the smoke into fresh air or just translocating it molecule by molecule and replacing it with air from outside. I suppose it might be doing something else entirely, but I can’t figure out what it is. Fascinating to watch, though. Vine will be sorry she missed it, but I doubt she’ll be very happy if I start trying to fill the cabin with smoke for her.”

“Obviously she just doesn’t appreciate your efforts, old man!” Zak laughed.

“Women!” Ksaveras laughed in sympathy. “Good thing Orya decided to stay on *Wave Regis* this evening, but we do have a problem Six and I’m hoping you might be able to help out.”

“If I can, you have only to ask, Veras,” Sextant replied sincerely.

“Well, the problems here have really nothing to do with my early mistakes on the throne,” Ksaveras began again. “Have you heard about the new nuclear reactor we built outside New Querna?”

“I have,” Sextant replied, “and I even spotted the twin cooling towers a few miles to the north. Quite impressive looking. I’ve seen the plans for it too. They look good, but I take it not everything is performing up to spec?”

“Or perhaps it is performing a little too well,” Ksaveras replied tightly. “This reactor is a new design. If you’ve studied it as you say, you must know that.”

“I do and said as much to King Hacon Ancel,” Sextant replied. “I must say you have been remarkably open about the reactor and its design.”

“After the misunderstanding with the missiles, I wanted it well-known that this reactor could never be used for anything but peaceful purposes,” the king replied.

“No matter what we do,” Zak interrupted, “some jerk could think up a way to abuse the reactor or its products. I’ve told you that before.”

“Yes, you have,” Ksaveras replied tiredly, “but we can try. Six, the fuel is too reactive. I’ve called in all the best nuclear experts on Maiyim and what’s happening is completely beyond their experience. The levels of heat and energy being produced are well above and beyond anything our theories predict. All of them tell me what is happening is impossible, but, impossible or not, we are approaching a runaway reaction and none of the usual procedures are doing a thing to resolve the problem or even slow it down a little.”

“Inserting the control rods...” Sextant started.

“Only accelerates the process,” Ksaveras replied. “I know. Just the opposite of what is supposed to happen. Six, will you take a look into the situation for me?”

Three

“Are these cobalt rods you’re using as controls?” Sextant asked the nuclear engineers the next morning.

“That was our original plan, Sir Sextant,” Doctor Marovian replied, “but we decided on a new alloy of silver, indium and cadmium encased in a stainless steel jacket to avoid corrosion in the pressurized water.”

The control rods, as Balance had explained earlier to Leotawa, were used to moderate the reaction by controlling the neutron flux in a fuel element. They were constructed using materials that could absorb neutrons without fissioning. “With the control rod in the fuel element,” Balance told him, “they get in the way of the neutrons being emitted by fissioning uranium atoms and absorb them. Because of this fewer atoms are split and therefore there are fewer neutrons running around to cause fission, slowing the process down still more.”

“What are these rods made of?” Leotawa asked.

“There are quite a few elements that can absorb neutrons without fissioning,” Balance had replied. “Boron, cobalt and titanium are commonly used along with several rare earths and alloys and compounds of them as well.”

“Interesting alloy,” Sextant replied to Doctor Marovian.

“We found that its neutron capture cross-section was better suited to the fuel rods than the originally planned cobalt,” the engineer replied. “However something we truly do not understand is happening to the control rods. Instead of absorbing neutrons they appear to be emitting them instead.”

“Exactly what is the alloy you’re using?” Sextant asked.

Marovian hesitated to answer, but Ksaveras scowled and curtly instructed, “Tell him.”

“It’s mostly silver, actually,” Marovian replied nervously. “Eighty percent, actually, combined with fifteen percent indium and five percent cadmium. We’ve been calling it sil-in-ca.”

“Is that new?” Sextant asked, glancing around at the control room they were in.

“It’s been used before in the reactors in Kenda and on Ahler,” Marovian answered.

“And obviously it’s always been a neutron absorber before,” Sextant nodded not wanting it to sound like a question. “Well then, I can only assume the pellets in those controls rods are not sil-in-ca.”

“Then what do you think they are?” Marovian challenged.

“I haven’t the faintest,” Sextant replied, drawing a golden pen-like object out of his shirt pocket, “but that’s what it will be once I’m finished.”

In his hand the golden pen grew in size until it was the size of a quarterstaff. There was really no need for the staff to change size, but just as Candle had once explained, Sextant felt better to have the staff actually look like one when it was being used, especially when he was going to have to be extra careful. He started to concentrate on what he intended to do, but Doctor Marovian interrupted him.

“What are you doing?” the nuclear expert asked.

“Doctor,” Sextant told him firmly. “I am about to attempt one of the most difficult acts of magic imaginable. A century ago only a wizard would have even thought of trying it. We’re fresh out of wizards these days so I’m going to have to take my best shot. The job is all the harder because I cannot actually see what I’m working with. I’m going to have to use magic to see and feel around inside the core and that is going to take more concentration of will than most people ever see in a lifetime. Consequently I’m going to need to do with without any distractions.”

“So if you can’t keep still both physically and verbally for the duration,” King Ksaveras told the men firmly, “we are going to have to ask you to leave this room until Sir Sextant has finished.”

“Your Majesty!” Marovian protested. “Surely you cannot expect me to stand idly by while a dilettante magician pokes around in the guts of my reactor. The consequences could be disastrous.”

“Sir Sextant is not so uneducated as you seem to think, Doctor,” Zak cut in, “and frankly given how well you’ve done here so far, I’ll take my chances with the ‘dilettante magician.’ If you’re that worried, however, if you start running right now, you may have time to get out of range.”

“You have our leave to evacuate if you feel that would be safer, Doctor,” Ksaveras told him somewhat less harshly.

“I will stay in the facility, Your Majesty,” Marovian decided prudently. “My staff and I will monitor the reaction as Sir Sextant works.”

“All right,” Ksaveras replied, “but keep in mind that silence is essential. Sir Sextant, I believe you may begin now.”

Sextant nodded and sat down at one of the controllers' chairs and closed his eyes. Candle had always trained him to work magic without having to use the expedience of self-hypnosis, but even the wizard would have shut his eyes in a situation like this.

He relaxed and allowed his magical sense to reach out and down into the reactor core. Slowly and carefully he allowed his mind to make its way through the reactor core, differentiating the long, radioactive fuel rods from the ones that were supposed to control and inhibit the reaction. He took his time once he had identified his targets and then inspected the control rods. Through his magical senses he could sense the pellets inside their stainless steel jackets. He could feel the fission going on inside the control rods and knew his original guess had been an accurate diagnosis, but now it was time to do something about it.

He paused to remember the properties of silver, indium and cadmium and realized he was unable to remember the atomic number of indium. He opened his eyes and asked, "Does anyone have a periodic table handy?"

"What for?" Marovian asked.

"I need the atomic numbers and weights of silver, indium and cadmium," Sextant replied.

"Two hours of just sitting there and now you suddenly remember you need that?" Marovian asked incredulously.

"Well, I know silver, cadmium and indium are elements forty-seven, forty-eight and forty-nine respectively," Sextant replied calmly, "but I'll admit to being unclear as to the number of neutrons in the most common isotopes. I imagine that sort of thing could be critical especially since we're going to expect these metals to go on absorbing neutrons."

One of the other engineers in the room supplied Sextant with the numbers he needed and Sextant closed his eyes once again. Almost immediately the gauges in the room started settling down and settling back into more normal readings and by the time Sextant opened his eyes once more, several minutes later the reactor was once more functioning normally and cooling rapidly.

"That's better," he sighed, allowing the staff to shrink back down to pocket-sized.

"I don't understand," Marovian admitted. "Just what did you do?"

"I don't know how it happened," Sextant replied, "but whatever those pellets were in those control rods, it wasn't anything that could absorb neutrons safely. The stuff was undergoing fission almost as rapidly as the fuel. So, I transmuted it into sil-in-ca. Once that was done everything started to cool down."

"That really is impressive," Marovian agreed. "You can use magic to change any element into any other?"

"Just like the old alchemists tried to do," Sextant nodded, "but it isn't that limited. I can, should I choose, create anything. This rose, for example," He held out his hand and created a pink, long-stemmed rose and then set it down on the control panel. "Doctor, your reactor is a magnificent work of engineering, but nuclear fission is really quite pointless when compared to some of the alternative sources of energy we have at our disposal."

“Such as?”

“Such as what I can do with the power of my mind,” Sextant shot back. He pointed at a nearby table and after a moment brought a solid gold miniature carousel into being. “ $E=MC^2$, gentlemen,” he announced to everyone in the room, not just Doctor Marovian and his staff. “Magic follows the same physical rules as anything else. Would you care to pull out your slide rules and tell me how much energy I just used to create that?”

“Uh, we don’t use slide rules much these days,” one of the other engineers commented. “We have programmable pocket calculators.” Doctor Marovian pulled a long, but thin oblong box out of a belt holster to show Sextant.

“I’ve heard of those,” he admitted, “but most of my colleagues are still using slide rules. Are they really that much better?”

“Using one isn’t as fast until you get used to how to program it,” the second engineer explained, “but once you do, you really don’t want to go back.”

“I’ll have to pick one up,” Sextant commented as Marovian punched in a few numbers.

Next the Doctor lifted the carousel and commented, “For the sake of argument, I estimate this to mass approximately five kilograms.” He put it back down and continued to work, while talking, “Assuming we’re talking about complete energy to matter conversion that means it should represent very roughly... Holy Methis! One hundred twenty-five trillion kilowatt hours. How the heck...?”

“By magic,” Sextant shrugged. “A gift for the queen,” he added to Ksaveras. “My point is that this carousel did not come from out of nothing. In this case I used some of the excess energy in the reactor and probably a few random molecules from everything around us and probably a whole lot of photons, but mostly I drew off bits of the reaction mass. That was intentional. Normally I just grab at random mass from a long distance all around me, always being careful not to take from living creatures, of course. In a sense you could say it comes from out of thin air, but not from nothing at all. That’s how we do that trick, random borrowings from all around us, but when I concentrate I can choose to use a specific source.”

Just then an alarm went off and the engineers rushed back to their gauges. “The reactor is overheating again,” Marovian told them. “Are you sure you transmuted those control rods correctly?”

“Absolutely sure,” Sextant replied, pulling the staff out once more. This time he didn’t wait for it to gain its customary size before going to work. Knowing what he had to do, he wasted no time and once again transmuted the pellets inside the control rods into pure sil-in-ca. “Something is causing those pellets to transmute into fissionable material,” he told Marovian.

“That’s impossible!” Marovian told him disbelievingly.

“After my little demonstration,” Sextant waved at the rose and the carousel, “you can still say that?”

“You didn’t make the problem go away permanently, did you?” Marovian shot back.

“Proof in my favor, not yours,” Sextant told him coldly.

“Sir Sextant,” Ksaveras cut in. “Something appears wrong with your students.”

Sextant spun around to see both Leotawa and Balance gasping for breath and falling to the floor. Using the staff he quickly examined them and found the cause of their sudden illness. “Everyone stand back!” he shouted. “It’s the Bond of Aritos.”

Four

It was a far faster acting version of the curse than Sextant had encountered before and a part of his mind wondered how the students had just contracted it, but he also saw there was no time to wait. Without intervention, they would both be dead in a few minutes.

The Bond of Aritos was one of the most powerful and flexible curses on Maiyim and Candle had many opportunities to teach Sextant and Oceanvine how to resist and fight against it, so Sextant did not need to think about his approach. He had learned that one of the best ways to dispel the Bond was to draw energy out of it. Once the spell had no power source, it would collapse and its victims would recover. There were other, more specific and effective ways to combat the Bond, but most of them would kill a living victim.

The Bond had not been infecting the students for long and had not gained a very firm hold on them, fortunately, so Sextant had them cured in under a minute. “What happened?” he asked them as soon as they seemed able to talk.

“Looked down,” Balance croaked out.

“Into reactor,” Leotawa added.

“The Bond was in the reactor?” Sextant asked, mostly to himself.

“Is that what it was?” Balance asked, already sounding a bit better.

“Sorry,” Sextant apologized. “It appears I’ve been neglecting your studies. Wizard Candle always told us not to show students the Bond of Aritos because of the trouble they could get into inadvertently. Now I think I at least should have had you working on your defenses a bit better. Don’t try looking in there again.”

“No kidding,” Leotawa replied dryly. “Fireiron warned us about that sort of thing, but I guess we weren’t being careful enough.”

“Six, what’s happening in there?” Zak asked even as Sextant took a look for himself.

“This is the same curse, or at least in the same family of curses that we ran into from Lord Wallono and the People’s Party back before and during the Counterrevolution a few years ago. I’m afraid One Maiyim is back,” Sextant replied. “But for now I need to dispel this curse and it’s not going to be easy. I need to go outside for this, I think.”

“Why didn’t you see this curse for yourself on your first look?” Ksaveras asked as they rushed out of the control room.

“Two possible reasons come to mind,” Sextant replied. “First, I automatically shield my mind from such

things these days. My training was not particularly normal and I was exposed to the Bond only a few weeks after I started my training. However, I think the real reason is that the radiation seems to mask the Bond's characteristic spell signature. With all that energy and neutrons whizzing around down there, I just couldn't see the spell behind them.

"I realize now that somebody must have cast the Bond on the floor of the containment chamber, and possibly on the fuel rods themselves. Because the Bond was stirring up all that energy as well as transmuting the sil-in-ca into uranium or plutonium or whatever, I could only see the problem, not what was causing it. I only saw it now because I had temporarily calmed the reactor down, but Balance and Tawa haven't had my experience, nor have Vine and I taken the opportunity to train them in the necessary defensive techniques, so they pretty much walked into the trap.

"The good news, though," Sextant continued, "is that this variant is not particularly well adapted to people, so it was only trying to kill them."

"That's good?" Zak asked.

"It wasn't trying to spread to the rest of us first," Sextant pointed out. "Okay, I'm going to have to leave you here on the ground for a bit." Sextant immediately began to rise up and into the air until he was floating directly over the reactor, encased in an invisible ward he hoped would protect him from harmful radiation and yet allow visible light to reach him.

The roof over the containment structure exploded as he drew out the power from the Bond and funneled it through the staff. There was too much for the staff to hold on its own, so he used another trick of Candle's and allowed it to shoot upward in a display of fireworks. Meanwhile, however, the Bond was fighting back and even as he was taking energy from the Bond, it was powering itself from the reactor. He was going to have to shut the reactor down.

Wizard Candle, he knew would have simply invoked the Seal of Aritos, the sign that directly stood for the elder god it was named for, but Candle had been granted special dispensation by Aritos to use it. Sextant had never even discussed the matter with him, he was going to have to resort to transmutation once again.

Reaching mentally into the reactor, he considered both the fuel rods and the controls and instantly converted them all into harmless, but pure silver. Now he could see the Bond clearly. Without an external power source it was trying to transmute the fuel rods back into fissionable material, but it was a slow process and one Sextant now had no trouble interfering with. It took the better part of the next hour, but gradually, he drained the Bond of all its power and ensured it had been completely dissipated. Then he transmuted the control rods back into sil-in-ca and reformed the roof of the containment structure.

"I'll need to talk to Doctor Marovian," He told Zak and Ksaveras when he finally settled back down to ground level. Balance and Leotawa had joined them there. Sextant explained what he had done. "I didn't want to try recreating the fuel rods without knowing precisely how they were made. It may be safer to simply have new fuel rods made and installed, but if it is simple enough, I can transmute the pellets into anything he wants."

"Once again, you've done all Granom a service I can never adequately repay," Ksaveras told him.

"This?" Sextant shrugged. "It was nothing compared to the Counterrevolution. Let's call it a good deed in the name of friendship. You'd have done the same for me if you could, right? And you two," he addressed his students, "are going to get a crash course on the bond of Aritos and why you need to be

careful when playing with spells you don't understand, but that can wait until we're on our way home. I suppose."

"But I don't understand," Marovian admitted plaintively after Six had restored the fuel rods and the reactor was once more starting to heat up to a proper temperature to produce electricity. "What was wrong?"

"You have seen that magic is real?" Sextant asked. The nuclear expert nodded, "Well any maliciously cast spell is, by definition, a curse. This was something far worse than that, but it was still a curse. It was feeding off the power of nuclear fission in a sort of feedback loop which is why we were getting runaway results. It's also why you didn't have a problem at first. It took a long time for the curse to build up to the point at which a meltdown was imminent, but once it was there, it didn't take long to bring it right back up even though I had restored the controls to their normal state. Now that the curse has been removed everything should go back to normal."

"A curse," Marovian shook his head. "Sounds like something from out of the Age of Faith."

"Maybe we need a new, less sensationalistic term in this modern age," Sextant suggested, "but no matter what we call it; a curse is still a curse. Fortunately this one is over. Anyone else as hungry as I am?" he asked and then quickly added with a laugh, "aside from you, Tawa."

Olen

Six

"I don't really feel all that comfortable doing this, you know," Oceanvine told Sally.

"Come on, you know we have to," Sally urged her. "We've been standing outside your grandmother's suite arguing about this for five minutes. We found a curse that has all the earmarks of One Maiyim and she is the only member we know who has been anywhere in the vicinity."

"I know we have to search her rooms, but I don't have to like it," Oceanvine told her. "Would you go barging into your mother's room like this?"

"Probably not," Sally admitted, "but if Mom was a suspect you'd be urging me to do it. You have to admit that."

"No, I would probably go and do it myself," Oceanvine told her.

"So," Sally shrugged, "I'm just more willing to share the fun. I'd love to have seen what Grandma Jillanda's room looked like."

"My guess is sort of like Uncle Candle's, but from what I've heard, she wouldn't let him pile his books up in there," Oceanvine smiled.

"Oh," Sally sighed, then turned on Oceanvine. "There! You're doing it again. Changing the subject, trying to avoid this."

“What’s all the noise?” Clemen asked, stepping around the corner from the main hallway. “Oh, ho! Sneaking into Grandmother’s rooms? Count me in!”

“You’re not helping, Clemen,” Oceanvine told him.

“After all your defiance of her, Vine,” Clemen retorted, “this bit of privacy you’ll respect? I must remember this when it comes time to teach morality to my own children.”

“Oh, thank you so much,” Oceanvine growled, turned toward the door and opened it with such force it banged loudly as it hit the doorstop against the far wall.

“Careful,” Clemen chided her. “Next you’ll get Mom trying to figure out who’s making all the noise.”

“At the moment you are,” Oceanvine snapped at him.

“She used to be such a nice quiet child,” Clemen told Sally.

“Clemen,” Sally told him seriously, before Oceanvine could react, “I have at least a thin chance of being able to defend myself if I push my master too far. You’ll just end up extra-crispy.”

“Vine wouldn’t do that,” Clemen replied, then caught the look on his sister’s face, “but then I ought to have grown out of teasing my little sister by now. Sorry, Elie.”

“I’m just on edge, Clem,” Oceanvine told him. “Let’s just get this over with.”

“What are we looking for?” Clemen asked. “That old rubber ball of yours? Hey! I wasn’t there for the planning session for this little espionage mission, you know.”

“We’re looking for anything that might tell us where that cursed coin came from,” Sally told him.

“About forty years ago,” Clemen replied.

“What?” Sally asked.

“It came from about forty years ago,” Clemen repeated. “Forty-one actually. Do you think that’s significant?”

“Probably not,” Oceanvine shook her head, “Gold coins haven’t been minted for general circulation in thirty years or so. Why gold, though?”

“Is gold a particularly good medium to work magic with?” Clemen asked.

“If I’m getting paid with it perhaps,” Oceanvine remarked, finally starting to look around the room. The front room was not entirely unlike her own sitting room. It had older, more expensive furniture and the walls boasted framed paintings where Oceanvine’s room, unchanged since she had been in college, featured various posters. It was sparse and neat with no drawers or closets to search through. “As for storing a magical charge, a lead slug of the same size would be slightly better if not as pretty to look at. It’s all about the mass of the object.”

“Except for the Staff of Aritos,” Sally corrected her.

“It’s deceptively light,” Oceanvine admitted, “but I’m sure there is something beyond mere mass that gives it the properties it has. More likely it’s whatever spells Aritos put on it, and so far He’s refused to say.”

“Look at all the portraits,” Sally remarked.

“We’ve seen them,” Oceanvine told her. “These are the overflow from the main hall, but they’re all ancestors of one ilk or another. Your Dad’s Lord Tamollen, Miss Candleson. You may not have been born noble, but you are in the third generation of your now noble line. One day your family’s home will be littered with paintings very much like these.”

“I’ve noticed the really good-looking side of your family seems to be missing,” Sally pointed out.

“I have the only portrait of my great grandparents on my grandmother’s side,” Oceanvine replied. “You’ve seen it on my desk. Well, I doubt there’s anything to be found out here. Let’s check Grandmother’s office and the bedroom.”

They searched through an antique desk where they found a drawer filled with opened letters. “I should have known,” Clemen chuckled. “Everything has always had to be so neat for Grandmother. It should have been obvious she was a secret slob, I’ll bet her closets are as well organized as this desk.”

“I don’t think we’re going to have to find out,” Oceanvine told him, reading the letter on the top of the pile, “Dear Myrrha, I was sorry to hear of your son’s illness. The Gods are ever generous and I pray to them for his speedy recovery. Enclosed please find a specially blessed coin. If you place it at the bottom of a vase and then fill the vase daily with fresh flowers, the blessings of Nildar will facilitate the return of Olen’s health. As ever, Yr Servant, Lord Carna.”

“Sounds fairly straight forward,” Sally commented. “Who is Lord Carna?”

“There is no Lord Carna,” Clemen told her. “It’s a port town in North Horalia, not a barony or a county.”

“So someone is being presumptuous,” Oceanvine added.

“I imagine there must be a law against that,” Sally remarked.

“There are several laws against it,” Oceanvine told her, “but if this Lord Carna is who I think he may be, illegal presumption will be among the least of his offenses.”

“This doesn’t make sense,” Sally shook her head. “Your grandmother hates magic. Why would she use that coin?”

“The coin was purported to be blessed by Nildar,” Oceanvine replied. “More accurately, blessed by a priest on Nildar’s behalf. Priests have been doing that for centuries. I think it’s a religious scam, but I could be wrong. I’ve never asked and I suppose Nildar allows his priests to do that sort of thing, but I know Methis does not. However, She does keep her hands off religion unless someone does something She finds vile in Her name. All the Gods have been staying uninvolved that way.

“Anyway, Grandmother wouldn’t see a divine blessing as a form of magic,” she concluded.

“What’s the difference?” Sally asked.

“None that I can see,” Oceanvine replied, “but to Grandmother it is like night and day. Gods bestow blessings, only crass mortals practice magic.”

“But she has actually met Methis,” Sally argued.

“And Aritos, Nildar and Wenni, I’m sure,” Oceanvine agreed, “They all taught at the Renton School, I’m told.”

“And she’s the daughter of Silverwind,” Sally continued. “She must have known who they really were, didn’t she?”

“I don’t know,” Oceanvine admitted. “I suspect she didn’t. You know Methis prefers not to announce her true identity but to let people figure it out for themselves. Most never do. My great-grandparents would have honored that even with their only daughter.”

“Oh dear!” Sally gasped. “Do you think Methis might be angry with me for telling the others?”

“If She were angry with you,” Oceanvine told her, “you would not have to ask that question, though you might be wise not to tell anyone else. Just introduce her as your dear friend Fireiron.”

“Elie, did you say you had the only portrait of Silverwind and Oceanvine?” Clemen asked, holding a photograph in his hand. “Better make that the only intact portrait.” He handed the photo to Oceanvine. On it were the images of Silverwind and the elder Oceanvine when he was in his sixties and she was approximately forty-five years old. It had been ripped in half and then taped back together.

“Oh, that’s very sad,” Sally remarked, tears threatening to spill from her eyes

“Mmm, yes,” Oceanvine nodded. “I’ll bet she tore this in two right after she left Renton, but I wonder when she repaired it. Maybe this is the one that should be painted and hung on these walls.”

“You think Grandmother actually regretted walking out on her parents?” Clemen asked.

“On some level, it seems obvious,” Oceanvine replied. “Why else would she have taped it back together? But did she do it long ago? I don’t think it was more than a few years ago. The tape is too fresh.”

“I can’t imagine Grandmother regretting anything,” Clemen remarked.

“I can,” Oceanvine told him. “She’ll never admit it, especially to us, but I can imagine her having regrets. Well, I think we’ve invaded her privacy enough for one night. We found out what we came for. Someone sent her that coin. Now we need to figure out who he is.”

“That information could be in these other letters,” Clemen disagreed. “I’ll go through them and let you know what I find.”

“Elie?” Mahten the gardener called. The older man rarely entered the manor beyond the kitchen and looked quite uncomfortable. “I’m sorry it took me so long.” He held a staff in his hands. Unlike Oceanvine’s other staves, this one looked like something from out of a fairy tale. It was a bit longer than she expected, several inches longer than she was tall. Mahten had shoed the staff with a band of highly polished brass near the base of the staff, with just enough wood below the band to keep it from scratching a floor, but it was the finial on top that made this staff so different.

The wood of the staff was the warm golden color of ash, but Mahten had cut the staff and shaped it so that there was a large bulge at the top, but then he had carved the bulge into an intricate representation of Oceanvine’s personal heraldic arms. The carving was deep and two sided and the grain of the wood featured cleverly throughout. He had continued the masterful carving partway down the staff, ending just about where Oceanvine would naturally want to keep her hands so she could feel the warm smooth wood in her hand but enjoy the sight of the deep and complicated carving above.

“Will this do?” Mahten asked anxiously.

“Oh, Mahten,” Oceanvine told him even as she gave him a hug and a kiss on his cheek. “This is the most beautiful thing anyone has ever given me.”

“Oh it’s not so much,” Mahten told her modestly.

“Not so much?” she laughed. “Come with me.” She led him back outside and out to his cottage a little over one hundred yards behind the manor and behind a tall hedge. He had kept a modest flower garden there, but in her wanderings about the estate, Oceanvine had noticed one of the rose bushes there had died and not yet been replaced.

All the way there, she worked on charging the staff and while she knew the staff was not yet fully charged, what she intended did not really need it. She only wanted to use it, because now it would be appropriate. Standing before the blank spot in the garden bed, Oceanvine took a deep breath and then used the power she had stored in the staff and much more besides. A moment later a small rose bush appeared in the bed. She concentrated a bit more and the bush grew until it was three feet high and in bloom. She had never seen a rose quite like this. The blossoms were all multicolored in shades of white, yellow and pink, although each blossom had a different mixture of those colors. Satisfied with her creation she turned and told Mahten, “And this rose is special just for you, Mahten.”

A short time later, still carrying her new staff, she went to visit her father. “How’re you feeling, Dad?” Oceanvine asked as she entered his room. He was sitting comfortably in his chair, reading a newspaper.

“Much better, Elie,” he replied, then corrected himself, “Oceanvine.” He folded the paper and put it down on a nearby table.

“Elie, Oceanvine, or just Vine,” Oceanvine shrugged. “It doesn’t really matter. It’s still the same me.” She leaned her new staff up against the nearby wall.

“It is,” Fredrik smiled, “but I’ve spent too much time trying to deny you and your accomplishments. Silly of me, but there you are. It seems I’ve been very wrong about magic. Your apprentice has been polite enough, but she also hammers that point home every time she visits.”

“Sally is young,” Oceanvine explained, “and she has the same zeal for magic that Grandmother has against it.”

“Yes,” Fredrik agreed. “Nice staff, by the way.”

“Mahten made it for me,” Oceanvine told him. “All I really expected was a rough pole lopped off a tree, but he really outdid himself. I thanked him by creating a new rosebush next to his cottage. If you go down there sometime, I think you’ll be able to figure out which one it is.”

Fredrik smiled. “Tell me, though. Why did you ever choose to study with Wizard Candle?”

“Uncle Candle,” she corrected her father. “He was Great-Grandmother’s brother. He was also a friend of Mom’s family, I’ve come to learn.” She smiled. “He was known and loved and respected by a lot of people. Well, no surprise. He was a noble in two kingdoms, had degrees from all three universities, and worked almost everywhere at least once. Why did I choose to study with him? I don’t think I did. He kind of tricked me into it. He was in cahoots, I think, with Great-Grandmother.

“First he got my faculty advisor to ask me to visit this elderly retired professor. It just happened this old lady was my great-grandmother, although I didn’t learn that until after she had died.”

“At least you got to meet her, Oceanvine,” Fredrik pointed out. “I never did.”

“That’s true, Dad,” Oceanvine nodded, “Well she used to pay me for my company, though I kept trying to refuse. Eventually, it was easier to just take the money and leave it in the collection box at Nildar’s temple. Well, just to please her I allowed her to teach me how to practice self-hypnosis, which is how young mages gain the confidence to cast spells, but it also allowed me to relax and to concentrate on my school work. That’s when my grades started to go way up.

“She tried to get me to cast spells, but I guess I wasn’t ready yet,” Oceanvine continued. “I wasn’t very good at it, but she did make me promise that after she died I would go onboard the *Maiyim Bourne*.”

“The one in His Majesty’s museum?” the earl asked.

“Well, that’s what I thought too,” Oceanvine admitted, “So I got Six to help me, but Uncle Candle stopped us before we could set off the alarms. Then he loaded us up in his car and rushed us off to Renton.”

“Why Renton,” Fredrik asked.

“You remember how grandmother claimed her mother’s body had been stolen from her grave shortly after the funeral?” Oceanvine reminded him. “Well, it’s true. We had her casket behind us in the car all the way. The first Oceanvine had wanted to be buried next to her husband in Renton, not in some cemetery of the wealthy in Randona. I think Uncle Candle knew what sort of tabloid mess would get stirred up if he fought it out with Grandmother before the funeral, so he just let her have her way. Then he came, disinterred his sister and brought her to where she wanted to be.”

“Most people think their families are weird at some point in their lives,” Fredrik mused, “but I grew out of that before I went to college. Now I find mine might be the strangest of all.”

“Not really,” Oceanvine laughed. “Anyway, that was when I first met Sally and her family. It’s also where I first met Methis and the other gods, although I didn’t know who they were at the time, but I spent most of that night chatting with this nice Granomish mage who later turned out to be Methis. Then, finally, Uncle Candle arranged it so I could keep my promise and board the *Maiyim Bourne*.

“She had been kept in storage for decades in Keesport,” Oceanvine explained. “There are certain enchantments in her that Uncle Candle felt would be best left out of reach of the average mortal, so when His Majesty requested the boat for his collection, Uncle Candle gave him a copy. It was an almost perfect copy, but it was missing all the magic.”

“What was so dangerous about the boat and why did your great-grandmother want you to go onboard?” Fredrik asked.

“She told me there was something she wanted me to have on the boat,” Oceanvine replied. “I thought it was some trinket or a book, perhaps, she had left behind, but actually it was a bit of her life. Of all her great-grandchildren, I’m the only one she ever got to meet, but she was never able to tell me we were related. So getting me on the boat was her way to make a sort of familial connection and maybe she hoped that once I was there I would want to know more of the magic I resisted letting her teach me. Uncle Candle tricked me into learning that.

“He was good at tricking people into doing things they might not normally do,” Oceanvine smiled reminiscently. “Must have learned that from Aritos himself, but he talked Six and me into a summer school course that would involve sailing the *Maiyim Bourne* around the islands for a couple of months. It sounded harmless enough, so off I went. We were at sea before he hit us with our first lesson. Want to guess what it was? You tanned my backside for trying it when I was just a kid.”

“You lifted a rubber ball with magic,” her father grimaced, remembering young Elinor’s delight with her new plaything and his furious reaction. “I’m very sorry about that.”

“It worked out all right,” Oceanvine replied. “Anyway, we started out with a paper bag filled with steel hex nuts.”

“Was that a pun?” Fredrik asked with a smile. “Hex nuts, spells, magic?”

Oceanvine paused. “I never thought about it that way,” she admitted. “Could be. It would have been typical of Uncle Candle’s sense of humor. Anyway the first assignment he gave us was to levitate a hex nut. Obviously I had a head start on that one, but he wanted us to practice it repeatedly and within a few days I was doing this.” She opened a small velvet pouch that hung from the waistline of her skirt and a large pearl floated up and started circling her head. “Well, I only had hex nuts to do this with at first, but a year later Queen Orezhda caught me practicing with one, and gave me this to use instead. I’ve been wearing it as if it were a tiara at formal events. It catches the eye and, well, it seems to please His Majesty to see me doing it.

“I’ve taught a few others how to do it,” she continued, “but it was Sally who started showing anyone on campus how it was done. About half the girls were wearing bits of jewelry around their heads like this by finals week this spring. It seems to be the new fashion.

“That first summer was going along idyllically, although I did spend a lot of time worrying about being disowned, but I had agreed to take Uncle Candle’s class and I was going to keep my word. Then the tsunamis hit Sutheria and fun time was over. We raced to the city of Silamon to see what we could do to help.”

“Yes,” Fredrik nodded. “It was the right thing to do. Your brother rounded up a few friends and went to help pick up the pieces on Kemalart. He told me it was your idea.”

“I don’t know if I can take the credit really,” Oceanvine replied. “I bumped into him, almost literally, in

Truwich, and told him where we were headed. He took the idea and went with it on his own. I must admit that at first I was looking forward to maybe seeing him in Sutheria, but when things started falling apart I was glad he was somewhere else. My childhood ended that summer, Daddy.

"I don't mean sex," she added immediately. "But first we saw Silamon not too long after the tsunamis. It was a wreck, but some people were already clearing away wreckage and trying to construct temporary housing. Most people lived above the line of destruction, so fortunately deaths were kept down, but there were still quite a few. I also met Granomen for the first time. We were searching for the root cause of the Tsunamis and that brought us to Petronelle Station on the coast of Robander's Island.

"The Granomen are, by and large, nice people," Oceanvine continued. "We were in maybe the worst part of the Cold War that summer, but they welcomed us to the station and when we told them why we were there, they helped out in every way they could. Although if I thought they were friendly and hospitable, it was nothing compared to the welcome I received from their royal family, but that's another story.

"Anyway, we raced back to Silamon with what we had learned, but got drawn into a police case that involved missing persons and their bodies once they started to be found. That led us to chase a mage who called himself Adamant. You heard of all the subsequent destruction in Silamon, but the news bureaus made it sound like after effects of the tsunamis. It was caused by this Adamant who had learned to use a very evil, but powerful spell. He was the one who caused Mount Petronelle to erupt which caused the tsunamis, but I doubt he expected the side effects, one of which was that new volcanic island in the middle of the Great Bay. We discovered that on the *Maiyim Bourne* too, by the way. A lot of things happened that summer. You know, it's a shame I didn't get any writing assignments that fall about what I did while on vacation. It would have filled a book.

"After island hopping to Marh and back again, we eventually found Adamant trying to raise a volcano in the heart of downtown Silamon," Oceanvine told him. "We had to fight with magic to stop him and eventually it came down to me to kill him. I was the last one standing, and just barely at that. After that, I didn't feel there was any going back. I had invented new spells, won a mage's battle, saved quite a few lives too. That's what earned me the Star of Emmine, and yet, looking back it was some of the easiest of magical tasks I've had to perform in the last few years."

"Does it keep getting harder?" Fredrik asked.

"More challenging," Oceanvine responded. "The more I learn, the more I realize just how much more there is to learn. Methis is constantly reading, She has every book ever published in Her library and any spare moment She has is spent reading. I think I understand why. She knows so much that maybe now She knows just how much She doesn't know and the only way to fix that is to never stop learning. But I didn't answer your first question, did I?

"The *Maiyim Bourne* was enchanted to provide her passengers and crew with almost everything they might need," she explained. "I say almost, but frankly I've never failed to find exactly what I needed on board. This outfit I'm wearing is from one of the closets on the boat. It's a modernized version of something my great-grandmother used to wear all the time and most of the women who have sailed aboard the boat, have worn something similar at one time or another. We refer to it as our school uniform."

"Much more becoming than the school uniforms girls used to have to wear when I was a boy," Fredrik commented. "So what do you intend to do with all this knowledge you've gained?"

“Gain still more, I hope,” Oceanvine told him. “Uncle Candle never stopped learning while he was alive, after all, and I still have a long way to go to catch up. I hope to earn my wizard’s degree in a year or two, but it might be longer. The Dean tells me he isn’t really sure the University is qualified to give such a degree anymore, so I’ll probably have to do more than the wizards before me just to be considered as good. And I want to teach.

“I really enjoy teaching the students I have at University although I was talking about this with Methis just before I left and was reminded that the first Oceanvine founded the Renton School for advanced magical technology. Methis had been one of the teachers, you see, and the reason we visited Her was so my students could experience the same sort of classes She used to teach there. She put Six and me through that particular wringer a few years ago and I wanted Sally and the other new students to get a chance to have the same opportunity, but you know, I’d really like to give all my students and all the new magic students the same chance, but to do that I need to found a school like Great-Grandmother’s.

“I have the money,” she continued. “That’s another gift the boat supplies in unlimited amounts, but I need to find a place where I can build it; a place not too isolated from the rest of the world but where we can afford a bit of privacy as we work as well.”

“Why not here?” Fredrik asked her.

“In Olen?” Oceanvine asked in reply.

“Why not?” he asked again. “We have a very large estate and I would be happy to give you a dozen acres, more if you want, on which to build your new school.”

“Really?” Oceanvine asked. “Oh thank you, Daddy!” She rose to hug him in his chair. “Oh, that’s what She meant!”

“Who?” the earl asked.

“Methis, of course,” Oceanvine replied. “She said She was sure I could work this out. She really can see the future, although She also tells me that’s not as useful as it sounds. ‘To see the future you have to be facing in the right direction,’ is one of her favorite sayings, in fact. But I guess She knew I would be working that part out very shortly. She did sound sure of Herself.”

“Methis is a goddess,” Fredrik reminded his daughter. “I imagine She must always be sure of Herself.”

“No, not always,” Oceanvine replied. “She’s a goddess, but She’s also a person like any other and none of us are perfect.”

The door opened just then and Oceanvine’s mother stepped into the room. Sally and Clemen followed close on her heels. “I think you two ought to see the news,” Erinne told them, stepped over to a television set in the corner of the room and turned it on. It took nearly a minute for all the vacuum tubes inside to warm up, but even before the picture resolved, they could hear the announcer.

“Mount Mira erupted this morning for the first time in recorded history. There have been rumblings from deep inside the mountain for the last several years, but the ash and steam that were ejected this morning were the first actual emissions in nearly ten thousand years according to Doctor Eileanne Stass, head of the Geology Department of the University at Randona.”

“Oh, I know her,” Oceanvine remarked.

“No surprises,” Clemen remarked. “You both teach there.”

“We do, but, I haven’t seen her since she was assisting Doctor Gonnev in Silamon,” Oceanvine replied.

“It seems unlikely that this is not related to the massive eruption at the Great Bay volcano,” Eileanne was saying.

“What eruption?” Oceanvine asked.

The newscaster answered as though talking to her, “There was another large eruption of the Great Bay volcano that sent large waves in every direction. It is unknown what damage, if any, was caused.”

“Six’s family live on Ketch,” Oceanvine fretted. “The port there faces the bay directly. I’d better call and make sure they’re all right.”

“We have more calling to do than that,” Clemen remarked.

“What do you mean?” Oceanvine asked irritably.

“It’s what happened in Medda,” Sally told her.

“Medda isn’t at risk from Great Bay tsunamis,” Oceanvine denied.

“Listen,” Erinne suggested and pointed at the screen. There was large map of the western portion of the archipelago being displayed behind the anchorman and a picture of what looked like several demolished buildings that were still burning hung in the air to the side of his head.

“Repeating our top story,” he told his viewers, “There has been a massive explosion in the city of Medda on the island of Kern, leveling most of the downtown area and causing untold numbers of deaths.”

“Oh my Gods!” Oceanvine gasped.

Kern

One

“I have to go to Kern,” Oceanvine decided with her next breath.

“We both do,” Sally told her.

“Why?” Fredrik asked. The phone rang. Elsewhere in the manor a servant might have answered it, but the line to the private chambers was only answered by family. Countess Erinne got up to answer it.

“Hello?” she asked into the handset.

“Daddy, we have family there,” Oceanvine told him. “The Smiths and Coopers. Great-Grandmother Oceanvine’s family live in Medda.”

“Then we’ll have to see you get there and send such aid as it is within our family’s power to follow you directly,” he told her, earning a warm hug from his daughter. The earl stiffened slightly. His family had always been reserved, even in private, but Oceanvine had gradually become far more demonstrative. When she had tried to hug her father following her graduation several years earlier, his stiff reaction had come as a shocking rebuke, but this time he forced himself to relax in her embrace and after a moment decided it wasn’t so bad to hug his daughter once in a while.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Erinne spoke to the phone, instantly capturing everyone’s attention. “Yes, we would be honored. Thank you very much, Your Majesty. She’s right here.” She held out the phone to Oceanvine and told her, “It’s your drinking buddy.”

“Mom!” Oceanvine protested, knowing the king must have heard her mother clearly. “Your Majesty?”

“I told her to say that,” Hacon Ancel explained. “Oceanvine, have you seen the news this evening?”

“Just now, as a matter of fact, Your Majesty,” Oceanvine replied. “Are we talking about Medda or the communities around the Great Bay?”

“Both,” the king replied, “but there was very little damage in the Great Bay basin. We are more concerned with the disaster on Kern and knew that you would be at least as worried.”

“I am, Your Majesty,” Oceanvine admitted. “It hasn’t had a chance to sink in yet. How bad is it really?”

“We do not know. All communications have been cut off between here and Kern. The news was flown out to Amden and released from there,” Hacon Ancel explained. “We are preparing to fly directly to the airport at Medda but will wait for you if you would like to join us.”

“I’m not sure the word ‘like’ is quite appropriate, Your Majesty,” Oceanvine replied, “but words fail to convey the depths of my gratitude for your offer. It will take several hours to drive there, however.”

“Take the county plane,” Fredrik advised her.

“Are you sure, Dad?” Oceanvine asked gratefully.

“Obviously, I’m not using it this evening,” he told her. “Go pack and I’ll have my pilot prepare to take off as soon as you get to the airport.”

“Your Majesty,” Oceanvine turned back to the phone. “I’ll be flying in as soon as possible. Should I be landing at Sloan Base?”

“Indeed,” Hacon Ancel replied after an odd pause. “We will meet you there.”

“I get the impression that when I said I’d be flying in he had the notion I might not be using a plane,” Oceanvine told Sally and the others after hanging up.

“You could do that,” Sally laughed.

"I would be very tired and it would probably have been faster to drive," Oceanvine told her. "Thanks for the use of the plane, Daddy. Let's get packing."

"Yes," Fredrik agreed. "Speed is essential. The king is waiting."

"I'll get my car warmed up," Clemen offered. "It's a lot faster than the limo."

"We'll have to ride with the top down though," Oceanvine told him. "I'm taking my new staff with me. I'm probably going to need it."

They raced through their packing chores and then to the airport so that less than an hour and a half after speaking to the king, the Olen county plane was taxiing alongside Hacon Ancel's personal jet. The jet dwarfed the small plane her father owned, but having flown on it once before, she had expected Hacon Ancel's jet to be one of the newest and largest in service.

Oceanvine and Sally ran across the tarmac and up the stairway. Inside the jet they found over one hundred men and women in their early to late twenties seated in the main cabin. "Oceanvine!" Maia called from the back of the plane. "Back here!"

"Who are all these people?" Sally asked as Oceanvine and Maia hugged.

"Hi, Sally!" Maia hugged her too. "Friendship Corps volunteers. As many as we could round up on a moment's notice. Come, you're expected in the private compartment. Where'd you get the staff, by the way?"

Oceanvine didn't have time to answer before they had entered the King's private cabin. "Vine!" Crown Prince Helm greeted her, taking her and Sally's bags and finding a place to store them. "Miss Tamollen, nice to see you again."

"And for me as well, Your Highness," Sally responded.

"We'll be taking off as soon as we're all seated," Helm told them, escorting them to where the king was speaking on the phone."

"Her Majesty isn't joining us," Oceanvine observed.

"Somebody needs to keep the home fires burning," Helm replied. "My father wanted Maia to stay behind as well, but I suppose there are some things even a king cannot command. Nice staff, by the way. Makes me want to take up magic."

"Thank you," Oceanvine replied. "Mahten, my father's gardener, made it for me."

"Very nice, but we'll need to stow it securely," he explained.

"Heh," she chuckled, "with the amount of power I've stored in it, I could stick it to the cabin wall for the next century, but no problem. Where?"

"There's a coat closet just behind you," Helm pointed.

"I'll do it," Sally offered and explained. "Apprentice duty." She took the staff and placed it in the curtain-covered recess in the cabin. Then seeing some straps, she used one to make sure it would stay

where she put it, then returned to sit next to Oceanvine where she was already speaking with King Hacon Ancel. The jet was already moving toward the runway.

“Is there any further news?” Oceanvine asked Hacon Ancel anxiously.

“I’m afraid not, Oceanvine,” he responded gravely, “but I have to warn you the death toll is expected to be horrendous. We’re expecting at least fifty percent mortality in the affected area.”

“I expected as much,” she admitted, “but I have family there. This isn’t an option for me. I couldn’t live with myself if I wasn’t there for them now.”

“I knew you would feel that way,” the king nodded. “That is why I called you.”

“How’s your father?” Maia asked Oceanvine.

“Much better, thanks,” Oceanvine told her. “One thing, though. Have any of you ever heard of someone calling himself Lord Carna?”

“Carna is no barony,” Helm scoffed. “Who would dare?”

“An Arithan mage of the Inner Circle of One Maiyim,” Oceanvine replied.

“Show me this man and We’ll have him arrested,” Hacon Ancel replied. “We have no tolerance for presumption.”

“If he is part of the Inner Circle,” Oceanvine replied, realizing she had said this before, “presumption is a relative misdemeanor compare to his real crimes. He’s a multiple murderer many times over, assuming he is a ‘he.’ For all I know the ‘Lord’ part is a cover as well, though I doubt it. At least I haven’t come across any other of the higher ups of Maiyim using the wrong gender titles. Mostly they just take intimidating mage names.”

“Like Oceanvine is not intimidating!” Sally laughed. “A vicious and carnivorous form of sea life capable of destroying ships and anyone on them. Yes, a nice gentle name.”

“I didn’t name myself for the seaweed,” Oceanvine told her tartly. “I named myself for my great-grandmother.”

“A fierce and indomitable lady,” Hacon Ancel remarked.

“She never seemed so formidable to me,” Oceanvine admitted.

“No, of course not, young Oceanvine,” Hacon Ancel told her. “You were her great-granddaughter and she loved you very much. She told me about you, you know. I visited her a few weeks before she died and there was a picture of you by her bed.”

“I don’t recall giving her a picture,” Oceanvine remarked.

“She probably created it herself,” Sally speculated.

“I asked her about that picture,” the king continued, “and she told me about you. She thought a lot of you and was very proud, so I was only a little surprised when the next time I saw you was the day I

inducted you into the Order of the Star of Emmine.” He paused. “Aren’t you going to ask me what she said about you?”

“No, Your Majesty,” Oceanvine shook her head. “I’m sure it isn’t any of my business. Oh, I might have asked that question until fairly recently, but now, no. I don’t think I need to know that any more. I loved her, even though I didn’t know how we were related and I know she loved me. That’s all that matters.”

“Good point,” the king admitted.

“I want to know,” Sally told him.

“Hmm, just one thing,” Hacon Ancel decided. “My old friend and advisor knew your teacher at a time before she had decided what to do with her life, but the elder Oceanvine knew that once her great-granddaughter found her calling she would not rest until she was the very best.”

“I still have a long way to go before that happens,” Oceanvine denied.

“Really, Vine?” Maia asked. “So who out there is better than you?”

“In history? Every wizard there ever was,” Oceanvine replied.

“How about right now?” Maia pressed.

“I don’t know,” Oceanvine admitted uncomfortably. “That’s the problem.” They were quiet for a few moments before Oceanvine added, “I called the Hardistys on Ketch before I left Olen. Six’s Mom told me there was only a little minor damage in the harbor area, mostly fishing boats getting knocked together.”

“I told you the Great Bay area had not suffered much,” the king reminded her.

“I know, but the phrase ‘not much’ implies there was some,” Oceanvine pointed out. “I just needed to know I wouldn’t have to be in two places at once.”

“You can do that?” Helm asked, amusement showing.

“Not yet,” she replied. Then she caught Sally looking at her oddly. “I’m fairly certain it can’t be done.”

“No?” Sally pressed. “You have an idea, though. I can tell.”

“Well, Time is inseparable from Space,” Oceanvine replied. “It’s just a dimension like height, width or depth. We all travel through time in one direction at a rate of one second per second although it might be possible to move ahead in time at a faster rate of speed. I think I could do that to something if I wanted to. It’s a matter of slowing the passage of time within a given volume so while time passes at a normal rate outside, inside less time has passed.”

“But that’s not really changing the rate at which time passes,” Sally argued. “Time is still passing normally inside that volume, isn’t it?”

“For someone inside, it would so appear,” Oceanvine replied, “but from the outside it wouldn’t.”

“I don’t think you could actually do that,” Sally shook her head, “and if you did the person inside would

not likely survive, I think that sort of time compression or stretching or whatever you want to call it, only happens in close proximity to something like a black hole.”

“A what?” Hacon Ancel asked.

“When a star burns out,” Sally explained, “a number of things may happen depending on its size. The really large ones explode, causing what’s called a supernova, but smaller stars merely swell up to many times their volume. It’s part of the dying process; they have used up the hydrogen they were burning, or rather fusing into helium before, and start working on creating and fusing other heavier elements. This will make it get hotter and larger, see? The sun expands and contracts all the time even now, just not anywhere near as much as it will when it is burned out.

“Well, once it has expanded, that heat will dissipate and after a while it will begin to contract again. Its own gravitational attraction will pull itself back together. Depending on how much mass we’re talking about it may just condense into what is called degenerate matter, essentially it would be a sort of burned out cinder of a star. A bit larger and it contracts so much that most of its mass becomes nothing but neutrons all densely packed together. It’s called a neutron star and the substance is sometimes referred to as neutronium. It’s very dense, but if the star is even larger, but not so large that it exploded and sent its mass so far it couldn’t be drawn back again, it contracts so much that it becomes just a gravitational point source, unimaginably small and so strong that even light cannot escape it. That’s why it is called a black hole.”

“And where are these black holes?” Helm asked her.

“Astronomers haven’t found any yet,” Sally replied easily, “but I understand the mathematics predict they do exist. Sorry, that’s as much as I got from a freshman-level class. But I was taught that time seems to behave differently near a black hole. That if you were to fall into one, from the outside it would seem that you never quite actually crossed the event horizon, although for you it will be over very quickly, I imagine. That’s sort of what Vine was describing.”

“I am not going to try creating a black hole just to see if I can,” Oceanvine told her.

“Good,” Sally agreed, “because it would probably destroy all Maiyim if you managed to succeed and that would kind of ruin everyone’s day.”

“Of course a very small black hole would probably explode instantaneously,” Oceanvine remarked. “I mean if I managed to compress a small amount of matter so much that under pressure it became a black hole. Such a small one might not be stable and once released would return to its original state in short order.”

“Not exactly its original state,” Sally argued. “There would be a lot of radiation emitted in the process and if you so compressed a chair, it wouldn’t look anything like a chair after decompression.”

“No, more like a collection of dissociated atoms,” Oceanvine told her, “and I wouldn’t be healthy enough to appreciate it either, but while not in its original shape, I think the results would be normal matter.”

“You don’t think that’s what happened in Medda, do you, Vine?” Maia asked.

“I doubt it,” Oceanvine replied. “I think far more of the area would have been devastated, and with a lot of radio-activity to boot. Comparable to the results of a nuclear explosion. That isn’t what we are flying

into, is it?"

"Devastation-wise," Helm told her, "it might be. But we have a device that measures radiation onboard."

"You do?" Oceanvine asked. "Why?"

"The Cold War with Granom has come close to getting hot at times," he explained, "and it was thought having such a device on the royal plane would be prudent."

"More like a warning given too late in many possible scenarios," Oceanvine remarked, "but we could scan before landing?"

"I will see that it is done," Helm promised.

Two

They detected no harmful radiation as they passed over the city, but Oceanvine did not think the devastation could have been worse if an atomic weapon had been detonated there. There was an area near the center of the city that looked like nothing but rubble. Further out from there stood the stumps of buildings, some taller than others and still further were buildings that still stood but showed sickening amounts of damage.

The airport was beyond the range of destruction, however and they had no trouble landing, although the pilot reported that not only was he unable to make radio contact with ground control, but all he could hear on his headset was static. However, their approach had not gone unnoticed and a small delegation was on hand to greet them as they got off the jet.

As Oceanvine reached the top of the movable stairway, well ahead of the rest of the royal party, she saw the Friendship Corpsmen and women standing to one side on the tarmac and half a dozen dirty-looking people in ragged clothing waiting on the other.

"Vine!" a woman's voice rang out from below and Oceanvine recognized her cousin, Jollin Smith at the head of the welcoming delegation. Oceanvine had seen Jollin looking haggard before. She had been sleep deprived and stressed beyond what most people could bear when Oceanvine had arrived in the Saindo archipelago some years earlier, but seeing her so filthy looking and in tattered clothing was much worse. They met on the middle of the stairway and hugged, heedless of the precariousness of their perch. "I knew you would come, Lady Cousin!" Jollin told her, still keeping her arms tightly wrapped around Oceanvine. "Even if no one else did, I told the family you would be here. Where's Six?" she added as they descended finally.

"Somewhere between here and New Querna by now, I imagine," Oceanvine told her. "We visited Fireiron this summer, but when Dad fell ill, I rushed back to Olen and he was left with the boys to sail home. I understand they got held up with a problem in Methis' Chain, but they ought to be on their way home by now."

By then, the rest of the royal party had disembarked and Oceanvine performed the introductions. "An honor to meet you, Miss Smith," the king told her. "Who is in charge in Medda at the moment?"

"I'm afraid I am, Sire," Jollin admitted. "We six are the only surviving members of the Medda City

Council. Mayor Cooper, a cousin of mine, was killed in the blast while he was visiting Earl Kern. The earl's entire family was killed too. Anyway, we took a vote among ourselves and I got stuck with the job of Mayor Pro Tem."

"It was a unanimous decision, Your Majesty," one of the counselors added.

"Actually it was a five-to-one vote, but I suppose mine doesn't count," Jollin commented wryly. "Why don't we find a more comfortable place to discuss this," she suggested. "The airport restaurant, perhaps? I had all the food taken into town, but..."

"Then perhaps we will be more comfortable aboard the plane," Hacon Ancel suggested. "Helm, would you see to the deployment of the Friendship Corps?"

"Yes, Father," Helm replied. "Miss Smith, where will they be needed the most?"

"Anywhere," Jollin sighed. "But first they ought to establish an advanced base to operate out of."

"The Second Police Precinct building is intact," a counselor suggested, "and fairly close to the center of destruction. I could show them the way." Jollin nodded and Helm accompanied the man as they went to deploy the volunteers.

"How's the family?" Oceanvine asked worriedly as they walked back up into the plane.

"At the current count, we lost over two dozen cousins when it happened," Jollin replied, "many more were injured, of course. I wouldn't have survived either had I not been out of town inspecting the new reservoir with my colleagues here. The Forge was destroyed," she added sadly. The Forge had been the Smith family's business, a thriving machine shop where Jollin had grown up. It had been, Oceanvine knew, the place Jollin could always call home.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Oceanvine sympathized.

"It was just a building," Jollin shrugged. "We'll build another in time. Meanwhile we've been sifting through the wreckage for the machinery. Most of it seems to be repairable and we're really going to need it. The Smiths and Coopers were among the lucky ones, though. Most of us are still alive. Some families were completely destroyed."

"Are you able to tell us what happened here?" the king asked once everyone had a cup of hot coffee and something to eat.

"Not really, Your Majesty," Jollin replied after looking at her colleagues. "The first I knew, there was a deep rumbling coming from back in town and a mushroom-shaped cloud over the city. We feared, at first, that Granom had dropped the Bomb on us, but I doubt that now. I mean why Medda? We're a big fishing port, but they could do more damage to Keesport or Kanaduin or even Tamd if they were looking for a remote and unlikely city to destroy."

"We have no evidence that Granom was involved," Hacon Ancel informed her. "We personally doubt that is what happened, especially if no strange planes were seen overhead just prior to the explosion."

"There were survivors who witnessed the blast more closely than we did," Jollin replied. "So far there have been no reports of planes dropping anything. It was just another quiet summer day and then... Boom!"

“I assume there is no power anywhere in town?” the king asked.

“In the heart of the city?” Jollin countered. “No, but the plant is intact, and we have power here at the airport and at most other peripheral sites. We can only spare two crews at the moment to repair power lines and that is just so we can get makeshift hospitals going in the center.”

“Then why was there no radio contact from the tower as we approached the port here?” Hacon Ancel asked.

“Radios aren’t working for some reason, Your Majesty,” Jollin replied. “It’s one reason we were concerned about radiation.”

“We detected nothing out of the ordinary,” the king replied to her relief.

“There’s a really big ward over the whole area,” Sally reported, looking out one of the airplane’s windows.

Oceanvine rushed to look for herself. “That must be blocking signals,” she commented, “but why?”

“We’ll just have to find that out,” the king decided.

“Or rather I will,” Oceanvine replied. “For now, however, we need to see to disaster recovery, although dispelling that ward may be part of it.”

Oceanvine tried, whenever she could, to dispel the ward that was blocking all radio contact with the outside world, but even with her staff to assist, she was unable to do anything about it. The problem nagged at her, but for the immediate moment she was needed more in the search for survivors.

Medda was the closest to a war zone Oceanvine ever wanted to experience. The devastation was so great that even the king put on work clothes and helped pick through the rubble. The view from the air had been horrendous, but it was far worse to behold on the ground where the air was filled with the stench of burnt buildings – never quite the same as the smoke from any other sort of fire – and a wide variety of even worse smells.

Oceanvine met with many of her family members that first night. “Thank you for coming,” was the phrase she heard most often, and “How could I be anywhere else?” was her most frequent response, but most of their communication was nonverbal in nature. Most of the time, they sat holding hands and just looking at each other. Words would have gotten in the way.

Sally, on the other hand, found herself in a myriad of conversations. When it became known she was Candle’s granddaughter, she was welcomed as kin even though there was no actual blood relationship. Candle had been “Uncle” and “Cousin” to generations of Smiths and Coopers, and so Sally was obviously a cousin, although several young male cousins clustered around her that evening and vied to work somewhere in her vicinity over the next few days.

Over the next two days more Friendship Corps volunteers arrived, although it seemed there were never enough and only a few military units were able to fly to Medda, although Hacon Ancel ordered an aircraft carrier group to be deployed there. “They won’t be here for another week,” he informed Jollin one evening. “The *Carrier Tarense* and her escorting ships are on their way, but they had been maneuvering south of Midon and headed toward the Inaliands when We finally reached them.”

“In the meantime we keep working,” Jollin replied tiredly.

However, as weary as Jollin was, Oceanvine had quickly surpassed her. The master mage worked all day clearing debris and looking for survivors and much of the evening studying the ward that continued to encase the region. “The blast was no accident,” she told Sally and Jollin. “We knew that from the start, I think, but I’m starting to think it actually occurred to release the power needed to drive that ward above us. It’s very powerful and I can’t dispel it. I can’t even get a handle on how I might try.”

“Perhaps you should get a bit of sleep,” Jollin suggested, “and then go look into it in the morning.”

“I can’t do that,” Oceanvine protested. “I’m needed to clear rubble.”

“We have people and equipment to do that, Vine,” Jollin told her.

“But I can do so much more with my staff,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“Maybe, but until you get rid of that ward,” Sally told her, “you’re not going to get any rest. You’ll kill yourself if you keep this up, Vine. Even I’m not that driven and I’d like to think I can give you a run for your money most of the time.”

“You do run me ragged some days,” Oceanvine admitted. “All right. I’ll go get some sleep and then look into that ward in the morning.”

Three

Oceanvine woke up several hours later in the pup tent she was sharing with Jollin. It was still dark outside but that suited her just fine. “Vine?” Jollin asked as Oceanvine inadvertently jostled her. “Where are you going?”

“The ladies’ trench,” Oceanvine replied. “Go back to sleep.”

“Okay,” Jollin muttered tiredly. She had crawled into the tent several hours after Oceanvine had and needed little persuading to stay where she was. Then Oceanvine drew her staff out of the tent and continued on.

Oceanvine looked up at the sky and noted the magical energies that made up the large mysterious ward that enclosed most of the island of Kern were still pulsing from horizon to horizon. She found the make-shift sanitary facilities, but she had only been half truthful to Jollin. Oceanvine had decided it would be best to track down the source of the large ward on her own.

After washing her hands, Oceanvine made her way quietly toward the edge of the tent city the Friendship Corps had established. She felt guilty sleeping there. There were still thousands of people in Medda who did not even have that much shelter to sleep beneath. Those whose houses remained intact had opened their doors to the homeless, but there were still many sleeping under the stars in the parks and on the beaches. She had just stepped around the last tent when she ran straight into Sally.

“So, where to first, boss?” Sally asked cheerfully.

“You’re going back to bed,” Oceanvine told her sternly.

“Why?” Sally asked, looking hurt.

“Sally, I don’t know who cast that spell,” Oceanvine tried to explain, “but it is the largest ward I have ever seen. The power behind it is immense. I doubt I could duplicate it without the Seal of Methis to back me up. It’s just too dangerous for you.”

“No, that’s why you need me,” Sally protested. “You need me to watch your back. You’re right, that is a big spell. Only a god or a group of mortal mages could cast that large a ward. That’s why you need me there. We need Six and Tawa and Balance too. But they’re not here and neither is Misana. We have Maia and Jollin, but while they have the raw talent, they don’t really have the training. I’m all you have. Are you really going to cut your forces in half?”

“Sally, you don’t have the experience against offensive magic yet either,” Oceanvine told her.

“Did you when Granddad took you to Sutheria?” Sally challenged her. “I know a lot more than you did back then. I’ll bet I’m even better prepared than you were on the Isle of Fire or when you led Oceanvine’s Girls in Querna. So I haven’t had to battle another mage yet. As long as One Maiyim exists there’s going to be a first time. Would you rather I faced them alone or with you?”

“I would rather you didn’t have to face them at all,” Oceanvine told her, then sighed, “but that’s not an option, is it?”

“Sorry, no,” Sally grinned.

They walked together toward the harbor area. The docks were still intact although some of the taller buildings there had lost their windows and they strolled out on the longest pier as they tried to get to the edge of the ward. However, even here it was several hundred yards from the end of the pier. “We’ll have to borrow a dinghy,” Oceanvine told Sally.

“Suits me,” Sally agreed, “but what will we use for oars? I mean these are definitely rowing dinghies, they have no sails, but no one left the oars here.”

“Oars? We don’t need them,” Oceanvine laughed. “Remember the old pilot’s spell?”

“Forgot about that,” Sally replied, “I’ve only done it once, you know.”

“We’ll have to add that to your repertoire next semester,” Oceanvine told her. “Uncle Candle told me he and my Great-Grandmother turned it into a sport while they were attending the University at Merinne. They had the entire Magic Department racing in dory skiffs, using magic as the only motive force.”

“Sounds like fun, “Let’s start that in Randona,” Sally suggested. “I’ll bet anyone who can do your trick with the orbiting pearl can pilot a small boat.”

“Could be,” Oceanvine admitted. “Let’s use this pram here. It’s large enough for the two of us and should be easy to maneuver.”

They got into a small plywood boat with a flat bottom and squared-off ends and were soon skimming through the water toward the edge of the ward. Once in close proximity, Oceanvine brought the boat to a halt. “Afraid to go through it?” Sally asked.

“Not really,” Oceanvine admitted. “We passed through it without incident on the plane. I can see all this is doing is blocking electromagnetic waves that are longer than the visible spectrum.”

“Radio waves,” Sally interpreted. “Every frequency?”

“Every one used on Maiyim,” Oceanvine replied, “That’s why most people cannot see the ward overhead. It’s invisible. Oh, that’s interesting. I’m glad we came out here at night.”

“It’s not quite night anymore,” Sally pointed out. “The eastern sky is starting to get lighter.”

“But it is still dark enough to see this,” Oceanvine told her. “Look down into the water. Look for auras, that is.”

“I see spell strings,” Sally remarked. “Why haven’t we noticed these before?”

“They were cleverly hidden,” Oceanvine explained. “First of all, by carefully placing them beneath the surface of the water the reflection of sun and sky in the daytime helps to mask them. Second of all, these strings are connections to the Xenlabit form of the Bond of Aritos and are therefore close to the color of water already. According to Uncle Candle’s notebook, that makes them very hard to see in a circumstance like this, except during the night. They aren’t easy to see on land either since they tend to sink down to the water table.

“Is this really safe for me to look at?” Sally asked. “From everything you and Granddad told me...”

“I’m warding you from its effects. Besides this is not the Bond itself, just the strings running from it, somewhere,” Oceanvine replied. “If you’re going to go any farther with me, you need to maintain a personal ward that will shield yourself, however.”

“Like this?” Sally asked, forming an invisible shield of magic around her.

“Good,” Oceanvine nodded, inspecting the construct for weaknesses. “Was this another of Methis’ lessons?”

“She did coach us on this sort of thing,” Sally admitted, “but it was Six who taught us this particular defense in one of the labs. Of course, knowing when to use it is the tricky part and none of us have ever actually been exposed to the Bond, you know.”

“It can take anyone by surprise,” Oceanvine told her. “The key, when unwarded is to hold on to your own pattern. We all have them. They’re our personal versions of the seals of the Gods or the Bonds of Aritos. You don’t need to know what yours is, just don’t let it be twisted out of its normal shape.”

“How do I do that?” Sally asked.

“Drop your ward,” Oceanvine ordered. Sally did and then Oceanvine did something Sally couldn’t quite catch, but there was a sudden subtle pulling on something deep down inside of her. “Feel that?”

“I do,” Sally admitted. “I don’t like it much though.”

“I don’t blame you. I’m just barely touching your personal sign,” Oceanvine explained. “You might say I’m leaning on your soul, but I’m doing it gently, the Bond is not this gentle. Now, can you push me away

with your mind?”

Sally struggled with the concept of pushing away something so intangible. It was harder because once she realized what was happening, she really didn't mind having Oceanvine touch her in this manner even though it was not comfortable. Then suddenly the light pressure eased off. “Yes, that's right,” Oceanvine commended her. “Do it once more.”

Sally wasn't certain of what she had done, but this time Oceanvine's mental touch was considerably stronger and harder to bear. Sally concentrated and tried to examine the situation and once again the pressure eased off. “Right,” Oceanvine nodded. She turned the dinghy around and they headed back to the dock. “I think you're as ready as any of us can be.”

“But it can't be that easy,” Sally protested. “All I did was concentrate on trying to analyze what you were doing.”

“And by doing so, you were pulling your own pattern, because that is what you do when you are about to cast a spell,” Oceanvine lectured. “Incidentally you are also concentrating on your personal pattern and you reacted properly faster than I did the first time I had to defend myself against the Bond of Aritos.”

“What happened?” Sally asked.

“For me it was a struggle,” Oceanvine admitted. “Perhaps I had been too open and trusting, I'm not sure. Open and trusting is usually a good thing, but it can go too far for one's own good, but you have a healthy dash of cynicism in you already. You don't want to let that get over-developed either, but it's what enabled you just now. Anyway, that's when I invented the non-stick wards. It did the trick, but not in the manner your grandfather wanted me to. He was especially annoyed when he couldn't just duplicate the trick and I couldn't tell him how I did it.”

“Oh, that must have really annoyed him,” Sally laughed. “What did he do?”

“He assigned me to write a paper on the subject,” Oceanvine replied.

“You've done that to me a couple times,” Sally recalled.

“Where did you think I got the idea?” Oceanvine laughed. “We're here, grab the painter and secure us to the pier.”

Sally tied the boat up, using the rope attached to the little pram's stubby bow and then they started walking northward. “This seems to be the way those threads were headed,” Oceanvine remarked, “but we'll need to find where they come ashore.”

They walked all morning, taking only occasional breaks, but had no trouble finding the spell strings once they knew what to look for. They were several miles outside of town by the time they found the power source. Looking down from a low hill, Oceanvine and Sally spotted a dark symbol burned into the summer wheat of the field below. As they watched it seemed to be pulsing.

“That's the Bond of Aritos, isn't it?” Sally asked.

“Yes, it is,” Oceanvine admitted. “Don't dwell on the shape, whatever you do.”

“Why would I want to do that?” Sally asked. “It’s ugly.”

“Just don’t,” Oceanvine ordered. “I want you to stay up here.”

“No!” Sally told her stubbornly.

“You said you were here to watch my back, right?” Oceanvine argued.

“Well, yes,” Sally agreed.

“Do it from here. I need you to keep me warded so I’ll be free to do other things,” Oceanvine explained. “You can do it from here as well as when you’re by my side and if something goes wrong, you need to rush back to town and warn the king. If you stay up here it’s possible those people down there won’t even know you’re here.”

“What people?” Sally asked, taking another look into the valley. “Oh,” she noted, spotting five men and women standing to one side of the Bond. “Those people.”

“See?” Oceanvine chided her, “you would have gone rushing in and gotten caught by surprise. Also that Bond is a composite construct. It is a combination of all five Bonds of Aritos. I saw this in Merinne. President Jiroshi did it by using the power of the other four demons and he was able to bring a semblance of the Bond of Arithan to life. Methis tells me it’s a mostly hollow gesture because the Arithan Bond does not add any power to the spell and in fact consumes it instead, but it does mean that the subtlety and deviousness of Arithan’s spells can be emulated this way. Methis didn’t believe the pay-offs offset the expenditure, but obviously these mages do. All right, I’m going down.”

“You could attack from up here,” Sally pointed out.

“I could, but that would leave you exposed,” Oceanvine told her and promptly flew off, staff in hand.

“I have to learn how to do that,” Sally grumbled.

Oceanvine wasted no time challenging the mages of One Maiyim, but instead instantly attacked the Bond of Aritos by using a ward to cut all the spell strings that tethered the tremendous ward to it. In her mind’s eye, she saw the ward flicker out and the Bond begin to unravel into its component parts. She managed to get her feet on the ground, before the counter-attack began.

Suddenly she was bound in a shiny black ward that barely allowed her to breathe or blink her eyes. “Ah, little Elinor,” one of the mages, a tall woman with short dark brown hair and hints of gray at her temples, almost purred. “We have been expecting you. Little play-wizard, aren’t you? Yes, we know who you are; the spoiled daughter of Olen. Know-nothing little girl pretending to know what it is to be a true mage; yes, I have heard of you. Uh, uh, uh! None of that!” the woman told her as Oceanvine attempted to throw a fireball. The flames were quickly quenched and she felt the full force of the four remaining Bonds of Aritos bearing down on her mind. Somehow this black confinement ward had eaten through the defensive ward Sally had cast.

The female mage continued to taunt Oceanvine, while the other four sat quietly on the ground. Oceanvine realized they were not as advanced as the woman; they were unable to maintain their spells outside of a trance. If she could just disrupt them somehow, but it was all she could do to mentally steel herself against four Bonds of Aritos.

And then came blessed relief. Sally had managed to ward Oceanvine's mind from the Bonds and while still confined, Oceanvine was free to concentrate on what she needed. It was a gamble, she knew, but right now the Seal of Methis seemed to be her best hope. She concentrated on the ever-changing, clockwork flower design that represented the goddess.

It was not quite right at first, but then Oceanvine remembered the image in her mind had to be in synch with the rest of the Seal. She could not see the small pendant Methis had given her. That would have told her all she needed to know, but Oceanvine had been studying Methis' seal for years now and knew how the pattern's cycle progressed. Working back in reverse, she finally hit on the right configuration and once she was in synch with the Seal of Methis, she could feel the power of the goddess infuse her with warmth. It was like experiencing Methis' love first hand. It was almost too intense and Oceanvine wondered if Uncle Candle had experienced this as well.

Go ahead, she seemed to feel Methis tell her in the same gentle tones She had used in so many lessons.

Oceanvine considered the Bonds of Aritos. They were merging once again into the Arithan form. Aritos, she knew would have tried to persuade His children to be good. He would have only reluctantly stopped them and then done it by as gentle a means as possible. The key, however, was to emulate Methis. Uncle Candle had been very clear about that and Methis, Oceanvine felt, would have had no patience with the Children of Aritos and would have, instead, swatted them down in the same way Oceanvine might deal with an annoying fly.

She was about to bring the full force of the Seal of Methis down to crush the composite Bond, but stopped herself. She remembered the resulting blast of energy, if she did that, would not only kill her, but possibly every one for many miles around, but Uncle Candle had a number of ways to deal with excess energy and one came to Oceanvine's mind now.

The power of Methis' Seal would all be needed to quench the Bond, but Oceanvine needed still more. Methis' seal was building up power in a closed loop. Oceanvine would only be able to use it for a single purpose. She still had her staff and it was fully charged, so with the ability only years of practice could hone, she quickly used the Seal to slap down the Bond and then in the same instant, translocated both patterns and all the energy they contained within them one thousand miles straight up. The spell had drained her staff completely, but she suddenly found herself free of the confinement ward.

The four lesser mages were dead and maybe more than dead. They had not been reduced to ash, but instead their bodies had simply fallen apart into small, pebble sized pieces and smaller. The female mage was still standing. She looked startled, but came back swinging. She tried the confinement ward again, but Oceanvine could feel that while it seemed to be there, it was having no effect.

"So little Elinor thinks she's a great mage," the woman continued to gloat unaware how little control she had now. "You know a trick or two, do you? You don't even know enough to realize how ignorant you are!"

The taunts, similar to those she had received from the mage who called himself Adamant, would have bothered her in that first summer when she began her true education. They might even have annoyed her years later as they battled President Jiroshi and the mages he commanded. Now they were just a string of meaningless words, She knew how empty the taunts were and by how much they had failed to hit their intended target.

"Ah, you've been talking to Grandmother, have you?" Oceanvine realized, willing her staff to recharge. "I think you ought to consider the validity of your sources, though."

“Silly little girl!” the woman ranted. “Before we are through with you we will kill all you hold dear. What we have done here on Kern is just the start. Before we allow you to die, you will watch everyone you love die first.”

That was Oceanvine’s one weakness. It was the only threat that worried her, but it was also the only thing this woman could have said that could have angered her as well. A year earlier it would have been the woman’s lethal mistake, but Oceanvine had worse in mind for her. Uncle Candle’s notes had described Arithan’s favorite curse and how Candle had turned it back on the demon himself. To turn that curse on a so-called Arithan mage of One Maiyim seemed appropriate.

It was a subtle change at first, but then the woman screamed and grabbed her head in pain. The already useless confinement ward vanished and Oceanvine stood over the woman and waited for her to recover enough to understand. “You’ll kill yourself if you try to practice magic again,” Oceanvine pronounced the woman’s sentence. “Magic will kill you now.

“Hurt my family and friends?” she continued harshly. Even now she knew the other woman was only half aware of the world around her. Arithan’s nightmares were closing in. “Not anymore. The only way to survive the nightmares is to give up magic entirely. Keep fighting this and trying to use magic and you will go mad. Go ahead. Try something.” She did and bent over in agony. Oceanvine concluded most of this woman’s nightmares involved a fear of physical pain. “You can’t, can you?”

The woman screamed in rage and tried to cast another spell before falling to the ground in agony. Oceanvine waited implacably. She knew it was possible to overcome this curse; Uncle Candle’s notes had said so, but even without previous experience it had taken Silverwind decades to figure out how. The woman tried several more spells and each one caused her more pain than the last. Oceanvine shook her head; this one was not likely to ever shake the curse off.

Finally, the woman whimpered and asked plaintively, “What have you done?”

“I have given you a taste of the Demon Arithan,” Oceanvine told her, wondering how true that might really be. “Your power is gone and any attempts to use magic will bring on the nightmares. You feel them, don’t you?” the woman nodded fearfully.

“How can you wield such power?” she asked.

Oceanvine ignored the question. “I left you alive for only one purpose. You are now my messenger. You go and tell the rest of One Maiyim – you go directly to the top – and you tell them if I catch them trying to harm anyone ever again, related to me or not, I will do the same to them or worse.” Privately Oceanvine wondered if she could even imagine something worse. It didn’t matter; the threat had worked. The woman was now nodding her head constantly and subserviently. It sickened Oceanvine to even look at this person, but there was more yet to say. “This is the end of One Maiyim. You make sure they understand that. One Maiyim is dead! Disband and renounce your misguided goals or I will personally track each and every one of you down.”

A moment later Oceanvine concentrated again and translocated the woman to a field just outside Randona.

“Will she survive the shock?” Sally asked a few minutes later when Oceanvine explained what she had done.

“I think she will,” Oceanvine replied, and then added, “Maybe.”

Four

It was late afternoon before Oceanvine and Sally arrived back in Medda and described what had happened.

“And that should pretty much take care of that,” Oceanvine concluded. Jollin and Hacon Ancel nodded as Oceanvine gave her report, but Helm and Maia only seemed to have been listening with one ear.

“You don’t really think that will be the last of One Maiyim, do you?” Sally asked skeptically when none of the others had.

“Not a chance,” Oceanvine shook her head. “I was blustering a bit, but hoped that it would at least plant a seed of doubt in One Maiyim’s collective mind. I was serious about what I said though. I will track them down one at a time, if I must.” Then she finally noticed that everyone else in the royal jet’s private compartment seemed distracted. “What’s wrong?” she asked. “What have I missed.”

“Just before you got here,” Maia explained, “we received a message from Lord Mifde. A Granomish strike force has not only entered Emmine waters, but is less than an hour away from here.”

“And they do appear to be coming right here,” Helm added.

“What’s a strike force?” Sally asked.

“Our navy calls it a carrier group,” Hacon Ancel explained. “It consists of an aircraft carrier, a destroyer and two frigates. Our intelligence informs us that the Navy of Granom has been using such groups to practice invasions in their war games.”

“But what are they doing here and now?” Oceanvine inquired. “Didn’t anyone think to radio them and ask?”

“Only our military has their frequencies at their disposal,” Hacon Ancel replied. “and until a short time ago we were unable to receive any broadcasts. It’s too late to do anything but wait and see what they intend now.”

“Perhaps it would be best if you were to fly back to Randona, Your Majesty,” Oceanvine suggested.

“That would be the wisest course,” the king replied, “and everyone else has already suggested it, but that is not what I am going to do.”

“Then what are you going to do?” Oceanvine asked.

“I intend to meet with the commander of this strike force,” Hacon Ancel told her calmly.

“Very brave, Your Majesty,” she responded politely.

“Thank you, Lady Oceanvine,” he replied.

“But potentially terminally stupid,” she concluded.

“You forget yourself, my lady,” Hacon Ancel told her coldly.

“No, Your Majesty, I remember myself all too clearly,” Oceanvine replied. Inside her head a part of her was urging extreme caution and another was advising her to apologize abjectly, but another part, evidently the part with the big mouth, was cheering her on. “You told me my great-grandmother never failed to let you know when she thought you in error. You went on to say, ‘We find that few of our subjects are willing to be so forthright. Will you do us that service, young Oceanvine?’ I agreed and now I am here following your royal command.”

King Hacon Ancel stiffened, but paused to think. “We did say that,” he admitted finally, relaxing a bit, “and we commend you for your loyalty and bravery even in the face of our anger. Your counsel is as wise as that which we received from your great-grandmother.” He then added, “And I was not always pleased to hear it from her either,” but he smiled at the memory. “Thank you, my lady. However, as wise as your advice is, we are afraid we cannot accept it. We shall meet the Granomish commander.”

Oceanvine wanted to argue the point. She wanted to do anything she could to keep her king from placing himself in such a situation, but when it came right down to it, she also respected his bravery and sense of honor in this time of danger. “I will join you, Your Majesty,” she told him.

Not long after, Oceanvine and Hacon Ancel stood at the end of the same long pier from which she and Sally had borrowed a pram earlier that day. Her eyes traveled down to the water and saw that boat was still where she had left it, although she had not earlier realized it had been painted bright red. *In the dark, all boats are gray*, she thought to herself. Aloud she commented, “Nice ship. Big. I think it needs a tennis court, though, and a dance floor.”

The Granomish aircraft carrier was one of the largest ships anywhere on Maiyim. Anchored one half of a mile out from the dock in the middle of Medda’s harbor, it dwarfed every other vessel in sight, including its own escorts. “She might look a little friendlier had she been painted another color,” Hacon Ancel attempted to match her bravado.

“I guess even in the light all boats are gray sometimes,” Oceanvine replied.

“What?” the king asked.

“Hmm? Oh sorry,” she apologized. “I had been thinking about something from earlier today.” She was about to explain, but it became apparent something was happening on the carrier’s deck. “It looks like they’re lowering something into the water,” Oceanvine remarked. “but it’s on the port side and we can only see the starboard from here.”

“They are probably lowering a pinnace,” Hacon Ancel replied. “No doubt they will be demanding a surrender.”

“That still doesn’t make sense to me,” Oceanvine told him. “I know Ksaveras very well. He doesn’t want war. He especially doesn’t want a war with nuclear weapons and worse, which is what he would get. Oh, wait a minute, yes! It’s not a pinnace, it’s the *Maiyim Bourne*. I think we can relax a bit now. I’m tempted to fly out to meet her, but that might spoil it for the historians.”

“The historians will rewrite this anyway they please,” Hacon Ancel told her. “That’s their job, but I think you must be right about being able to relax.”

Oceanvine turned around and beckoned to Sally. "I think it's safe to tell Jollin, Captain Jack and their fellows it's safe to join us, dear," she told her apprentice. "Oh, and call Maia and Helm at the airport. I believe they will want to be here as soon as they can as well." Sally nodded and ran back down the dock.

The king told her, "After all these years you might think I would stop arguing with Oceanvines, but thank you for agreeing that our crown prince and princess should stay out of harm's reach."

"It was reckless to risk your own life, Your Majesty," Oceanvine commented, "but we both knew it would have been insane to risk the future of the kingdom as well. Um, who would the succession have passed to had the worst happened?"

"Technically the Duke of Grinnel is next in line after my son, but his grace is elderly and without heir, so more likely it would have passed to North Horalia," Hacon Ancel admitted, "although perhaps not. Duke Norton is an unusual man in an unusual family. It is possible he might have refused the crown."

"Could be," Oceanvine nodded, as the *Maiyim Bourne* continued to move closer to the wharf. "I've been to the last three Harvest Festivals at Castle North and he doesn't impress me as a man who would want to be king. Ahoy, Six!" she shouted once the boat was finally within speaking range.

"Ahoy, Vine!" Sextant shouted back. "Put out the good dishes, I brought company!"

"Yeah, I see," Oceanvine remarked, preparing to accept the boat's painter from Balance so it could be secured to a cleat.

"Not yet, you don't," Six laughed.

Leotawa jumped from the boat on to the dock with the second rope as King Ksaveras stepped up on to the *Maiyim Bourne*'s deck, followed by Earl Zakhar. "Your Majesty," Ksaveras greeted his fellow king gravely.

"Your Majesty," Hacon Ancel replied with equal solemnity. The kings were a study in contrasts as they shook hands. Hacon Ancel was tall and athletic with mostly gray hair, while Ksaveras was short and square-shaped although massively built. Ksaveras' hair was still the dark brown of a youthful Granom and his skin the characteristic chalk white, while Hacon Ancel had darkened several shades in the sun as he had worked in Medda the last few days and his clothing was showing signs of wear, whereas Ksaveras wore clean but sturdy clothing.

"We heard of the great tragedy here and rushed to see what we could do to help," Ksaveras told him. "I do have kin of sorts on Kern after all."

"A few extra hands would be appreciated," Hacon Ancel admitted reluctantly.

"Well," the King of Granom offered, "if you will allow a few foreigners to pitch in, I brought in the second shift."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Hacon Ancel replied. "May I present Miss Jollin Smith, Acting Mayor of Medda."

"Cousin," Jollin nodded and then belatedly performed an awkward curtsy.

Ksaveras' eyes blazed with delight as he scooped Jollin up into a bear hug, exclaiming, "Cousin!" Then it fell to Jollin to introduce her father, Jack Smith, who then began to discuss arrangements with Zakhar while Jollin introduced the rest of Medda's surviving notables.

"Uh, no offense intended, old man," Ksaveras whispered to Hacon Ancel a few minutes later, "but you look like you've been bench-pressing whole buildings lately."

"Pretty close," the King of Emmine admitted.

"Well, you won't have to do it alone anymore," Ksaveras laughed. "By the way we have an exceedingly large number of military issue canvas shelters. It looks like a tent or two might be in order."

"Thank you," Hacon Ancel told him again. "We have a lot of people who lost their homes here. Your shelters will get them out of the rain until we can build something more permanent."

"And we shall help with that as well," Ksaveras told him. "Remember, the best engineers on Maiyim come from Granom."

Helm and Maia arrived on the scene a few minutes later and Sally boldly performed the introductions. "Welcome to Emmine, Your Majesty," Helm greeted the Granom.

"Thank you, Your Highness," Ksaveras replied. "I hope you will feel comfortable enough to call me Veras, though. All my close friends do. I've always wanted to visit Emmine, but until now politics seemed to keep me away. And this must be Maia. My dear, I knew from your voice that you must be a beautiful woman but my imagination did not do you justice."

Maia smiled and replied, "You're sweet, Veras, but at the moment I'm a wreck and we all know it."

Ksaveras shrugged and turned to Sally, "And you are?"

"Sally Candleson, cousin," she winked at him. "I believe you knew my granddad."

"Knew him and loved him, cousin," Ksaveras told her, "and Six tells me you're following in his footsteps. You must come visit Querna. Next summer perhaps? They generally throw a big party for me at the Wurra."

"I'll be there with bells on," Sally told him. She pulled out her crystal marble, "or maybe I'll just float one around my head like this." Ksaveras laughed and told her he would hold her to the promise. "Which?" Sally teased him. "To be there or to wear a bell?"

"Both."

Sally laughed before turning around to find Oceanvine standing behind her with two staves in hand. "I don't need two of these," she told her apprentice. "Why don't you take this one with the two bronze bands. Your granddad created them after I nearly burned the staff out in Bellinen."

"Really?" Sally asked.

"Sure," Oceanvine smiled at Sally's eagerness. "I think it's time."

“In the Age of Faith, a mage did not carry a staff until after graduation,” Sally replied, accepting the staff anyway.

“Really?” Oceanvine asked. “Now that I didn’t know. Maybe that’s why we get mage stones instead these days.”

Ksaveras and Zak were busy the rest of the night deploying sailors who helped homeless civilians erect their tents. Some elected to remain on the beach or in the parks, while others opted to camp out nearer to their previous homes, but by dawn most had temporary homes of their own although it was a week before those who had camped out in others’ homes were similarly sheltered.

Everyone went back to clearing rubble by day, including the kings. The death toll rose as expected above twenty thousand as more and more victims were found in the collapsed buildings, but even as the scope of the tragedy grew, there were thousands of miracles too. Hundreds of people were found still living in air spaces beneath wrecked buildings. More than once, rescuers were led there by faithful pets seeking their owners. Granomish engineers from the ships brought the local power plant back on line allowing the human linemen to work with their Granomish counterparts to repair downed powerlines.

By the time the Emmine Navy arrived, wooden shelters were already under construction. With the Arrival of Hacon Ancel’s ships, the two kings were finally able to sit down and talk at length.

“I do admit I was briefly tempted to invade when I was told I would be unable to attend my Uncle Candle’s funeral,” Ksaveras admitted frankly to Hacon Ancel one evening *overals* .

“Strange as it might sound,” the King of Emmine replied, “that matter was out of my hands as well. Looking back I am not really sure why relations cooled so much between your grandfather and me.”

“Politics, old man,” Ksaveras replied easily. “I fear it will make me old before my time. First, I had to teach my generals that I, not they, was in charge, and then there’s the Parliament. Honestly, you don’t know how lucky you are to be able to just let yours legislate.”

“You could do the same,” Hacon Ancel suggested.

“I wish I could,” Ksaveras replied, “but the Revolution/Counterrevolution a few years ago showed me otherwise. I am considering re-establishing a House of Commons, however. Perhaps if the Lords realize they have the Commons to work with as well as me, they will stop trying to slip things past me. I swear it’s like the old television shows where secretaries try to get their bosses to sign various bits of paper by sliding an extra in with a large stack.”

“Always read what you sign,” Helm advised.

“Oh, I learned that at my grandfather’s knee,” Ksaveras nodded, “and got it enforced during my stint as regent. Anyway, I’ve come to the conclusion that the government is not representative of the people enough on the national level, especially since too many of the lords picked the wrong side during the Revolution. So what can we do to end this so-called Cold War, anyway?”

Five

“All these bodies,” Jollin fretted. “We need to bury or cremate them as soon as possible for sanitary

reasons, but for the sake of their families, I wish we could properly identify them and give them all the respect they deserve.”

“How long is that likely to take?” Sextant asked. They were standing outside one of a dozen temporary morgues. This one was in a large warehouse on the outskirts of Medda.

“At this rate?” Jolling shrugged, “Months. There’s so much to do here and the living have to come first.”

“And yet the respectable funerals are really for the living, not the departed, aren’t they?” Sextant pointed out.

“That’s the way I was taught,” Jollin admitted. “I figure that once I’m dead I’m not going to care much one way or the other about my grave, but not everyone thinks that way.”

“I think I might be able to help,” Sextant told her and led the way into the morgue. Like Oceanvine’s and Sally’s staves, Sextant had been keeping the golden staff at full length and in his hand wherever he went in Medda. Its size did not seem to change its effectiveness, but he found it handy when making his way over uncertain surfaces.

Inside, the smell of death was already becoming unbearable, but Sextant cast a ward that filtered the air around him and went to work. For long minutes nothing at all seemed to be happening and then all the bodies began to glow a dull blue. The air filled with a low rumble and then all was silent and the blue glow disappeared.

“There,” Sextant told her. “This should give you somewhere between six months and a year to properly identify the bodies without having to rush. Let’s go to the other morgues and I’ll do the same there.”

“Thank you, Six,” Jollin told him simply. “This won’t make it easier for anyone, but it will give us the time to properly respect our dead. We all need the time this will afford us.”

“What did you do?” Oceanvine asked him later that evening aboard the *Maiyim Bourne*. She may have felt guilty about using tent space when it was at a premium, but somehow that didn’t apply to the chance to sleep in her own bed onboard the boat. “You didn’t actually stop time, did you?”

“No,” Sextant shook his head. “I think that’s impossible, but all life, or in this case death, is a set of chemical processes. We can suspend chemical reactions for a time. Actually it isn’t all that different from setting up a ward, except the spell infuses the object you want to affect. The length of time that will last is just a matter of how much power you put into the spell. Try it for yourself sometime.”

“I will,” she replied.

By the end of another week, Medda was still a disaster area, but by then all the survivors had their own shelters to live in and Hacon Ancel had promised to see the city rebuilt.

As she prepared to leave, Oceanvine took two large bags filled with gold coins from the *Maiyim Bourne* and presented them to her cousin, Jack Smith. “I want the family to have this,” she told him and Jollin.

“Vine,” he shook his head, “how can we accept this fortune when our neighbors will have to do without for a long time to come?”

“I didn’t think of it like that,” Oceanvine admitted. “My mistake.”

“No,” Jack shook his head. “Your heart is in the right place and in normal times, or if we were the only victims, it would have been different.”

“You’re right,” Oceanvine agreed. “Jollin, you’re the mayor.”

“Acting mayor,” she corrected Oceanvine instantly.

“The people here will make it official if you want them to,” Oceanvine told her. “That’s one thing I’ve heard repeatedly since arriving here. You’re the woman in charge and they all look to you. Take these and use them to help those who need it most.”

“Vine,” Jollin replied, looking inside one of the bags. It was larger than the normal moneybags on the *Maiyim Bourne* and weighed over twenty-five pounds. “This is a king’s ransom!”

“Only if we’re talking about a very cheap king,” Oceanvine replied. “I estimate the face value of these coins may be worth half a million crowns, but some of those coins, maybe all, are collectors’ items so if you sell them carefully maybe two or three million. It’s a lot of money, but not a king’s ransom. However, if there’s anything left, use whatever is left as a fund for the education of the children of Kern.”

“Possibly all of it, Vine,” Jollin told her. “His Majesty has promised everything we need to rebuild.”

“Then all of it if it comes to that,” Oceanvine told her, “but I’ve noticed that no matter how hard we try, there are always those who somehow slip through the cracks. The coins in those bags will act as mortar if that happens here.”

“I’m not going to let that happen here, Vine,” Jollin told her determinedly. “But you’re right. Two or three million should take the pressure off, although I tell you, I plan to use it all for the Oceanvine Endowment.”

“The what?” Oceanvine asked. “I don’t want my name plastered over half the town, Jollin. Where this came from is not as important as where it is going. Putting my name on that will obscure that point.”

Jollin laughed, “Lady Cousin, you have got to be the strangest noblewoman ever!”

“None stranger,” Oceanvine agreed.

“But I’m putting your name on this endowment anyway, Vine,” Jollin told her. “It’s that or a statue.”

“I don’t want that either,” Oceanvine told her.

“You forget whose name is already on plaques across the Narrontown district,” Jack chuckled. “Most people will think it’s named after her.”

“Fine by me,” Oceanvine nodded. “I’m already getting too many memorials for my tastes. There are statues in Silamon and Rjalkatyp and Six tells me there’s a jump rope rhyme with my name being chanted all over Granom and her colonies. I’m too young for that.”

“The hell, Vine!” Jollin told her. “Age has nothing to do with it and it isn’t fair to tell people not to express their thanks. Okay, it embarrasses you. I get it, but these things are what people do when words just aren’t enough to say thank you. The king can grant arms or elevate you to the House of Lords, if he

wants, but the rest of us don't have that option."

"I don't want to sit in the House of Lords," Oceanvine told her. "When this is over I'm going to found the Olen School of Magical Science and pick up where my great-grandmother left off. I'll also go and finish my wizard's degree and follow in Uncle Candle's footsteps. There are a lot of problems out there that need a good mage to solve them so it won't be boring and in between there will be the school and my post-wizard studies. That will be my memorial. And children. Six and I want to have kids, at least two of them."

"So you have your life all planned," Jollin noted.

"All planned?" Oceanvine echoed. "Probably not, but those are my goals. We'll just have to see how it goes, you know?"

"I know," Jack told her. "Life is always filled with surprises, both good and bad."

"Right," Oceanvine agreed.

She returned to the *Maiyim Bourne* to find both kings seated in the galley with Six. "Is this a boys' night in?" she asked them, seeing them with cigars lit.

"Not at all, my lady," Hacon Ancel denied. "We were just inviting young Ksaveras to Randona to finish the negotiations we started here. We hope you and Sir Sextant will be able to join us there."

"Fall semester starts soon, so we'll have to get back soon anyway," Oceanvine replied, "but we need to return the *Maiyim Bourne* to her slip in Keesport."

"At the speeds this boat can travel," Hacon Ancel remarked, "it's even money you'll beat us back."

"Not quite," Oceanvine laughed, remembering the King's jet was still at the airport, "but we'll be along in a few days. Try not to save the world without us."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Ksaveras laughed, "and I'm sailing to Randona on one of the frigates, so it really will be a race. The rest of my ships will remain stationed here for the next two months and continue to help with the rebuilding."

"That really is help above and beyond what anyone could expect, Veras," Oceanvine remarked.

"It's the least I can do for family and friends," Ksaveras replied.

"The Smiths and Coopers are not really related to you, you know," Oceanvine pointed out.

"They are by Granomish custom," Ksaveras argued. "Princess Ksana, my aunt, and the first Oceanvine were sisters by adoption, so since the Smiths and Coopers were related to Ksana by adoption, then they are to me as well. In Emmine you are quite exacting about your relationships; and make it almost mathematical with such concepts as third cousins twice removed and so forth."

"I know that," Oceanvine smiled. "Six and I figured out we were fifth cousins through our relationship to Silverwind and his family."

"Exactly," Ksaveras nodded. "But in Granom we only differentiate between close cousins and distant

ones. Close cousins share two of the same grandparents – you call them first cousins, of course – and anyone else to whom you can trace a relationship beyond that is just a cousin. The Smiths and Coopers are my cousins,” he concluded.

“I see,” Oceanvine told him. She had heard this before and even discussed the differences in Granomish and Emmine cousin terminology, but hearing Ksaveras explain why he felt compelled to come to Medda brought it home for her. She also realized that the Granomish king had taken as big a risk to do so as Hacon Ancel had in meeting him on the pier. The ensuing benefits had outweighed the risks, but that had not been apparent at the time. The two men were merely doing what their senses of honor compelled them to do.

It was not really different from how she behaved when she had sought out and encountered the One Maiyim mages who had caused the disaster on Kern; reckless and brave and yet compelled to do what had to be done, but it seemed different when it was someone else. The matter gave her something to think about as she sailed back to Keesport.

Rallena

One

“Oh,” Sally sighed as they came about on their approach into Keesport harbor. “This is what I truly love. Sailing with the wind in my hair and a bit of salt spray in my face.”

“A bit hard on the eyes, all that salt,” Oceanvine remarked.

“I don’t mind it a bit,” Sally laughed. “It’s a part of me, I think.”

“For me it’s the *Maiyim Bourne*,” Oceanvine told her, “but I get the feeling that the boat is only incidental for you, isn’t it?”

“Mmm, yes,” Sally replied as a splash of sea water broke over the bow and blew past them as a mist. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m a landlubber, but most of what I love about the land involves water; lakes, ponds, waterfalls. How will I ever incorporate all that in my life?” she asked suddenly.

“The way we all do,” Oceanvine told her. “One bit at a time. Your basic training is in general magic, but your specialties can be in anything you want. Look at everything your grandfather and my great-grandmother did and learned even after they were wizards. Especially after they were wizards. Your journeyman’s degree is just the start, you know, and you’re just entering your sophomore year. There’s plenty of time to do everything you want.”

“Stand by to retract the hydrofoils!” Sextant shouted to his crew.

“Come on, little salt spray,” Oceanvine teased Sally, “That’s your job.”

“Yes!” Sally exclaimed suddenly. “That’s it! That’s my mage name. Thank you, Vine.”

“Saltspray?” Oceanvine asked.

Sally nodded, "It's me. Methis was right; I know my name now that I hear it." She raced to her position so she could retract the foils on command, but shouted to her fellow students, "Balance, 'Tawa, I have my mage name!"

Oceanvine smiled. This was a perfect moment and so much better than the one in which she had found her own name. She watched Sally, *No*, she corrected herself, *Saltspray*, working the foils' mechanism while excitedly telling her fellows about her epiphany, and smiled even more broadly. Sally had always been a bold and confident child. It was a great contrast to Oceanvine's own uncertainties, but in this moment in which Sally had taken the name Saltspray, she seemed to have changed subtly. She held herself ever so much straighter and had not the unknowing confidence of youth, but the more informed self-confidence of an adult. *Oh, Uncle Candle*, Oceanvine thought, *I do wish you could have lived to see this!*

They stayed on the boat that evening and rode with Gerry Carter's son, Douglass, to the airport the next morning. Doug was close to Sextant's age, only a few years older and had been gradually taking over more and more of Gerry's responsibilities.

"Thanks for the ride, Doug," Sextant told him. "Your Dad is all right, I hope?"

"Dad's fine, but busy," Doug replied, "And don't worry about your boat. I'll see she's in perfect storage just like I do every year. One of these days you'll have to let me see inside the cabin, though."

"It stays warmer in Keesport longer than in Randona," Oceanvine suggested. "How about we come back during the mid-term break and sail around the strait for a couple of days?"

"You're on," Doug agreed, "And now you're off. Here's the airport."

"We're cutting it a bit fine," Sextant worried after bidding Doug farewell. "It's only fifteen minutes before our plane leaves and you know what Wizard Candle used to say about what gate one's plane is always at."

"I think I missed that one," Saltspray remarked.

"It's always at the furthest one down the concourse," Sextant replied.

"Sounds like Granddad to me," she laughed. "This is a small airport, though, and Kara said we were preboarded. Oh and Granddad was wrong. Our flight is at Gate One."

"You're almost late," the flight attendant informed them with a plastic smile on her face.

"Hmm, almost late," Saltspray mused. "That means we aren't actually late, are we?"

"Yes, Miss," the other woman admitted. "You will have to store those staves in the security cabin, however. They could be used as weapons."

"They are weapons," Sally replied after handing her staff over. "We're mages."

"You should have had these stamped and loaded in the cargo bay then," the attendant replied, still not allowing her smile to slip.

“They are also not weapons,” Oceanvine told her. “They are tools of our trade and mine might have been damaged in transport. You may have insurance, but this one is irreplaceable. Please store these in the most secure place you can, and, Saltspray, please don’t tease the attendant. Her job is difficult enough without us making it even more so.”

“I’m sorry,” Saltspray apologized to the flight attendant. “Actually Vine is right. There’s nothing I can do with that staff that I cannot without it. The staff just makes it all easier.”

It turned out to be a rough flight across the Great Bay when they flew through a low pressure cell over the Cellenen Islands. However the weather cleared up for the second half of the trip.

“What’s that really black smudge on the eastern horizon?” Leotawa asked while they were still an hour out of Jorric International Airport in Randona. He was sitting just behind Sextant in a trio of seats he shared with Saltspray and Balance.

“The Great Bay Volcano,” Sextant replied. “It’s been erupting all summer, sending a lot of ash over Mairsten and the other islands to the east.”

“I read that Cape Serd got a few inches as well,” Oceanvine remarked. “Not good for the tourist trade.”

“I thought the rich and famous were going to Bellinen these days,” Sextant remarked.

“Some are,” Oceanvine nodded, “but most folks cannot afford to jet all around the world to the latest in-spot and I think Cape Serd will always be a traditional summer spot, so long as the eruptions don’t keep up for too long.”

“Actually, I hear there’s a whole new sort of tourist going there,” Leotawa told them. “Volcano watchers. One of the Emmine sailors mentioned it a few days ago. Evidently a lot of people are going to Cape Serd and hiring boats to get a closer look at the Great Bay Volcano. The area is already based on tourism and there are hundreds of boats for hire, so it’s a natural.”

“So maybe the merchants there aren’t having as bad a summer as they might,” Oceanvine decided.

“Well, it’s no fun shoveling volcanic ash up off your sidewalk,” Balance remarked. “You can take that from me. Sometimes the ash from New Island gets blown to Rjalkatyp. It’s bad enough scooping out what is essentially gravel and powdered rock when it’s dry, but when it gets wet you have to really work to get it off. Sometimes it sort of sets like a glue. Very nasty stuff.”

Coming into Randona, Leotawa made another observation, “There’s Veras’ frigate. She’s still moving so I guess this race was a tie after all.”

“So at least we won’t have missed anything important,” Saltspray remarked.

“It’s only a week until classes start again,” Oceanvine reminded them. “Don’t you have orientation duties helping the freshmen get settled?”

“Yes, but only in the Magic Department,” Saltspray shrugged. “That won’t take much of our time.”

“But we do have to get ready for our own classes,” Balance reminded her. “Besides, we’re not the mages the kings have been consulting with.”

“True,” Saltspray admitted reluctantly, “but both Ksaveras and Hacon Ancel always behaved as though my opinion mattered.”

“They were being polite,” Leotawa commented.

“They were,” Oceanvine confirmed, “but they were also interested in what you two had to say. I’ll promise you this much, though. I’ll see that you are invited to the signing of whatever treaty they eventually come up with. At least I will if I can.”

Two

“I feel guilty asking Master Sunray to fill in for so many of our classes,” Oceanvine told Sextant as the semester began. They had been splitting their time between their responsibilities at the University and in treaty negotiations. Just now they were entering Randona Palace for what they hoped would be the last negotiation session.

“He seems to be enjoying it, Vine,” Sextant replied, “and the masters candidates appreciate being allowed to conduct the labs. I think that maybe we should continue that in the future.”

“That is working well,” she admitted, “and at least the treaty is almost ready for signing. I like the name they’ve chosen.”

“The Medda Compact?” Sextant asked. “Yes, I think Ksanya was inspired when she came up with it. Now it’s just a matter of getting Parliament to ratify it.”

“That’s going to be an uphill process, I fear,” Oceanvine sighed. “There is still so much anti-Granom sentiment in both Commons and Lords.”

“There you two are!” Princess Maia remarked as they stepped around a corner. “I was just coming to see if you got lost.”

“Sorry,” Oceanvine apologized. “We got held up at University. Are there any further sticking points on the treaty?”

“No,” Maia laughed, opening the door to the conference room. “We were just trying to decide who would get to sign the actual document.”

Waiting for them in the room were the two kings, Crown Prince Helm, Queen Melloise, Countess Ksanya and Earl Zakhar. “What’s to decide?” Oceanvine asked. “The treaty is between Kings Ksaveras and Hacon Ancel, isn’t it?”

“And our governments,” Hacon Ancel replied. “His Granomish Majesty has the power to sign and enforce all treaties directly, but we are compelled to work through our Parliament. I sign, but they ratify.”

“Yes, Your Majesty” Oceanvine argued, “but first there must be a treaty to be ratified, or are we waiting to see if Parliament will accept it before proclaiming the Medda Compact.”

“No, we will sign the Compact tomorrow morning regardless,” Hacon Ancel replied, “but what we were discussing was who would get to sign the original document as witnesses.”

“Everyone in this room, certainly,” Ksaveras commented, “and our military commanders. Ours will be flying in this evening. But the issue is whether or not members of Parliament should sign.”

“Ah, I see,” Oceanvine nodded. “Well, it seems to me Prime Minister Hannis might.”

“He is not well disposed toward the Medda Compact,” Helm commented.

“We shall be meeting with him this evening,” Hacon Ancel informed them. “It will be his job to present the Compact before the combined Houses of Parliament and we intend to ensure he does so in a fair and unbiased fashion regardless of his personal feelings in the matter.”

“So we don’t have the MPs sign,” Oceanvine shrugged. “They’ll get over it. I don’t see how we can politically have some members sign if the prime minister refuses. Those in favor should understand and those against us wouldn’t like it if we offered them free ice cream at lunchtime. But we should work on gaining supporters in both houses, it sounds like.”

“What about your students?” Ksaveras asked.

“What about them?” Oceanvine asked.

“We thought it would be a good idea to have them witness the treaty as well,” Ksaveras replied.

“I’m not against the idea, but why?” Oceanvine inquired.

“First of all, they were there,” Hacon Ancel replied, “and second, they are one each of the three sapient species on Maiyim. The symbolic value is priceless.”

“All right,” Oceanvine nodded. “Anyone else?”

“That probably ought to be enough witnesses,” Ksanya remarked. “Many more and we may as well just send a copy to every town and city and ask the people to sign it as well.”

“That’s not as silly an idea as it sounds,” Helm remarked. “If we had the technology to circulate such a document in a timely manner, we really could ask the entire world to witness it.”

“Maybe in your time, son, but not mine,” Hacon Ancel replied.

“Maybe,” Helm echoed. “For now, however, I agree that we have enough witnesses.”

“I still would have preferred signing it in Medda, however,” Maia added.

“Me too,” Ksanya agreed, “but it really would have been unfair and insensitive to Jollin and her people for us to go back there with a media circus in tow.”

“Agreed, but it would have been nice to have Jollin here for the signing,” Maia replied. “I called her up and offered to have her flown in but she turned me down. She won’t leave Medda until the city is back on its feet.”

“Good for her,” Melloise nodded approvingly. “Dear, you need to remember her when next year’s honors list comes up.”

“I came to that conclusion in Medda,” Hacon Ancel replied. “Jollin Smith is a remarkable young woman. The city there could have been in chaos when we arrived and while there were some incidents of looting, most of the people were already picking up the pieces with quiet determination. At first I thought that might just be the way the people of Kern are, but no, it was Miss Smith holding it all together.”

“Her father, Jack, was a big part of that,” Sextant pointed out. “He’s the harbormaster there, but the fact is the surviving members of the city council originally asked him to be the acting mayor.”

“Why did he refuse?” the King of Emmine asked.

“He told me, he could do a lot more behind the scenes,” Sextant replied.

“Cousin Jack is a hands-on kind of guy,” Oceanvine explained. “He prefers to lead by example and did not care to delegate when he could pitch in. Jollin was the better person to act as mayor. She’s relatively young and personable while Jack likes playing the gruff old-timer. Both styles work for them, but I think he realized Medda needed someone like Jollin and he was happy to assist in any way he could. Tell me, though. The Earl of Kern and his entire immediate family were killed in the blast. Who will you choose to fill it or will you opt to keep the county seat vacant?”

“I have not yet had time to consider that,” Hacon Ancel replied. “I imagine there are cousins who will expect to inherit. Why? Did you have Jack Smith or Jollin in mind?”

“I don’t play those games, Your Majesty,” Oceanvine told him coolly. “What you do with the county seat there is your business, but I was going to advise you not to rush into any decisions. The people of Medda are in shock just now, but I think they’ll come through this just fine. Do you think it would really do them any good to install a stranger as their new lord?”

“This isn’t the Age of Faith,” Hacon Ancel replied. “There is no reason to rush into filling that county seat for now. You’re right about that. I will tread softly on this matter and let Miss Smith know I have no intention of elevating anyone to the county seat until the people there are ready for it.”

“Fair enough,” Oceanvine nodded.

“Have there been any signs of retaliation by One Maiyim, Vine?” Ksanya asked.

“You’d probably hear about it before I would,” Oceanvine replied.

“Maybe not, Vine,” Sextant told her. “We’re not Wizard Candle’s sidekicks anymore.”

“Sidekicks?” Oceanvine laughed at the word. “Six, have you been reading comic books?”

“Not since high school,” Sextant replied. “The thing is, while the wizard was still alive I doubt One Maiyim took either of us seriously, even if they knew our names.”

“They knew mine from the start,” Oceanvine retorted. “Adamant kept calling me by name, remember?”

“I wasn’t conscious at the time,” Sextant reminded her. “I thought you just assumed his information was from your grandmother.”

“That Arithan mage on Kern did the same thing,” Oceanvine continued.

“You didn’t get her name?” Ksanya asked accusingly.

“It wouldn’t have been a name any of us would have heard before,” Oceanvine retorted, “and frankly the only thing worse than fighting those people is having to talk to them. She called me ‘Little Elinor, just like Adamant did.’”

“So Countess Myrrha’s been talking about you again,” Sextant commented. “Consequently she, the Arithan, that is, underestimated you badly.”

“I don’t think we can count on that happening again,” Oceanvine replied.

“I’ll say,” Sextant laughed. “We might have had a bit more leeway had you just killed that one.”

“No,” Oceanvine shook her head. “I’ll kill in self-defense, but I’d already pulled her fangs. Uncle Candle always said I was a nicer person than Great-Grandmother. I’m not sure he would still be saying that now. It would have been a mercy to kill her and I wasn’t feeling merciful.”

“Good Gods, Vine!” Ksanya swore. “What did you do?” Oceanvine explained about Arithan’s curse. Ksanya’s chalk-white face went slightly transparent. “You got me beat,” she replied at last. “I’d have just taken her apart to find out why she was still living.”

“I didn’t think of that,” Oceanvine admitted. “I’m afraid I lost my temper.”

“Well, you’re young yet,” Ksanya grinned. “There’s a chance you’ll grow out of that... maybe.”

Three

“Damn the Parliament!” Oceanvine muttered a few days later. She was having tea with Maia and Ksanya. “We managed to draw up a treaty between Emmine and Granom that was beneficial to everyone and yet they still argue and refuse to ratify it.”

“And after we staged the signing so nicely,” Ksanya chuckled. “I thought Saltspray’s speech was particularly adorable.”

“She was first to witness after the kings had signed the Compact,” Oceanvine chuckled. “She didn’t realize she wasn’t supposed to make a speech as well.”

“No harm done and the news people loved it,” Maia commented. “I do wish we could sit her in Parliament though.”

“That wouldn’t be fair,” Ksanya disagreed.

“They’re big boys and girls,” Maia shrugged, “They’d have to rely on their own defenses.”

“I meant it wouldn’t be fair to Saltspray,” Ksanya clarified testily. “Now if you could only find an excuse to let her father sit among the Lords.”

“It hasn’t been thirty years since their family was ennobled,” Maia explained.

“A stupid law if I ever heard one,” Ksanya replied, “and I’ve spent my life hearing about stupid laws. In Granom a recently created lord may sit in parliament immediately.”

“We had a few problems with that,” Maia explained.

“Yeah, back during the reign of Hacon I,” Ksanya argued. “The king decided to pack the Lords in his favor except the new lords decided to vote their way and not the king’s. I did my research.”

“It shows,” Oceanvine remarked, “but that was before the establishment of the House of Commons by his son Hacon II. A lot has changed since then.”

“But not that law,” Maia pointed out. “His Majesty can no longer simply issue a decree, you know.”

“He can in Probellinen,” Oceanvine argued. “Most of it except for Tarense.”

“A special case and we both know it,” Maia shot back. “Since the rebellion, Probellinen has been directly under His Majesty’s rule. However, if you must know, Helm intends to rescind that and normalize governance in Probellinen if his father doesn’t do it first.”

“It’s about time,” Oceanvine commented.

“Well, yes, but you have to understand Hacon Ancel was the Crown Prince when the Probellinens tried to break away from the kingdom and he still remembers the events first hand,” Maia explained. “Yes, I asked about that fairly early on after Helm proposed. There are some things that really are unforgiveable to each of us and the Probellinen Rebellion was that to His Majesty. Deep down he knows he’s holding a grudge, but none of us are perfect, are we?”

“Speak for yourself,” Ksanya laughed. “I figure I must be perfect to someone. I just have to find out who.”

“Not what I meant,” Maia chuckled, “but it did break the mood. Vine? What’s wrong?”

“Parliament,” she replied, getting back to the reasons for her concern. “Can’t we do something to push them our way? I’m sure the people of Emmine want this treaty as much as I do. Maybe make a speech on television?”

“That would not be in keeping with the dignity of the Crown,” Maia replied. “You could do it, I suppose.”

“One Maiyim might know who I am, but I doubt anyone else does,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“Oh come on, Vine!” Ksanya scoffed. “You’re a hero in Granom. Everyone’s heard of you and Oceanvine’s Girls. And your name is known on the Isle of Fire too.”

“You could run for prime minister in Sutheria and win in a walk, Vine,” Maia added.

“Maybe, though I seriously doubt it,” Oceanvine denied. “And none of that counts in Emmine proper. The populace of the main archipelago doesn’t know who I am. Why should it, really?”

“I wouldn’t be too sure of that,” a male voice from the door disagreed. “I doubt there’s a lord in

Emmine who doesn't know you on sight by now."

"Dad?" Oceanvine turned to see Earl Olen standing in the doorway. He was still thin and very tired looking after his magically induced illness. "What are you doing in Randona?"

"Parliament is in special session, dear," he replied, "and I'm late for the party, but hopefully not too late."

"Will you argue for the Medda Compact, Dad?" Oceanvine asked.

"That's why I'm here," Fredrik told her. "It is also why I am in the palace. I'm here to discuss strategy with His Majesty and His Highness. I am also looking forward to meeting our other royal cousin."

"Me?" Ksanya piped up.

Fredrik smiled. "I've met you before, Madame," he replied, "but not as cordially as I would have liked. You'll be dining at the embassy this evening?" Ksanya nodded. "Then I will see you there. Oceanvine, you and your husband are invited too, I'm informed."

"We'll be there," Oceanvine promised.

"Good," Fredrik replied. "Your mother and brother are here as well."

Fredrik, Earl Olen's arrival in Parliament changed the complexion of the debate immediately. Even before the session was called to order, he had met with allies and undecided lords alike, working to build a coalition that would pass a measure of acceptance within the House of Lords. The measure had been stalled, but with the endorsement of Olen, it gained the needed votes to pass through the House of Lords, but that was not enough. The conservative members of the Emtos Party still had control over the House of Commons.

Oceanvine had long suspected that, in spite of denials, many of the Emtos Party had been members of One Maiyim in their youth. Even if not, it had become apparent to her that the Cold War had benefitted One Maiyim more than any other group of people in the world. It was normal for the House of Commons to follow the Lords' lead when a bill was being debated in both houses. If the conservatives among the Lords voted in one way, then the Emtos Party could generally be counted on to follow suit. This time seemed to be a rare exception.

While Oceanvine had been growing up and even just a few years earlier, her father had been just another member of the Parliament. He was not well known outside his circle of friends and his opinions did not hold a lot of sway in either house, but all that had changed since two tsunamis had ravaged the east coasts of the islands of Sutheria.

Oceanvine, Sextant and Candle had been the heroes of the day and because of her name and heritage, King Hacon Ancel had sought out Oceanvine's advice on innumerable subjects. More often than not for the first few years, the young Oceanvine had nodded politely at any idea her king had run past her. Aside from the fact that she was taking tea with the royal family, she may as well have been sitting with friends in the university cafeteria. Parliament did not know that, however. In politics perception is everything and what was perceived was that this young woman had become a confidante of the king. Therefore, her noble father must have influence with the crown as well.

Suddenly, Fredrik found himself being consulted by his colleagues in both houses. The situation was both satisfying and frustrating since he had disapproved of his daughter's choice of career. But if the king

approved, then how could he do otherwise, at least in public.

Now the Earl of Olen's voice could be heard in both houses and while traditionally a conservative, even the more liberal parties paid attention when he spoke. He may have arrived after the special session had begun, but he was right on time to speak before both houses of Parliament.

His speech was an impassioned plea to his colleagues to consider the truly traditional values of Emmine. He stressed the friendship the two kingdoms had enjoyed for centuries and how it was Emmine who helped to broker the treaty of peace between Bellinen and Granom over a century earlier. He cast the more recent tensions as a modern absurdity that obscured a friendship the conservatives of Parliament had always embraced. And then he spoke of things that had happened more recently.

He spoke at length about the space race that had culminated in a combined mission to Midbar and the recent "Tea in Space" meeting of two spaceships, one from each kingdom. These were the harbingers of the future, he told Parliament; not only peaceful coexistence, but cooperation and teamwork with one of their oldest friends.

He also spoke about One Maiyim. He had been indoctrinated by his mother in the public policies of the organization from the cradle and knew all the propaganda they had used before being forced to go underground. He spoke about those ideals; peace, prosperity, international cooperation and ecological responsibility. Then he turned and showed how One Maiyim had betrayed the world by abusing those ideals. He spoke of One Maiyim's attempts at regicide and revolution all over the world and then he returned to his original subject – traditional values.

Friendship with Granom was traditional, he told the Parliament. It was also the way of the future and the desire of their king. It was right for Maiyim, it was right for Emmine and it would continue to be right for their children's children's children.

Finally, Fredrik of the House of Jenynges, Earl of Olen called the question. Would they vote for the Medda Compact or for generations more of the Cold War?

Four

The Medda Compact had already been signed in a public ceremony, but both Hacon Ancel and Ksaveras agreed the Parliamentary leaders ought to get the chance to add their signatures as witnesses as the final step of ratification. And so another televised ceremony was hastily planned, this time in Parliament's Nildarin Hall.

As they had during Fredrik's speech, the House of Commons sat at their normal desks on the floor of their chamber while the smaller House of Lords sat in tiers of chairs to one side. Prime Minister Hannis sat at the front of the Commons while King Hacon Ancel, Crown Prince Helm and their guests sat at one end of the hall, facing back toward the assembled Parliament. It was rare for the Queen of Emmine to attend Parliament and ever rarer for the Crown Princess to be there as well, but they were. Also seated to their left were King Ksaveras, Earl Zakhar and Countess Ksanya. And to their right were Oceanvine, Sextant and their students.

Saltspray and Misana wanted to wear their personal satellites, but Oceanvine stopped them, "Let's not distract from the main event of the day, ladies."

There was a lot of obscure ceremonial business to go through when His Majesty attended Parliament, but eventually they got to the point of signing the Medda Compact into law. The prime minister and the leaders of both houses came forward and bowed before their king, but before they could rise there was a brilliant flash of light and a tall Orentan man with a gun suddenly appeared in front of the kings. Several more flashes of light brought other male and female attackers into the midst of Nildarin Hall.

“Maiyim will be One!” the first Orente screamed, holding his hand up to reveal a heavy gold ring. A vivid purple beam shot out from the ring, but Ksanya had already thrown herself in front of the kings. Her null-magic field was fully extended and the purple beam abruptly faded to nothing as it intercepted that field. The Orente, however, was prepared for such a defense and promptly threw a chair at Ksanya telekinetically, knocking her to the floor and out of the way.

Before he could try again, however, Saltspray was out of her seat and casting an impenetrable ward around the royalty from both archipelagos. Sextant and Oceanvine, staves in hand, rose to attack the Orente, but were immediately under siege by the assassin’s back-ups.

The first assassin renewed his attack on the kings and Saltspray felt her ward starting to crumble until Balance joined hands with her and added his own strength to her ward. Leotawa had a more direct approach and telekinetically used the chair that had knocked Ksanya out to do the same to the Orente.

Meanwhile, Sextant and Oceanvine were battling four other mages. Four Bonds of Aritos formed overhead and began to coalesce. “They’re forming a Bond of Arithan,” Oceanvine realized. The members of Parliament were running around in a panic, most trying to get out of the hall, but a few recklessly tried to attack the assassins. Those attacks turned out to be futile as mere fists, chairs and other thrown objects were insufficient to get through the assassin’s wards

“You know how to handle them, Vine,” Sextant told her even as the golden staff started siphoning power from the four Bonds.

“We can’t do it fast enough this way,” Oceanvine replied, feeling her own staff starting to heat up. She looked inward and drew on the power of the Seal of Methis once more. She knew what she had to do, but she would need all the help Sextant could provide.

Cooperative magic was among the most dangerous things a mage could attempt. If any mage in a cooperative spell were to resist what his partner or partners were doing, they could both be destroyed in a backlash of power. Oceanvine and Sextant, however, had been working together this way almost from the start. When Oceanvine placed her hand on the golden staff, just above Sextant’s he knew exactly what to do.

The Seal of Methis came to life suddenly in a large, spinning, illuminated representation overhead. It glowed in a pure white light and four petals of the clockwork flower it resembled reached out and swallowed up the Bonds of Aritos before returning to their places in the Seal.

The seal glowed brighter than ever and Oceanvine groaned, “It’s too much, I can’t hold it!” So Sextant next used the staff to aid him in translocating the seal and its energy into the upper atmosphere.

“I wonder if we’re starting to do that a bit too often,” he mused, holding Oceanvine from falling to the floor.

“Could be,” she whispered. “Uncle Candle did it several times, and now we have too.” She paused to gather herself, drew some random energy inward and felt better immediately. “I wonder if there’s a better

way to handle that sort of thing. Uh, what happened to the assassins?"

"Didn't you notice?" he asked. She shook her head. "Your Seal of Methis seemed to just swallow them up along with their attempted spells. That's probably why you had such an energy surge." Plaster and tiny bits of slate were still falling to the floor. "I seem to have destroyed another roof."

"You just punched a hole in it this time, Six," she told him, "and it was in a good cause, I think."

"We got the first one!" Leotawa told them proudly although Saltspray was already busy administering first aid to the members of Parliament who had gotten trampled in the panic.

"Your Parliament is more exciting than ours is," Ksaveras told Hacon Ancel in feigned casualness. "All this from having a House of Commons, would you say? Perhaps we should try something like that again."

"It's not always like that here, cousin," Ksanya told him. "Sometimes they even behave like grown-ups."

"That puts them one-up on our own system, I fear," Zak added.

Hacon Ancel just stared at the three Granomen, but Helm chuckled and told them, "I think I'm starting to understand you three and Emtos knows it took a while. This sense of humor is just your way of keeping fear at bay, isn't it?"

"That," Ksanya admitted, "and it keeps us amused. Are you all right, Your Majesty?" she asked Hacon Ancel. He had turned pale.

The King of Emmine took several measured breaths while the others looked on concernedly. "I think, perhaps, the excitement may have been a bit too much for me. I'm not a young man anymore."

"Perhaps we should call in your physician, dear," Queen Melloise suggested gently.

"Not immediately," Hacon Ancel decided. "Let's get this treaty signed first, but have him waiting at the Palace. I think I'll be fine, but a second opinion would not be amiss. How about you, Madame?" he asked Ksanya. "At least I did not get a chair thrown at me."

"Just a bruise and another ruined dress, Your Majesty," Ksanya reported. "I appear to have an exceptionally thick skull."

"Been telling you that for years, Sis," Zak pointed out.

"Keep that man unconscious," Oceanvine directed the arresting officers as they collected the Orentan assassin who had been knocked out. "If he is capable of self-translocation, no cell in the world will hold him otherwise."

"Yes, ma'am," a police lieutenant replied. "We're going to take good care of this one."

Parliament was gradually brought back to order and the cameras turned back to their coverage of the Compact. This time the people who were to sign, came forward one at a time and placed their names below those of the other witnesses and then nervously returned to their seats. Each of them had been promised time to make a speech but in the wake of the failed assassination none were disposed toward lingering at that end of the hall. Finally, King Hacon Ancel thanked his parliament and allowed the prime minister to close the proceedings.

On their way out of Nildarin Hall, however, word came that there had been an attempted bombing of Randona Palace timed to coincide with the assassination attempt. “Was anyone hurt?” Hacon Ancel asked immediately.

“Only the would-be bombers, Your Majesty,” the security agent who brought the news reported.

“All right,” Hacon Ancel nodded as they continued toward their waiting limousines. “What happened?”

“A car drove up to the main gate,” the agent reported, “and tried to crash through. Your Guardian Servicemen opened fire and killed the driver before the bomb could be detonated. Had it gone off we believe there would have been substantial damage to the palace. We have increased security around the palace and increased the perimeter by a city block.”

“Very well,” the king nodded. “We want similar precautions around the Granomish Embassy and please have Agency Chief Marks meet us at the palace at his earliest convenience.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

“Until the added security measures are around the embassy, it may be best to stay at the palace,” Ksanya suggested to Ksaveras.

“You may be right,” he told her.

“I wonder if the bombing is a coincidence,” Oceanvine speculated as she joined Ksaveras in his limousine. Saltspray and Misana joined her. Six, Balance and Leotawa got in the car carrying the Emmine royal family. Once inside the vehicle Saltspray and Misana took out their marble and silver beads and set them back into their customary orbits. Oceanvine decided she needed to relax and did likewise with her pearl.

“What makes you say that?” Zak asked.

“To date most of their attacks have been magic-based,” Oceanvine replied. Attempting to bomb the palace is something they might do, but I would have thought they would use a spell.”

“I hate to disagree, cousin,” Zak replied, “but they used both magical and nonmagical weapons during the Revolution. Car bombs were fairly common, in fact. I think you were too concentrated on the magical aspects of the Peoples’ Party to be particularly aware of such mundanities as car bombs.”

“Zak is right,” Ksanya told her. “Part of the attack on the Wurra involved car bombs. That’s how they breached the outer wall in two places, in fact. It was all over the news when we were at M... uh, Fireiron’s place. Then they used the rubble and several buses to plug the holes up after we had taken off for that little vacation home of her’s.”

“It might be an unrelated attack, though,” Ksaveras commented. “It’s a large and complex world and there could well be more than one group of people who don’t want Granom and Emmine to be friends again. However, it’s too late for that now. We are friends and no number of regicidal attacks is going to change that.”

“Who stands to lose with the end of the Cold War?” Saltspray asked.

“Weapons manufacturers, maybe,” Oceanvine replied uncertainly.

“In the short term, perhaps,” Ksanya nodded, “but weaponry systems are only one facet of business for most of those manufacturers. If they aren’t building bigger and better weapons, they’ll develop new refrigerators, cars, jet planes even space craft. Far too much of the Granom annual budget has gone into defense these past few decades.”

“Too right!” Ksaveras and Zak replied in unison.

“The same is true for Emmine,” Ksanya continued. “Maybe now some of that money can be spent to combat poverty and illness and more can be put into the space program.”

“The space program has had a lot of direct benefits for the people,” Ksaveras pointed out. “We developed new, very-light but strong, alloys and plastics that are now used in every walk of life. Wheelchairs, for example only weigh a fraction of what they did just a few years ago, but common household appliances are lighter and more efficient than they used to be too. There are whole new families of medicines that came to light because of space research in both archipelagos and we learned many new forms of engineering and gave many people jobs. You can’t say space research was a waste.”

“Never said it was, Veras,” Ksanya told him.

“Parliament did,” Ksaveras replied bitterly. “And there are a fair number of other organizations who doubt the benefits.”

“We’ll just have to prove them wrong,” Ksanya told him, “but there’s no single panacea to cure poverty. Maybe now we can afford to look into some of the others.”

“I never really thought of that,” Saltspray admitted. “I mean I’ve put coins in the poor box when visiting the Temples – Nildar’s especially – but I haven’t thought much about the homeless and poor beyond that.”

“It’s always been a concern of our family,” Zak told her. “It’s a concern of your king and his family too. I think it goes along with being proper royalty – you’re supposed to care for your people, all of your people. There have been kings who forgot that from time to time. We don’t think a lot of kindly thoughts about them, however.”

Ksanya chuckled, “There was a satirical history book written about forty years ago. Very funny and it is still in print. It mostly covers Granomish history, not too surprisingly since it was published in Querna, but what I remember most is how it listed all the kings back to the first Ksaveras and through the ages. Each one was classified as a good king, a bad king, a weak king or a strong king. Some were more than one of those, of course. Anyway most of the ‘bad kings’ were the ones who tended to forget they were here to protect and serve their subjects.”

“Sounds like a fun read,” Saltspray remarked.

“Very strange,” Misana remarked. “You make fun of your kings and ancestors?”

“It’s a Granomish form of respect,” Ksanya explained. “We don’t satirize people we hate. I’ll send you both copies of the book and you can see for yourselves.”

“Better send them a more serious history as well, Sis,” Zak suggested, “or they’ll miss most of the

jokes.”

The trip to Randona Palace was uneventful, although a gasp was forced from Oceanvine’s mouth when she saw the damage to the main gate. The bomber’s car may not have exploded, but it did not get through the wooden drop gate at the security check point. Instead it had crashed through the iron fence right beside it and did not come to rest until it hit one of the palace’s walls in the so-called New Wing. The car and its high explosives had been cleared away before the royal parties could return, but it had pushed in a section of the wall and shattered parts of the granite sheathing.

“I think tea and something to eat will do all of us some good,” Queen Melloise decided once they were inside and Hacon Ancel was being attended to by his doctor. “It will calm us down.”

“Orya will be sorry she missed it,” Ksanya remarked. “She takes tea in the Emmine custom most afternoons.”

“You must bring your queen next time you visit, Your Majesty,” Melloise told Ksaveras.

Maids were just bringing in tea and an assortment of cakes and biscuits and various other things to go with them when Hacon Ancel returned. “My blood pressure was a bit high,” he remarked. “Doctor Carpens suggests a new medication. I suppose the low-salt diet was not quite enough. He also thinks I should slow down a bit at my age. I promised to try to avoid assassination attempts in the future.”

“Good plan,” Ksaveras laughed. “I’ll take that to heart as well.”

“The good doctor was not quite as amused,” Hacon Ancel replied. “You would have thought I did this on a regular basis.”

“It was not the first time, dear,” Melloise pointed out, “but you should have a cup of tea.”

“Excuse me, Your Majesties,” Security Chief Marks interrupted from the doorway. “My apologies for not arriving sooner, but... well... The Orentan assassin...”

“What happened?” Hacon Ancel and Oceanvine demanded together.

“He escaped, sire,” Marks replied reluctantly. “when we went to check on him, the cell was empty.”

“I specifically instructed the arresting officers that he was to be kept unconscious!” Oceanvine stormed.

“Yes, my lady,” Marks replied, “but the thing is, you see...”

“No one believes in magic, right?” Oceanvine asked dangerously. “Or is it they weren’t about to take orders from a woman?”

“Uh,” Marks paused to compose an answer. Oceanvine gave him a scowl that suggested any answer he chose to give her would not have been the right one.

“Oh, this is ridiculous!” she snapped. “The assassin translocated out of the cell. Where was he being kept?”

“Downtown in the main police station’s temporary holding section,” Marks informed her.

“Six and I may be able to follow him,” Oceanvine replied. “Take us there as fast as you can.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“I’m coming too,” Saltspray told her.

“Not this time, Sally,” Oceanvine replied sternly. “You’ve never translocated yourself and this isn’t the time to start learning.” Saltspray shot her a rebellious look, but was unable to maintain it.

“Yeah, okay,” Saltspray finally backed down, “but I want to hear all about it when you get back.” Oceanvine raised her eyebrows at her apprentice. “Well it’s just another lesson, you know,” Saltspray maintained.

The security chief had neither a siren nor flashing lights on his car, but the four police motorcycles that escorted the car did and a few minutes later Oceanvine and Sextant were standing just outside the cell the Orentan assassin had escaped from.

“No sign of the Bond, Vine” Sextant observed.

“Thank the Gods,” Oceanvine replied.

“How do you propose to find him?” Sextant asked. “Wizard Candle tracked Adamant because he used the Bond of Aritos.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Oceanvine shook her head. “It was in Uncle Candle’s notes. Translocation always leaves a trail. It normally doesn’t last very long, that’s why we had to hurry here. Damn! I don’t see it though.”

“I do,” Sextant told her. “I think it’s the staff. It’s augmenting my ability to see the string. It’s dissipating, but still there. Here try for yourself.”

Oceanvine reached over and grasped the golden staff in her left hand. “You’re right. We’re going to have to translocate. He went about thirty miles to the south. If we try going overland, we’ll lose him. Besides, without the Bond to absorb translocatory shock, he could still be unconscious.”

“And what about the shock to our own systems?” Sextant asked. “I know you told Sally she’s never translocated herself, but then neither have we.”

“Don’t tell her that,” Oceanvine remarked. “Anyway, that was also in Uncle Candle’s notes. Remember he knew how to translocate without suffering shock and he wrote down how to do it.”

“Why didn’t he teach us that?” Sextant asked.

“Well, for one thing I got the impression that even knowing how, it’s still dangerous,” Oceanvine replied. “I mean, what happens if we end up inside a wall or a tree? And second and more importantly, we need the golden staff to absorb the shock. It’s possible we could do the same thing with an uncharged wooden staff, but this isn’t the time to experiment.”

“Are you sure you know how to do it?” Sextant asked hesitantly.

“It sounded simple enough,” Oceanvine remarked. “The spell that transfers you through space feeds

back into you at the other end of the trip. That's where the shock comes from, so instead you need to make sure it gets absorbed by the staff instead. When One Maiyim's mages do it with the Bond of Aritos, it's the Bond that absorbs the energy, but we're wasting time."

"I think it will be best for you to translocate us, Vine," Sextant told her. "Maybe neither of us have the experience, but at least you've read about it." She nodded and they swapped staves. Oceanvine took a deep breath, concentrated on what she wanted to happen, and then the world changed.

There was no sensation of movement, no strange noises or colors and no apparent passage of time. One moment they were in the holding cell and the next they were outside a small cottage away from the capital city. The golden staff warmed noticeably in Oceanvine's hand and they felt like they had been shoved hard in the back while the world spun around them.

"I think I need more practice," Oceanvine commented through the dizziness.

"I would rather we didn't have to," Sextant told her, nearly losing his balance. "That wasn't as smooth a trip as I might have expected."

"My first attempt," Oceanvine reminded him, "and by all rights we should have been knocked out."

"I don't see any sign of our assassin," Sextant told her, recovering rapidly.

Oceanvine scanned the area. They were standing on a recently mowed lawn of a lot completely surrounded by tall oaks and ashes. The white cottage it belonged to was small and there were no other houses in sight. A long dirt driveway stretched out of sight into the woods. Then she picked up an aura. "Inside the house," she told him.

"Are you sure?" he asked, looking for himself. "I'd hate to scare some poor, little old lady out of her life when we go charging in."

Just then a large fireball flashed toward them only to splash harmlessly off Oceanvine's protective ward. "Either that or those new burglar alarms are better than I thought," she told him and shot back with a projectile ward, forgetting which staff she was holding.

The results, when improved by the golden staff, were entirely out of proportion to what she had intended and a large hole was ripped through the cottage. The Orete inside, however, was prepared and cast a huge Bond of Aritos and the trees all around Oceanvine and Sextant started attacking them.

"It's the Gredac variant of the Bond, Vine!" Sextant shouted. Trees are not particularly flexible and those around them were creaking and snapping loudly. Branches reaching toward them were also breaking and falling off, becoming projectile hazards. There was a brilliant flash of light and a clap of thunder, but neither Oceanvine nor Sextant had time to worry about that now.

Sextant grabbed back the golden staff and started defusing the Gredac Bond by draining energy from it. Oceanvine used energy reserves in her own staff to send healing spells at the tortured trees all around them. Sextant finished dispelling the Bond and the horrendous noise suddenly stopped and the trees stopped destroying themselves while trying to reach for the duo of mages.

"That was new, I think," Oceanvine remarked.

"New for us, anyway," Sextant corrected her. "The cottage is nothing but rubble. What happened to the

mage?”

“Translocated again,” Oceanvine replied, “Back to Randona, it looks like.”

“I’ll try it this time,” Sextant decided and without waiting for Oceanvine’s reaction, he cast the spell.

Sextant’s attempt turned out smoother than Oceanvine’s, but they did not have the time to appreciate it. They had just realized they were in an apartment somewhere Downtown when a telekinetic blast shoved against Oceanvine’s ward. Sextant was slammed up against a wall, but Oceanvine crashed through a large plate glass window and found herself thirty stories above the city streets.

The Orente followed her out the window, took another shot at her with a fireball, then flew off to the roof of a nearby building. Oceanvine fell about thirty feet before catching herself to follow the Orentan mage. They flew from roof to roof, pausing occasionally to throw offensive spells at one another. The Orente seemed to favor fire, but Oceanvine was using projectile wards, small spherical wards that flew at her target like bullets from a gun.

It was a long chase, but finally Oceanvine caught up to the tiring Orente. She wasn’t sure why it seemed important to bring this one back for trial, but using another trick from Uncle Candle’s notes, reached out with her mind to snare the other mage and force him into a mental duel.

Oceanvine stood firmly in control of the illusory world they found themselves in. It was an ice sheet. As far as the eye could see there was nothing but a foot-thick layer of snow over ice. The terrain wasn’t smooth; the ice under the snow was broken and felt like a jumble of sharp rocks underfoot, but Oceanvine was not planning to move. All attempts at magic here would translate into blasts of wind-driven sleet and snow, but neither mage took the opportunity to try.

As quickly as Oceanvine had ensnared the Orente, he disengaged. Oceanvine felt a shock of mental backlash as her illusions shattered and the Orente had time for just one more spell, although it was not aimed at her. He ran for the edge of the roof and jumped off, but as Oceanvine reached out to telekinetically drag him back in, his body exploded into a thick red mist. Shocked beyond action, Oceanvine could only watch as the assassin’s remains fell to the ground below, drifting and being stretched out by the strong city winds as they fell.

Five

“After weeks of rumblings,” the newscaster announced the next day, “Mount Mira erupted in earnest early this morning. Initial reports indicate that as much as a cubic mile of material was ejected violently, setting off landslides and lahars that may have reached as far away as the Great Bay. As yet, our cameras are being kept away from the mountain for safety reasons so we have no pictures, but we do have these nighttime photos of the simultaneous eruption of the New Volcano hundreds of miles away.”

The scene cut from the anchorwoman to show a series of tall lava fountains illuminating the night from at least ten miles away at sea. “The New Volcano in Great Bay, our experts tell us, is undergoing a less violent eruption than it did earlier this year when it generated several small tsunamis across the Great Bay. Elsewhere in the southern hemisphere, Mount Kol in Sutheria and Mount Petronelle on Robander’s Island are erupting with plumes of ash and gas, and there are several mountains shaking to life in southeast Ellisto.”

“The Ellistans are right,” Sextant commented as he and Oceanvine prepared to leave for morning classes. “We live in interesting times.”

“The Great Bay Volcano is growing rapidly,” Oceanvine remarked, “considering it was only a few years ago that we discovered it in the first place. Last I heard it was about three hundred feet above sea level.”

“Maybe more by now,” Sextant added. “Well at least it isn’t our problem today.”

He was mistaken, however, and there was a message waiting for them when they got out of class. “His Majesty sounded frantic,” Kara told them. “He requested your presence immediately.”

“Why didn’t you take us out of class?” Oceanvine asked her.

“He just called a few minutes ago,” Kara replied. “By the time I got word to you, you would have been here.”

“I have another class to teach in an hour,” Sextant worried.

“Never you mind that, young man,” Master Sunray told him from the door that once led into Candle’s office. “I’ll cover for you again and see to it that one or more of the journeymen take the lab session this afternoon. Don’t keep the king waiting!”

“Are you sure, Master Sunray?” Oceanvine asked the older man. “We’ve been asking a lot of you that way lately.”

“Feels good to actually teach again,” Sunray told her. “Maybe I’ll handle a couple of classes myself next semester. Now go!”

It turned out, Hacon Ancel wanted them to get a closer look at Mount Mira. “The eruptions seem too coincidentally timed for comfort,” the king explained. “I have a plane waiting for you at Sloan. A pair of geologists will meet you there and fly with you to Grinnel. From there you’ll find a helicopter to take you as close in as the pilot feels confident is safe. I am not sure how close it really will be, but I have ordered that no undue risks be taken. The probable loss of life is too high already,” he added bleakly.

“Were there towns caught up in the landslides, Your Majesty?” Oceanvine asked.

“We ordered mandatory evacuations for thirty miles all around the mountain,” he replied, “but there were destructive slides of earth, mud and water as far as fifty miles downstream. We don’t know how bad it was yet, but that won’t be your responsibility. I need you to see if One Maiyim was behind the eruption. Also please come back by way of the Great Bay Volcano.”

“I recall you were skeptical that any mortal could cause a volcanic eruption after what happened in Sutheria,” Oceanvine remarked.

“When there is direct loss of life involved, we find our skepticism is an unaffordable luxury, my lady,” the king admitted. “I, uh, have been considering that new volcano ought to have a name. Mount Candle, perhaps?”

“He would have appreciated that, I think,” Oceanvine smiled. “Probably more than the barony you granted him.”

They arrived at Sloan Naval Air Base to discover two familiar faces waiting for them; Doctors Gonnev and Stass, the geologists they had worked with in Sutheria seven years earlier. "Nice to see you again," Oceanvine greeted them. "I saw you on television, Eileanne."

"Nice seeing you two again as well," Eileanne Stass replied. "Yes, the television interviews were interesting, but too much of a distraction from my real work. I'm surprised they didn't interview the two of you. I understand you've been in the thick of it as usual."

"We've been too busy to catch," Sextant laughed, "Doctor Gonnev, I take it Doctor Stass dragged you up from Sutheria?"

"Yes," the man agreed, "and just when things were getting interesting again on Mount Kol," he added sadly. "My current assistant will have to monitor activity there, I fear. I'm supposed to be meeting Doctor Yarrin from Petronelle Station here in Randona next week. I'm sure you remember him?" Both mages nodded, Doctor Yarrin was a nephew of Doctor Southgate whom they had later met in Querna. "Although," Gonnev continued, "he may get held up by the renewed activity down there, but if he doesn't get off of Robander's soon, he'll be snowed in for the winter."

The plane was not a jet, but it was a sturdy little craft capable of hauling relatively heavy loads and it was filled with scientific equipment. "This is actually one of our hurricane hunter planes," the pilot told them once they were aloft and the autopilot had been set. If you find you cannot get close enough in the chopper that's waiting for you, we can fly around the mountain and take atmospheric readings and a lot of pictures. It's not the same as direct measurements, but better than nothing. Of course that is all we'll be able to do at the Great Bay Volcano. No landing strip there, you know."

"We would need a boat or a seaplane to land there," Sextant agreed.

"But His Majesty wants to rename it to Mount Candle," Oceanvine added. "It's only fair since he was captain of the *Maiyim Bourne* when we first discovered it."

"Yes, I heard about the wizard," Doctor Gonnev commented. "Very sad. We held a memorial for him by the statue in Sutheria. You know about the statue, don't you?"

"I heard it had been erected," Oceanvine remarked. "I suppose one of these days I ought to go have a look and see if they got my nose right or if the pigeons have been more respectful than on any of the rest of the statues on Maiyim."

Both Gonnev and Stass chuckled at the comment. "It was very strange," Gonnev continued. "On the day of the dedication a dragon circled overhead for hours from just after dawn until the dedication ceremony was finished. Some people thought it was an omen of sorts."

"A good omen?" Sextant asked curiously, "or a bad one?"

"Just an omen," Doctor Gonnev shrugged. "People often say that when they see a dragon. It's rare enough to see one near the city, after all, and to have one overhead for so long is almost unheard of."

"We're going to have to detour a bit out to sea," the pilot reported from the cockpit. "There's a heavy cloud of volcanic ash ahead and flying through it would only clog the engines. Don't know about you, but I doubt I could fly safely just by flapping my arms."

Oceanvine and Sextant forbore to comment and fell back to chatting with the geologists until the sands

of Grinnel came into view. “Those are the fabled silver sands?” Oceanvine asked, sounding disappointed.

“You weren’t expecting something metallic-looking, were you?” Eileanne Stass asked.

“Well, the name sort of implies it,” Oceanvine remarked. “I guess I never really thought about it. The sand is very white, though isn’t it?”

“Very,” Eileanne agreed.

“And in heraldic terms white and silver are considered the same tincture,” Oceanvine noted. “Is that why these are called silver? And why is it so white?”

“That might well be,” Eileanne nodded. “Most sand is made up of tiny grains of quartz. More often than not, sand is coated with iron oxides which might color it anything from a light golden yellow to a fairly dark brown, but the sand here in Grinnel is almost pure so it is very bright white. It is, in fact the purest naturally occurring sand in the world so it really is a remarkable thing to see even if it doesn’t look like a prospector’s dream.”

“Ah well,” Oceanvine sighed. “That would have been blindingly hard to look at anyway.”

“Pilot,” Doctor Gonnev requested, “would it be possible to fly around Mount Mira before landing at Grinnel County airport?”

“I’ll have to request a new flight path,” the pilot replied, “but it shouldn’t be a problem.” However he reported a few minutes later, “The control tower informs me we must stay at least twenty miles from the mountain, Doc. Safety regulations, you know.”

“But that’s part of what we’re here to assess,” Gonnev protested.

“Good point,” the pilot agreed, “I’ll ask again. You are here at His Royal Majesty’s request.” The answer was the same, however. “They say you’ll have to wait for the chopper to take you there, but it’s one of our best military jobs. It won’t slow you down by much.”

Grinnel County Airport had a single runway and not normally being a busy port, the plane got clearance to land immediately. It only took a few minutes to taxi up to where the dark green helicopter was waiting and then transfer equipment. Finally, the chopper lifted and headed southwest toward the still smoking mountain.

“Look at that!” Sextant exclaimed half an hour later. “It blew its top off!”

“It looks like the entire north face let go,” Eileanne noted almost clinically. “It must have been something to see or will be if we can find either of the cameras we placed up here last week.”

“The south side camera is probably still there,” Gonnev speculated, “But it will be a miracle if the North side one can be found. See the ridge you told me it was placed on.”

“The trees have been blown clear over,” Eileanne observed. “I’ve only seen this sort of thing in pictures.”

“Must have been one heck of a wind,” Sextant commented.

“More than that, it was like a super-hurricane of volcanic ash,” Eileanne told him. “We’re still fifteen miles from the mountain. It’s probably even worse in the direction of the pyroclastic flow to the north-northeast. I say hurricane, but it’s likely the flow was several times faster and extremely hot. See how all those trees have been scorched? Any animals caught in that burned to a crisp in an instant.”

“Shouldn’t this have burned to ash too?” Oceanvine asked.

“It all happened too quickly,” Gonnev told her. “The flow came through at two or three hundred miles per hour, borne by gases four or five times hotter than boiling water. But there may not have been a lot of oxygen in that gust and the ash, though it scorched the trees, also served to squelch the fire. If we look, though, we’ll see places where the wood kept burning after the initial pyroclastic flow passed. Do you want to look for that camera, Eileanne?”

“If you don’t mind, Dashen,” she replied, “though I don’t have a lot of hope there.”

The helicopter landed on the ridge and they all got out to search for the missing camera. “Well, this is where it was placed,” Eileanne told the mages. “This six inch stump was a fence post one of my students set up. The camera should be off in that direction, more or less.”

“Let me give it a try,” Sextant offered. He pulled the golden pen out of his shirt pocket and without bothering to allow it to expand into its normal staff-like appearance allowed his mind to scan the landscape to their north.

While he was searching that way, Oceanvine noted, “The trees don’t all lie in the same direction, do they? They curve around with the shape of the hills here.”

“Yes, the flow followed the shape of the land,” Eileanne told her. “It was a burning hot river of ash, knocking over everything in its path. Could you give me a hand setting up the new camera?” Oceanvine assisted magically, making quick work of planting the new post with the camera mount while Doctor Gonnev planted a device to measure seismic activity in the area.

“Found it!” Sextant called triumphantly just as the others finished, but a moment later he added, “It won’t do us much good though.”

He floated the camera to Eileanne who looked at it and shrugged. “Oh well, I didn’t have a lot of hope for this one anyway. It’s cracked open and the plastic is all melted. The film inside is mostly burnt, although even if it hadn’t been, it would have been ruined by exposure to sunlight. Let’s go look for the other one.”

“Can we fly over the crater?” Gonnev asked the chopper pilot as they approached the mountain.

“We’re not supposed to, sir,” he replied but after a few minutes he finally agreed, so the two geologists could get film and pictures of the still-erupting mountain.

“You okay, Vine?” Sextant asked as they circled near the light volcanic plume.

“Just doing my best to maintain a protective ward,” she told him. “The thing is, I don’t really think I’m up to keeping us safe from a volcano.”

“Well, we won’t be here very long,” Sextant assured her. “Doctors, Vine has a good point. If this mountain erupts again while we’re in here, we are probably all dead.”

“But...” Doctor Gonnev started to protest.

“He’s right Dashen,” Eileanne agreed. “We’ve got our pictures and movies and maybe some of the instruments we left on the south side. We should go find them and, refill and replace them and then hurry back to the Grinnel airport if we want to get to the Great Bay Volcano, uh, Mount Candle while there’s still enough light to see much.”

“Hold on a bit,” Sextant told them. “Could you back away to the north a bit, please?” he asked the pilot.

“You see it too?” Oceanvine asked, looking down into the crater.

“Spell traces,” Sextant confirmed.

“Yes,” she nodded. “I’m fairly certain it was the Xenlabit form.”

“Form?” Doctor Gonnex asked. “Form of what?”

“The Bond of Aritos, Doctor,” Oceanvine replied. “The same one that nearly caused a volcano to erupt in downtown Silamon and the same one we think set off Mount Petronelle seven years ago.”

“Is that what it was?” Gonnev asked. “Wizard Candle told us about the Bond of Aritos, but I didn’t know there was more than one form.”

“There are five forms, in fact,” Oceanvine told him. “One for each of the children of Aritos, the ones we call demons. None of the forms of Bond actually has anything to do with the god Aritos. Each one taps into the power of the demon to which it is associated. One of them, the Bond of Arithan is actually powerless on its own because that demon is dead, destroyed by the Gods, although it can be powered through a combination of the other four. I won’t go into the differences, but each one’s uses correspond with the strengths and weaknesses of the associated demon. Since we met in Silamon, I have learned that One Maiyim, you remember them too, right? Well they have their own ranks of mages named for the demon whose sign they learn; Gredac, Xenlabit, Pohn and Kemalart. Their best masters are those who learn how to use more than one demon sign and those earn the rank of Arithan.

“To date I have only encountered two, maybe three, Arithans,” Oceanvine continued. “They’re rare for a number of reasons. First of all, the use of a Bond of Aritos puts you increasingly under the power of the associated demon, so the better you get at it the more likely you are to find yourself translocated into that demon’s grasp and also it is incredibly difficult to learn how to use the Bond. We believe more than half of One Maiyim’s mages are killed the first time they try, although I obviously have no proof of that, but even so, as difficult as it is to learn one form of the Bond, it is even more difficult to learn two or more.

“Six, we might need to dispel these traces,” she concluded.

“I don’t think so,” he disagreed. “These are falling apart fairly well on their own. It’s not like some of the traces we’ve found in the past. All the energy of this curse went into setting off the volcano. The rest of it is dissipating rapidly.”

“I think you’re right,” Oceanvine agreed after another look. “It’s fading away and is already very weak. You would have to be on the floor of the crater to be affected by it and if you were, the chances are that would be the least of the dangers. Let’s get out of here.”

“We didn’t get to Mount Candle until nearly sunset,” Oceanvine told Saltspray after class the next morning. They were walking together back to the Magic Department offices in the Onestone building. “But we circled the volcano for over an hour and got a spectacular fireworks display from the lava fountains at the top.”

“I wish I could have gone with you,” Saltspray replied. “After what we went through last summer, I got used to not being left behind.”

“You had classes and His Majesty asked us to do it for him,” Oceanvine explained. “I couldn’t very well tell him, ‘Sorry, but my apprentice isn’t ready yet,’ now could I?”

“I suppose not,” Saltspray admitted, “but it feels like you keep trying to shield me. You were out fighting One Maiyim after only a few weeks of training.”

“I got very lucky,” Oceanvine told her. “Adamant nearly killed all three of us, including your grandfather. The only reason I got him was that he made a fatal mistake and underestimated me. Of course how was he to know I was casting projectile wards so soon in my training?”

“I can do that,” Saltspray told her. “I can do all sorts of things you’d never even heard of back then.”

“Yes, you can,” Oceanvine agreed, “but you know, part of my job really is to keep you out of danger at least while you’re still my student. But I’ll tell you what. Six and I are having lunch with Ksanya at that off-campus diner you like so much. Why don’t you join us?”

“You’re trying to bribe me with a decent meal, aren’t you?” Saltspray accused.

“Yes, I am,” Oceanvine grinned.

Saltspray smiled, but shook her head. “I’m supposed to be meeting Misana.”

“Bring her along,” Oceanvine suggested.

“I’ll have to ask...” Saltspray began to reply. “Watch out!” she screamed and threw herself at Oceanvine knocking them both to the ground as a loud whooshing sound filled the air. A moment later a blue beam of light sizzled overhead where they had been standing a moment earlier.

The two women rolled apart and came up with impenetrable wards encircling them. Another blue blast of light came at Oceanvine, but her ward absorbed the energy and she threw it back toward a Granom standing thirty feet away who was one of three people trying to attack them.

“Give up Elinor Jenynges!” the Granom shouted at her, as he dodged her retaliation. Oceanvine didn’t bother to reply, but fired a projectile ward back at him. It smashed through his pitiful defenses and left a hole in his chest. The Granom fell lifelessly to the ground and Oceanvine turned to face the next attacker.

The other two, a male human and a female Orente, raised their arms and shouted, “Maiyim will be one!” but before the spell in their rings could be involved completely, Sally knocked one over telekinetically. The spell, now out of any form of control, formed a rapidly expanding green sphere of light and heat,

which Oceanvine quickly enclosed in a ward. The two screams lasted only a second and when the light faded there was nothing left inside that resembled a living creature.”

“I told you, you needed me,” Saltspray reminded her teacher.

“You were helpful,” Oceanvine admitted. “We’re going to have to report this. I’m really getting tired of reports. What’s wrong?”

“We killed them, didn’t we?” Saltspray asked, worriedly.

“Not we,” Oceanvine told her gently. “I did it.”

“But I helped,” Saltspray told her, “That means it’s the same as if I was the one doing it. I mean I would have had to if something happened to you.”

“These three were incompetents, Sally,” Oceanvine told her. “They practically tripped over each other.”

“Didn’t seem that way to me, Vine,” Saltspray told her. “You’re trying to protect me again. Don’t! Don’t you see I can’t grow up if I’m always kept safe and sound?”

“You seem pretty grown up to me,” Oceanvine told her, keeping the affectionate word *Kid* firmly silent. “But you know we’re a lot more than student and teacher. We’re also friends and friends are supposed to stand up for and protect each other.”

“But I really am responsible for their deaths,” Saltspray told her.

Oceanvine wanted to deny it. She knew, in fact, that her apprentice had done very little offensively against the three assassins and that even without her help, Oceanvine would have had very little trouble dealing with them had she noticed them first. But she saw that Saltspray wouldn’t accept that at the moment. “Well, maybe a little.” It sounded like the grudging admission it was, although not for the reason Saltspray thought it was. “And I might have been in real trouble if you hadn’t seen them first.”

“I didn’t see them,” Saltspray admitted. “I kind of felt them coming.”

“Felt them?” Oceanvine asked.

“Well, yeah,” Saltspray tried to explain. “There’s this sort of frisson in the air just before someone translocates nearby. It’s like the feeling of having your hair stand on end just before a nearby lightning strike. Didn’t you know that?”

“I never noticed,” Oceanvine admitted, “but then I don’t know that I’ve been in a position to notice it before.”

“I first noticed it in Parliament the other day,” Saltspray told her. “At first I just thought it was the excitement of the moment, then the first assassin appeared, then the others. You really hadn’t noticed?”

“I really hadn’t,” Oceanvine replied, “but it’s something we’ll have to look into. You have to realize that translocation is not a simple spell. It wasn’t known until the end of the last Granom-Bellinen War and at that only two mages knew how it was done. Even after that very few mages were capable of casting it, so there hasn’t been a lot of opportunity to study the entire phenomenon. It’s also possible that you’re more sensitive to the minute charges you felt than most of us.”

“Not so minute,” Saltspray told her.

“We’ll see when we study it in the lab,” Oceanvine told her. “In the meantime, I think that would make for an interesting term project.”

“Aw,” Saltspray protested. “What kind of paper would that be? How do I quantify how I feel the charge?”

“Well, let’s see what we learn in a lab session or two,” Oceanvine told her. “I think we will find it very quantifiable.”

“Hey!” Saltspray complained. “How did you do that?”

“Do what?”

“I was feeling all sorry for myself and you just changed the subject and knocked all that self-pity out of me,” Saltspray replied.

“Self-pity isn’t very becoming,” Oceanvine told her, “and actually you did most of that yourself. Come on, let’s get lunch and I’ll have Kara see about reporting this to campus security.”

“Good thing it’s the University Police,” Saltspray remarked. “At least they don’t treat us like we were the ones in the wrong. The city police seem to blame us because they have to do the paperwork.”

“That may be because they have to do a lot more of it, dear,” Oceanvine replied.

“This time they were obviously after you,” Sextant remarked a short time later at the diner. Misana was running late and Saltspray had decided to wait for her.

“The first one called me by my birth name,” Oceanvine confirmed, “but I wonder why they sent such relative novices. We’ve handled far more accomplished mages.”

“Maybe they’re running out,” Ksanya suggested.

“If those were their best,” Oceanvine remarked, “One Maiyim may as well close up shop now. No, I doubt that’s what it is. They keep calling me Elinor. On Kern they tried to taunt me like a baby. I think they really don’t know how good I am although that can’t possibly last.”

“Vine,” Ksanya argued, “you’ve stopped them all over the world. You’re a hero in Sutheria and the Isle of Fire and...”

“And Granom,” Oceanvine finished for her. “I’ve been invited to Wennil and Ellisto on the basis of my reputation, I know, but until three years ago it was always with Uncle Candle. You haven’t heard some of the more advanced mages of One Maiyim. They’re an arrogant lot and they don’t think much of learning magic at University.”

“That might be part of it, Vine,” Sextant told her. “They’re not doing their homework properly. You’ve published your work and your accomplishments are no secret, so if they are underestimating you it must be because they asked the wrong people, or person, rather.”

“You think they got what they know of me from Grandmother?” Oceanvine asked.

“They came after you, not me,” Sextant pointed out. “Does she even know we’re married?”

“It was in the Society columns, Six,” Ksanya pointed out. “It’s kind of hard to marry a noblewoman without getting it in print, you know.”

“Perhaps, but she wasn’t actually there,” Sextant argued. “Earl Olen was, although he was only going through the motions at the time, but Countess Myrrha? Not a chance. I am probably beneath her notice. Also she has never thought much of Vine or her magic.”

“Well, I can only hope they will keep underestimating you like this,” Ksanya told him.

“No, that won’t last,” Oceanvine disagreed. “By now they almost have to be figuring out I am better than Grandmother thinks.”

Seven

Except for the continued eruptions of Mounts Mira and Candle, the next week was quiet. With no further sign of activity from One Maiyim and with pressing business building up at home Ksaveras decided it was time to get back to Querna, “I sent Zak on ahead of me this morning, but first I want to visit Uncle Candle’s grave,” he told Oceanvine and Ksanya.

“Why don’t we fly over to Renton this afternoon?” Ksanya suggested.

“Let’s drive,” Ksaveras decided. “It will give me a better chance to see more of Rallena.”

“At night?” Ksanya argued. “You’ll see the same sorts of restaurant and hotel lights you can see at home and you can’t go anywhere in Emmine without a large number of escorts any more than you can in Granom. The resulting caravan would be unwieldy to say the least.”

“Ksanya’s right,” Oceanvine told him, “besides, a stretch of the Pan-Rallenan Highway got wiped out by Mount Mira’s big eruption. To go around would be a two day trip. We can fly out after my classes this afternoon and be in Renton in time for dinner. Hmm, I should take Sally with us too. I’m sure she’d want to see her family and she’s been complaining that I’ve been sheltering her too much.”

“This shouldn’t be a dangerous trip,” Ksanya pointed out.

“No, it shouldn’t,” Oceanvine agreed, “but merely taking her along should make her feel a bit better. I’m afraid I may have spoiled her during her first two years of apprenticeship.”

“You were hardly ever with her, Vine,” Ksanya pointed out.

“True, but when I was she got my full attention. This summer, when we were at Fireiron’s place, she was just one of the students, but I did take her with me to Olen and we spent a lot of time together there. It’s just that since Medda I’ve had other responsibilities as well and I think she may miss all the one-on-one time we had over the summer. Besides, aren’t masters supposed to spend a lot of time with their apprentices?”

“That’s not the way I’ve heard it,” Ksanya remarked. “More like ‘Apprentice, do this, Apprentice, do that! Shine my shoes and cook my dinner. No, that’s all wrong. Bad apprentice, no cookie!’”

“Well, that isn’t the way *I* do it,” Oceanvine retorted.

Saltspray was excited about the surprise chance to go home for the weekend and happily insisted on carrying Oceanvine’s bag as well as her own. “And it’s a long weekend too,” Saltspray enthused, “with no classes on Discovery Day.”

“I’d forgotten that,” Oceanvine admitted.

“Yeah, and Dad was saying I could have Jill’s old car. Maybe we can drive back?” Saltspray asked.

“I suppose,” Oceanvine nodded. “We’ll have to come back by way of Midon because of Mount Mira. That will make it an even longer than usual.”

“Road trip!” Sally exclaimed happily. “It will be just like when you were an undergrad, right?”

“I never went on a road trip when I was in college,” Oceanvine informed her. “Most of my spare time, when I wasn’t studying, I spent with my great-grandmother. That may be why my advisor set me up for that, in fact. She always said I was being too serious and ought to take a bit of time off. Then in my senior year I was too busy trying to squeeze in three semesters’ work in the space of two, to do much of anything.”

“Except for being invited to the palace,” Saltspray remarked.

“You heard about that, did you?” Oceanvine smiled. “Well, I often brought my homework with me. When coming to tea, the king was often called away on business and the homework gave me something to do while waiting for him to return. Helm used to tease me about it and offered to get me an office down the hall from Their Majesties’ private chambers.”

“Is that when he and Maia started seeing one another?” Saltspray asked.

“Not really,” Oceanvine shook her head. “Uncle Candle often invited her to accompany him to various affairs there, so they knew each other on sight, but it was a few years before anything happened between them. I think it may have started at the Winter Ball when One Maiyim first tried to kill the king, although I was in Querna at the time, and even then they had a very long courtship.”

“I know!” Saltspray agreed. “It took them forever to get married.”

“As long as it might have seemed to you, it was even longer from their perspective,” Oceanvine told her. “Remember, while she may behave like a storybook princess, Maia still thinks of herself as a rough colonial girl and the tabloids are insistent on reminding their readers of her origins as well.”

“I don’t even read those things when in the supermarket lines,” Saltspray laughed.

When King Hacon Ancel loaned the use of his jet to Ksaveras and his party, they were able to arrive in Renton two hours before dinner and with plenty of light left. “Why don’t we go right now?” Ksaveras asked anxiously.

“You make it sound like an amusement park, not a cemetery,” Oceanvine remarked, “and security isn’t

in place yet. They're set up for keeping you safe in the inn, but..."

"Oh sod that!" Ksaveras told her irritably. "We're secure enough."

"After what happened in Randona, Veras," Ksanya began.

"I doubt they were after me in particular," the king shook his head. "They were just trying to stop the ratification of the treaty."

"And how would your subjects feel about Emmine if you were to be killed here?" Ksanya asked sharply. "Veras, do you think the Medda Compact would hold if that happened?"

"Oh, all right," Ksaveras agreed reluctantly, "but I want to get there early tomorrow, before a crowd of cameramen can show up to spoil it all."

"I'll take care of that," she promised him.

"And air cover so they can't come in by plane or helicopter," he added. "You remember what happened two summers ago, don't you?"

"The whole barony here is a no-fly zone for the duration of your visit, Veras," Ksanya reminded him tiredly. "Any camera crew attempting to violate that will get shot down. We won't even have an official cameraman with us. Some of the townsfolk might want to snap your picture though. It's not like they have your portrait on the coins around here, you know."

"I don't mind that, Ksanya. You know that," Ksaveras replied. She nodded and let the matter rest.

The next morning, the four of them drove in Saltspray's hand-me-down car to the small graveyard behind the Renton School. There was a large crowd of tourists being held back by the local police, so Ksaveras kept his visit brief, saying only a prayer to Gran and Querna to watch out for the souls of Candle, Jillanda, Silverwind and Oceanvine. Then he relented on his desire for privacy and met with the people in the crowd for the better part of an hour before allowing Ksanya and the others to guide him back into Saltspray's car and off to the airport.

"You're flying directly back to Querna, Veras?" Saltspray asked as they made their way through a gate and directly on to the tarmac.

"With a brief fueling stop in Bellinen," he replied. "Where's my jet?"

"It got delayed by fog in Randona," Ksanya reported a few minutes later. "Evidently the radio was acting up and they didn't get the orders to divert here. I think that's it coming in now. It has the right color paint anyway."

"You brought in your own jet?" Saltspray asked.

"Well, it didn't seem right to take Hacon Ancel's home with me," Ksaveras joked. "Actually I normally travel in my own plane. This moving around with a fellow king is new to me, you know."

"It's new to everyone," Ksanya pointed out. "Ksaveras IX and Hacon II only met once after they were both crowned and we can count the number of royal visits before that on the fingers of one hand. It's a long way to come just to shake hands."

They paused to watch the sleek jet coast downward to the runway, but then just as the wheels were about to touchdown, an explosion onboard flashed and the left wing fell off. A split second later the entire plane was a tumbling mass of flames, followed instantly by another explosion that threw shrapnel hundreds of yards away.

Sharp scraps of aluminum slammed into Oceanvine's and Saltspray's hasty wards. Ksanya instinctively knocked Ksaveras to the ground and attempted to protect him with her own body, but in doing so, she bumped into Saltspray who felt her defenses crumble. Saltspray felt something scrape her arm, but without bothering to see what it was, she stepped away from Ksanya's null-magic field and recast her ward, although by then the danger was over.

Oceanvine looked around and saw most of the windows behind them had been blown out by the blast. There were hundreds of tiny dents, chips and holes in the walls where hot metal had struck as well. The security people were hastily scattering and setting up a perimeter around Ksaveras and his party. She also took a close look at the wreckage and made out of a number of spell strings whipping around and fading quickly. Then she saw something that frightened her worst of all. "Sally! Your arm."

"What?" Saltspray replied, "Something just brushed past it..." she trailed off. There was a stream of bright red blood running into the tattered upper sleeve of her blouse and dripping onto the ground beneath her. "Oh," she remarked in astonishment.

"Here," Ksanya told her, reaching out and clapping her strong white hand over the wound and applying pressure. "I think it's just a bad scratch but we had better get someone to look at it. You might need stitches."

"Stiches?" Sally asked. "Won't that leave a scar?"

"Tell folks you got it dueling," Ksanya advised. She lifted her hand up for a moment and remarked, "It may not need any stitches. It's a little deep, but not very long. A bandage may do the job, but I know you're not so vain as to worry about a small scar on your arm, Kiddo."

"I wasn't," Saltspray admitted.

"It won't be much of a scar," Ksanya told her confidently. "I have a larger one from where my appendix was removed. Yours will be about as noticeable as that vaccine scar on your other arm and not a whole lot larger."

"We should still get someone to look at it," Oceanvine remarked.

"We will," Ksaveras promised. He pointed at one of the airport security men. "You there. Is there a first aid station in the airport?"

"Yes, Your Majesty!" the man replied instantly. "This way please."

There was only a nurse on duty in the small airport, but she cleaned out and dressed Saltspray's wound. "It would heal if you left it alone," she told the teenaged mage, "but you should go to the emergency room at the local hospital and have someone take a closer look. I don't think you will need stitches, but I'm not qualified to make that evaluation. You should get a tetanus shot if you haven't had one recently, though."

"I just spoke to King Hacon Ancel," Ksanya reported as Saltspray and Oceanvine left the nurse's

office. "He's advising us to stay in Renton until this evening. There should be a contingent of the Royal Marines here in an hour or so and the royal jet is being prepped for a return flight Hacon Ancel and Queen Melloise will be flying to Querna with Ksaveras."

"Where's Ksaveras now?" Oceanvine asked, looking around.

"He went back to the inn with his guards. I told him he should wait for us, but you know how men are," Ksanya shrugged. "Look, given everything that's happened, I'd feel a lot better if you would stay near Veras until he leaves tonight."

"I have to get Saltspray to the hospital," Oceanvine replied.

"I'll go with her," Ksanya offered. "Sally, is that okay?"

"Sure, we have to keep Veras safe," Saltspray told her. "But let's get going. This is starting to hurt."

"Is it bad?" Oceanvine fussed.

"It's a bad ache so far," Saltspray remarked bravely.

"But it might get worse, right?" Ksanya nodded. "Let's get going."

Oceanvine watched Ksanya drive off with Sally from the parking lot of Candleson's and only after Saltspray's car was out of sight did she go inside where she was immediately confronted by Saltspray's mother, Sandra. "Where's Sally?" she demanded. "What happened?"

"She's going to be just fine," Oceanvine told her and instantly realized that was not a good answer to the question. "I take it Ksaveras told you about the explosion? Yes? Well, a small bit of shrapnel scratched her upper arm. It ruined her favorite shirt, but I doubt that has occurred to her yet. Anyway, the nurse at the airport cleaned and bandaged the wound but recommended a tetanus shot for the obvious reason, and also having a doctor check her work."

"But she could have been killed," Sandra worried.

Oceanvine wanted to deny it, but she knew Uncle Candle would never have done so. "Yes, that's a possibility," she replied carefully. "We all might have been, but we had our defenses up."

"Then why was Sally hurt?" Sandra demanded.

"It was an accident," Oceanvine explained. "Ksanya is a magic-null, you remember that, right? Well, in trying to protect the king, she inadvertently bumped into Sally and for just an instant, disrupted Sally's protective ward."

"But..." Sandra started to object.

"Good," Thomas cut in walking over to join them. "I wouldn't want to think our daughter wasn't up to protecting herself in a normal circumstance."

"Tom, this is no joke," Sandra told her husband.

"No, it isn't, dear," Thomas agreed. "If there was one thing I learned from Dad, it's that magic can be

dangerous. However, so can going for a walk or sitting in a chair and reading a book. Anything can happen. We aren't going to stop Sally from wanting to be a wizard but we can comfort ourselves in the knowledge that if she is hurt, it won't be because she was unable to cast the right spell. Our daughter did everything she could to protect herself and her friends and had one of them not been a magic-null she wouldn't have been harmed. Isn't that right, Oceanvine?"

"Her wards are as strong as any other mage her age," Oceanvine told them, "If Ksanya hadn't bumped her, her protection would have been more than sufficient. Where's Ksaveras?"

"He's in the bar," Thomas told her.

"Drinking?" Oceanvine asked then waved Thomas off, "Stupid question," she muttered darkly and walked toward the inn's barroom. Sure enough, there was the King of Granom, drinking an Emmine pilsner. "What the Hell are you doing?" she demanded.

"Vine?" Ksaveras asked, confused. "Aren't I entitled to a drink?"

"Drink?" she asked angrily. "Oh yes, get plastered for all I care. Someone just tried to kill you and you decided to make yourself a much easier target by coming back here with too few security guards."

"I had some calls to make, Vine," Ksaveras told her. "I want to know who planted that bomb."

"One Maiyim planted it," Oceanvine told him sarcastically. "Who else do you think it was?"

"I'd like to know when and where it happened," he explained. Ksaveras had a tendency, Oceanvine knew, to understate himself. What he really meant was he was as angry as she was and was going to find out what happened if it killed him. The problem was, she noted silently, that it might well do just that. Realizing he was dealing with the problem as he best understood how, Oceanvine calmed down.

"Your plane flew here directly from Querna?" she asked.

"It would have stopped to refuel in Killo or Fanna, I think," he replied.

"So whoever planted the bomb could have done it in Querna or whichever port the plane landed at in Bellinen, or in Randona," Oceanvine remarked. "That pretty much leaves that wide open, but we can look into who was allowed near the plane in each place. I'm not sure what sort of explosive was used here. It might have been an amulet with an explosive spell in it. That would be the hardest to prove. Or it may have been a more conventional explosive with a techmagic-based fuse. There definitely was magic involved but we won't know the mechanism until forensic experts have examined the wreckage and that could take months."

"Could it have been something similar to the spell that nearly destroyed the Gran 4 spacecraft?" Ksaveras asked.

"Happily, no," Oceanvine told him. "That was a case of a mage, Baron Wollono, I think, using the Bond of Aritos to disrupt a series of systems on the spaceship. Fortunately for the ethernauts, the spell was poorly executed and the mage failed to accurately predict how the spacecraft modules would fit together. He might have used the Bond to create an explosion and given the variant he used, it probably would have worked better than what he did, but I'm just as glad he didn't. I did just think of something."

"What's that?" the king asked.

“Well, unless this was done by someone who was a complete novice, it seems to me that the point was for the plane to explode with you on it,” Oceanvine replied. “You got amazingly lucky by deciding to come here on a whim. Your trip home got delayed and the bomb went off before you were on the plane. I think it should have gone off somewhere over the Probellinen Islands.”

Eight

The marines arrived just before Ksanya and Saltspray got back from the hospital and then, when Hacon Ancel’s jet arrived once more in Renton, they formed a long procession to the airport. Then the Emmine Royal Jet took off joined by a flight of Navy Air fighters that would escort it until they reached Bellinen airspace.

Ksanya sighed. “It was nice to see family again, but I’m glad he’s finally gone home. I haven’t had a good night’s sleep since I heard Veras had landed on Kern.”

“He’s not in Querna yet,” Saltspray remarked.

“Don’t remind me,” Ksanya told her with a shiver. “How’s the arm?”

“It hurts,” Saltspray replied simply. “I’ll live. At least they didn’t have to use stitches.”

“You said something about that earlier,” Oceanvine remarked as they headed back for the car. Now that the kings had taken off, the three women were able to move around without an ever-present halo of security guards or marines. “What did the doctor do?”

“She used tape,” Saltspray told her.

“Tape?”

“Sort of,” Saltspray replied. “Little strips of plastic with an adhesive spell on them. They hold my wound together as well as stitches might but the scarring is less and it just takes a quick counter spell, or more likely a device they have, that will counter the adhesive spell. She advised me to visit the campus infirmary in four or five days and have them remove the tape and make sure everything is healing properly. I have some pills, antibiotics, to take for the next few days too, but they told me they probably wouldn’t be necessary, just being cautious. They offered me some high class pain killer of some sort, but they said I’d sleep for a day or two so I decided to do without it. Aspirin takes the edge off the pain, and spinning my marble around helps keep me distracted too.”

“I was wondering about that,” Oceanvine admitted. “Just keep in mind it is a distraction. Also I think we had better start carrying our staves around with us everywhere we go.”

“Even to classes?” Saltspray asked.

“Even so,” Oceanvine nodded, “if any of your teachers complain have them talk to me. I think we’ll start putting staves on the sophomore curriculum and up, in fact. They’re handy devices even when we aren’t using them as portable batteries. Oh, and cast a personal ward tonight.”

“Why?” Saltspray asked.

“These attacks haven’t been only against the kings,” Oceanvine reminded her. “They might come after any of us. Ksanya is proof against most direct spells, but I’ve not met anyone else who is. I’m planning to cast a ward all around the inn, in fact.”

“It’s going to have to let people pass through it without harm, you know,” Saltspray told her. “We don’t get many guests checking in very late, but it does happen.”

“I have a plan for that as well,” Oceanvine told her. “Your grandfather started teaching me about conditional modifiers to spells and his notes told me still more. I plan to make it a simple detection ward, until it detects an aggressive amount of magical energy being directed at it, in which case the ward will become impermeable.”

“I didn’t realize you could do that,” Saltspray admitted.

“You probably won’t have to deal with that until your senior year,” Oceanvine told her. “It isn’t as dangerous as creation spells, but it is nearly as difficult.”

“I thought we were going to leave for Randona now,” Saltspray commented.

“Heck, no!” Oceanvine laughed. “We’re going to go back to the inn and get a good night’s rest and leave after an early breakfast.”

It had been a long day and all three decided to go to sleep early. It was a quiet evening but the quiet was shattered around two o’clock that morning when a high screaming sound filled the inn and loud enough to make the walls vibrate.

It was not the noise or the way the building shook that caused Oceanvine to wake up, however. She was forced awake the moment her ward was under attack. For a moment, she was in agony as though a thousand pins had been stuck in her haphazardly. The sensation lasted only a moment and then it coalesced into the worst headache she had ever experienced. However, she could deal with a headache and screwing up her will, she forced herself to her feet and looked around for the cause. The room was filled with a dark violet light as intense as the high screaming noise all around her.

Hard to move! The thought blasted itself in her mind. The air around her felt like syrup, but she pushed through to the window. Outside she could see a ring of men and women standing around the inn, their hands raised in the air. Each one was encased in an aura of dark violet light and thick lines of energy connected them to each other and to Oceanvine’s large ward.

It was not old magic, Oceanvine knew. It was only about ninety years old, but she had first encountered it on the Isle of Fire. Each of the people surrounding the inn wore a heavy gold ring and the spell was bound up in those rings. Uncle Candle had told her the trick of dealing with this spell was to not fight it directly but to latch into the energy flow and reverse it. She tried, but discovered she needed all her concentrated energy to hold the ward up around the large inn.

In Rjalkatyp she had maintained a similar ward while Uncle Candle had phased through it to attack the attackers from One Maiyim, but here she was on her own, she knew. The ward was already wavering under the stress of the attack. A part of her mind wondered which would kill her first, the violet light spell or the magical backlash from when her ward shattered. She needed her staff, but it was on the far side of her bed.

It took an eternity to reach the carved shaft of ash wood, but once it was in hand the stored energy inside it flowed to her command and strengthened the ward. *I have to get outside*, she thought to herself and decided the window was the closest exit. *Just a sheet of glass*, she thought. *It doesn't open!* The she decided there was no alternative. It would take too long to go down two flights of stairs to the lobby and through the front door. She ran in slow motion and threw herself at the window, concentrating more on the act of phasing through her own ward without disrupting it.

Suddenly normal time resumed and she was falling amid a cloud of glass splinters. It took only a hint of concentration to stop falling and float in the air above the ring of attackers. *My Gods, how many of them are there?* she wondered. Then she knew she had to act. Reversing the spell was not as easy as Uncle Candle had made it sound. This was the case with so many things he had done by magic. Candle had often behaved as though the toughest magical act was just a stray thought and only occasionally admitted, and at that only to Oceanvine and Sextant, when something had given him difficulty. *Showoff!* She thought acridly as she discovered that any attempt to latch into the attacking spell would weaken her ward.

I need help, she thought to herself desperately. Saltspray would do to maintain the ward, she knew, but could not remember if she had taught her student how to phase through a ward or even how to reinforce another's ward from inside and there was no time to show her how now. The first was a trick they just had not yet covered and the second was a dangerous act which she and Sextant had strongly recommended against trying. *Can't do this alone!*

You're not alone, dear. She half-heard and half-felt the words and they seemed to be coming from just below her chin.

Methis? She thought back, but there was no response. It reminded her, however, of the pendant around her neck. With a free hand, she reached up toward it and then brought it up to eye-level, the pendant was glowing with a brilliant golden light. The moment she saw it, the pattern within seemed to first swallow Oceanvine's mind and then alloy itself with her, giving her the ability to maintain the large ward while also fighting back against the attackers.

Oceanvine looked down, only dimly aware she was glowing the same golden light as the pendant. Now it seemed so easy. She saw the energy flow of One Maiyim's spell and how to reverse it. No sooner had the thought come to her when the energy flow seemed almost to reverse itself. For a moment the high-pitched scream grew louder and higher and the violet light turned black as it too rose in frequency. And then it was over.

Oceanvine allowed herself to settle down to the ground and saw all that was left of the ring-wearers was a series of piles of white ash with a gold ring deep within each one. The rings were still potentially dangerous, so Oceanvine telekinetically lifted them all from the ash piles and brought them to her hands. She was amazed at the number and was counting how many there were when Saltspray and her parents came running out the front door of the inn.

"Vine, what happened?" Saltspray asked anxiously, but then asked a more immediate question, "Um, why aren't you wearing anything?"

"I was wearing a night dress," Oceanvine remarked looking down at herself and realize that her apprentice was right. Any clothing she had been wearing was gone now.

"A fine example you are," Saltspray laughed, "running around in the cold night air without so much as a stitch of clothing."

"I really hadn't noticed," Oceanvine replied, determinedly trying not to show her embarrassment. Thomas removed his own dressing gown and wrapped it around her.

"What have you got there?" he asked, steering them all back inside the inn.

"More One Maiyim rings than I've ever seen in a single place before," Oceanvine replied.

Ksanya had just come downstairs as they approached the front door and she held it open for them. "Fine time for a late night stroll," she remarked. "You'll catch your death if you aren't careful."

"You sound like Mom," Saltspray laughed.

They sat down in the barroom while Thomas and Sandra dealt with a dozen worried customers and Oceanvine explained what happened. "But were they attacking us, you or did they think Veras was still here?" Ksanya wondered.

"Does it matter?" Saltspray asked.

"It might, yes," Ksanya replied. "If they think my cousin is still in Renton, they may try again. If they're after Vine, or any of us really, they will try again. Either way we need to make sure they know we're gone from here or else your parents will be in danger after we leave."

"How are we going to do that?" Saltspray asked.

"I'll compose a press release," Ksanya replied. "A statement by Lord Tamollen noting how he recently played host to Ksaveras XI and the noted master mage, Oceanvine. The local news can air it on the morning news and likely the national services will pick it up as an item of note as well. Why don't you two get back to sleep. I'm going to be up for a while, but I can catch up eventually."

"How's the arm?" Oceanvine asked Saltspray as they left the bar.

"It aches, but I didn't even notice it until after you stopped that spell," the teen replied. "How many of them were there?"

"Thirty-one," Oceanvine told her, "but it was only one cooperative spell. I probably would have had a lot more trouble if I'd been fighting thirty-one individual spells."

"So we got lucky again," Saltspray remarked.

"We're alive if that's what you mean," Oceanvine told her. She hadn't mentioned hearing Methis' voice, and had glossed over the details of how the Seal had reacted. That was something she would have to ask Methis about later.

Nine

They had intended to leave at first light, but Saltspray and Ksanya decided to let Oceanvine sleep in. "I'll miss a day of classes," Saltspray remarked, "but the only ones I have today are the morning class with

Vine and the afternoon lab. Maybe I ought to call the department though, and let them know Master Sunray will have to cover for her again.”

“That’s a good idea,” Ksanya nodded over her second cup of coffee. She glanced over at the television in the bar. The inn had an attached restaurant and the bar would not officially open for another hour, but Thomas had allowed them to sit there for the privacy it would supply. “Ah, see? My burning of the midnight oil is producing results.”

Saltspray turned to listen to an announcer explaining to the people of Renton that the recent visit from the King of Granom was now over. “I notice you didn’t mention that Their Majesties flew back to Querna with Veras,” Saltspray observed.

“It was not my place to do so,” Ksanya replied. “Besides I have no desire to make them a target. I imagine they’ll do something flashy on their arrival and if I know Orya, she’ll insist on a formal ball in their honor, but by then the Granomish military will be protecting them.”

“Will they have magical protection as well?” Saltspray asked.

“Our military branches have been recruiting mages ever since the Counterrevolution,” Ksanya explained. “Having Uncle Candle, Vine and Six there made all the difference, oh and Southgate too. She helped both Navy and Army organize their magical forces before she died last year.” Ksanya smiled sadly. “What a grand old lady! I flew back for the funeral and Veras granted her full state honors. Some of the news organizations had a field day with that. Southgate had been an orphan, but she picked herself up and got herself through school and then into the University in a day when only Vine’s great-grandmother had graduated from there. She was later inducted into the Order of the Silver Stay and for her actions in the Counterrevolution she was elevated to Marquessa.” She sighed. “I’ve put aside some money to see that once a week fresh flowers will be placed on her grave for as long as the Kingdom of Granom stands.”

“I’ve heard of her,” Saltspray commented. “Granddad mentioned her a lot. I think they loved each other although he loved Grandma Jillanda too.”

“There was something between them,” Ksanya admitted. “Nothing physical, mind you. There really is no sexual attraction between the species. It may be the wrong pheromones or something like that, but it is possible to love another person regardless of species. And they shared genuine love and affection. You could tell when they spoke to each other. It’s the sort of thing novels and movies are made of, you know?” Saltspray just smiled and sighed.

Oceanvine woke up sometime later and, predictably, started rushing everyone to get moving. “We’re all packed, Vine,” Saltspray chuckled.

“Oh, I’d better go throw my stuff back into the bag,” Oceanvine remarked, getting up from the table where Saltspray had delivered her teacher’s breakfast. As she often did in the morning, she had her pearl floating around her head and Saltspray did the same with the crystal marble she used even though she had already practiced her usual exercises for several hours.

“I’ve already done that too,” Saltspray replied. “I packed you up while you were in the shower and left out a change of clothes. The bag’s in the car, so you can just sit there and eat for a few minutes before we have to rush off.”

“Really, Vine,” Ksanya added, “didn’t you notice?”

“Not really,” Oceanvine shook her head. “I was in too much of a hurry.”

“Well, slow down,” Ksanya advised. “An extra few minutes won’t make any difference on the other end. Sally’s already called Six to let him know what was up and that we’d be late.”

“I think we could be back in Randona a bit after midnight,” Oceanvine considered.

“Vine, we couldn’t do that even if the highway was open all the way,” Ksana retorted. “It’s just after one in the afternoon.”

“That late?” Oceanvine asked, trying to gulp her coffee down.

“Stop that!” Ksanya scolded. “You’ll only hurt yourself.”

“I’m done,” Oceanvine told her unconvincingly.

“Finish your toast,” Saltspray commanded.

“One bite at a time,” Ksanya added as Oceanvine raised the last slice a bit too quickly. “Better. Now take one last relaxed sip of coffee. If you’re a good girl, I’ll buy you an ice cream cone later on.”

“Excuse me, Countess,” Sandra interrupted them. “There’s a phone call for you. You may take it in the office if you like.”

“Thank you, Lady Tamollen,” Ksanya replied politely.

“Lady?” Sandra scoffed.

“You started it by calling me by my title,” Ksanya teased. “Sally, make sure she finishes the coffee.”

“I’ll pack you a vacuum bottle, dear,” Sandra told Oceanvine and hurried into the kitchen.

“It’s really afternoon?” Oceanvine asked.

“Yep!” Saltspray replied lightly. “We figured that if you were still sleeping, you must need to. Oh, don’t give me that look. You would have done the same thing in our places.”

“I suppose,” Oceanvine admitted. “Can I stop stuffing my face now? I really have had more than I want.”

“Yeah sure,” Saltspray laughed. “All you had to do was say so.” Ksanya joined them again. “Problem?” Saltspray asked.

“No,” Ksanya smiled. “That was my embassy calling to let me know Their Majesties have arrived safely in Querna. I guess I can relax again for a bit.”

“Well, we can all relax in the car,” Oceanvine told them. “I’ve slept, I’ve eaten and I’ve even tried practicing patience, but it’s time we got going.”

“I think your patience needs more practice,” Ksanya laughed, but she got back to her feet.

"I'll get that coffee from Mom and meet you in the parking lot," Sally told them. She picked up the staff Oceanvine had given her and rushed away from the table. A short time later they finally started back toward Randona.

"The sun is setting," Ksanya noted a few hours later. "How much further do you plan to go today?"

"Another few hours at least," Oceanvine remarked. "I'm not tired."

"Uh," Ksanya seemed to be about to say something, but changed her mind and replied, "Okay."

"Vine," Saltspray butted in, "what Ksanya is trying to say is that she didn't sleep last night."

"Not at all?" Oceanvine asked.

"There was too much to do," Ksanya replied. "Keep driving, it's okay."

"No, Vine," Saltspray disagreed. "Ksanya can't sleep in a car. I've been watching. Admit it, Ksanya."

"So I'll sleep like a rock when we finally do stop," Ksanya argued.

"No," Oceanvine decided. "We're coming up on Bernol. My Aunt Klarissa and Uncle Thomas live here. Last time I saw them they were talking to me again. Let's stop in and say, 'Hello.' If we don't get a warm welcome we can always find a hotel room. It's a very popular ski area in the winter and it's early for the foliage season yet so we ought to be able to find a room."

"I don't want to be a problem, Vine," Ksanya protested.

"You aren't," Oceanvine told her firmly. "To tell the truth this is our turn off to avoid the area around Mount Mira and if I push on it will be on unfamiliar roads through the mountains. It's an older highway; the new superhighway is still under construction, so it would be better to do it in daylight anyway."

Oceanvine drove the car through the small town and then took a sharp turn onto a long driveway that had been paved with broken clam shells. They were rather far inland for such shells to be used as a paving materials, but Oceanvine knew her aunt and uncle could afford to have them trucked in several hundred miles and it did make the driveway unique in the region. The driveway switched back and forth twice until it reached the top of a tall hill with a wide, flat top. The house up there was a low, rambling affair that had been built less than twenty-five years earlier as a modernized and half-sized imitation of Bernol Manor which sat at the base of the mountain on the south side of the town.

"Nice place," Saltspray remarked as she got a glance of the structure in the failing light.

"Yeah," Oceanvine agreed. "Lord Bernol built it as a wedding present when his son married my aunt. I used to like visiting here in the summer. Grandmother was hardly ever here at the same time." The house had been built in a Vee shape with two wings spreading out from the main door near which Oceanvine brought Sally's car to a halt. "Well, let's go knock on the door."

The house may have been modern, but the knocker was a traditional heavy, brass lion's head bearing a ring in its mouth. Oceanvine only had time to knock twice before the door opened and she found herself face to face with a woman only a few years younger than she was. "Elie! It's been years, come in." She turned toward a formally dressed man who had just arrived to open the door. "I got it, Grover."

“Hi, Katrin,” Oceanvine greeted her with a hopeful smile. “We were in the area.”

“And you were looking for crash space?” Katrin finished for her.

“Crash space?” Ksanya asked.

“A place to stay,” Oceanvine explained, “generally with friends on an ad hoc basis. University students use the phrase, in Randona at least, and I think it has spread to Merinne.”

“I kind of like it,” Ksanya nodded. “We did that sort of thing when on roads trips in Querna. Just sort of drove until we were too tired, but were near a friend’s place.”

“I thought you were busy baiting the tabloid photographers,” Oceanvine remarked.

“That started in my sophomore year,” she replied.

“Grover?” Katrin asked, “Could you please tell Mom that Cousin Elie is here with friends and have rooms prepared.”

“Yes, Miss Katrin,” Grover nodded.

“Katrin, these are my friends,” Oceanvine finally introduced Saltspray and Ksanya.

“Nice to meet you,” Katrin told them, “Elie, I saw you on TV the other night. Oh wait? You’re that Ksanya, aren’t you?” She had started to lead them through the house.

“I haven’t been referred to as ‘that Ksanya’ in years,” Ksanya laughed, “but yes, I’m the ambassador from Granom, if that’s what you mean.”

“Yes,” Katrin nodded. “I’m a real fan of yours, Madame Ambassador.” She started walking again.

Ksanya chuckled, “Just Ksanya. I’m off the clock just now.”

“Come on!” Katrin urged them, “Mom will want to see you all.”

“Really?” Oceanvine asked hesitantly. “Aunt Kaisa wasn’t exactly thrilled last time I ran into her.”

“Oh yeah,” Katrin giggled. “Ema told me about that. She’s sorry about it, you know. Grandmother had been making threats, you know the sort, and Ema was too young to realize that she didn’t have to go along with what Grandmother said. Are we really descended from Silverwind?”

“She won’t even admit that?” Oceanvine asked. “The king has said so often enough.”

“I don’t get it either,” Katrin admitted.

“I never got the whole story,” Oceanvine explained, “but I understand when Grandmother was about your age she had an argument with her parents and pretty much disowned them.”

“That explains why disownment is her favorite threat,” Katrin shrugged. “Do you know what they argued about?”

“Oh yes,” Oceanvine nodded. “You’ve heard of One Maiyim?”

“I’ve heard you talking about them,” Katrin replied, “and yes I know who they were.”

“They’re still around,” Oceanvine told her. “Grandmother was a member back when it was still legal to be a member. Frankly, I doubt she ever got over it.”

“You say this One Maiyim group is still around?” Katrin asked.

“It’s a renegade group and an underground one,” Oceanvine replied, “but they’re behind the recent assassination attempts. They were behind my father’s recent illness and the disaster on Kern. They also attempted to take over the Isle of Fire and Granom a few years ago in the guise of the People’s Party and President Jiroshi of Bellinen was one of the higher-ups.”

“I didn’t know that,” Katrin admitted. “Maybe it’s time to get my head out of the sand?”

“It’s called being sheltered, Katrin,” Oceanvine told her. “It’s the way I was until Uncle Candle opened my eyes, but I don’t want to close them again, and our great-grandmother – oh, Katrin, I wish I could take you back to meet her.” They had arrived at a small room in which the centerpiece was a cloth-weaving loom the size of a spinet piano. Oceanvine’s Aunt Klarissa was sitting at the loom, weaving a bright plaid woolen cloth.

“That would be Oceanvine?” Klarissa asked. “That’s your name too, isn’t it, Elie? Is it acceptable to still call you Elie?”

Oceanvine replied in reverse order, “I don’t mind family calling me Elie although my name is now legally Oceanvine, and yes my great-grandmother, your grandmother was the Wizard or later Doctor Oceanvine. I chose my name in her honor.”

“I heard her lecture once on women’s rights,” Klarissa admitted, “but I didn’t realize we were related.”

“There’s not much of a family resemblance,” Oceanvine noted. “Most of us more closely resemble Silverwind from what I can tell, but Uncle Candle and a few others who knew her told me I have her chin and I wear my hair in a fashion similar to how she did when she was my age. And that is about the only resemblance between us. But I did spend most of my spare time with her during the last two years of her life.”

“Lucky!” Katrin told her.

“I think so,” Oceanvine nodded. She performed the introductions again and then added, “Aunt Klarissa, Ksanya is being polite beyond anything you could expect of me. Between one thing and another she didn’t sleep last night and part of the reason was so that I could. Would you mind...?”

“Countess, please don’t stay up on my account,” Klarissa told Ksanya. “Katrin, please see Ksanya to a room.” Katrin nodded and led Ksanya away.

“Thanks, Aunt Klarissa,” Oceanvine told her warmly.

“My pleasure, Sweetie,” Klarissa laughed. “It’s been too long since you were here.”

“Oh, that’s even better to hear,” Oceanvine admitted.

“Oh dear, you didn’t take Kaisa’s behavior to heart did you?” Klarissa asked.

“Dad behaved the same way until Uncle Candle’s funeral,” Oceanvine admitted.

“So you figured I’d treat you like a pariah like Mom wanted us all to,” Klarissa sighed. “You forget, perhaps, but I’m the middle child. I’ve always marched along to the beat of a different drummer – rock and roll, years before it was fashionable. I’m the one who used to keep Freddy and Kaisa from going at each other’s throats and I’m also the one your grandparents didn’t bother watching as closely. So after a period of rebellion, I eventually developed my own sense of values. I think magic is pretty cool, isn’t that what you kids say these days?”

“Um, that’s a bit dated,” Saltspray informed her and provided a list of alternatives.

“So, how about showing me how you do that thing with the pearl,” Klarissa suggested. “It was all the talk in court, or so Tom told me.”

“Where is Uncle Thomas?” Oceanvine asked. Sally took out her marble and willed it back into orbit.

“Randona with his father,” Klarissa explained.

“Lord Bernol,” Oceanvine translated for Saltspray.

“Yes,” Klarissa nodded. “The old lord gets tired easily these days, so Tom as the heir ends up doing most of his running around for him. It’s good practice for when he takes up the title, although his father’s health continues to be well so, the Gods willing, he’ll be with us a few more years yet.”

“And Michal?” Oceanvine prompted.

“Ah, you two used to get in such trouble when we visited Olen,” Klarissa smiled. “He’s on Holna, spending a year with his perspective in-laws, and probably looking forward to a milder winter than he’s used to. Now show me that trick and then you can tell me how your side of the family is.”

Ten

Saltspray took over the driving chores the next morning. “Are you sure you feel up to driving?” Oceanvine asked her.

“I felt up to it yesterday, Vine,” Saltspray replied. “Really, my arm is fine, just a mild ache is all. I don’t even notice it most of the time.”

“I really like your aunt and cousin,” Ksanya told Oceanvine, “not at all what I was expecting.”

“Yeah,” Oceanvine nodded. “I forgot Aunt Klarissa was so different from the rest of the family. I wonder if Grandmother had something to do with that. When I got caught levitating that ball back when I was a kid and Dad spanked me, I think Aunt Klarissa would have cheered me on if she had been around.”

“She certainly picked up basic telekinesis quickly enough,” Sally remarked. “Katrin did too. If they keep up the practice they’ll be wearing floating pearls or beads or whatever they choose at their next formal occasion.”

“Probably the king’s Winter Ball,” Oceanvine remarked. “Now that Lord Bernol is getting too tired to stay up that late, it will be up to his son to show the flag this year. It will be nice seeing them in Randona.”

They drove southward through the mountains and then out again. She had been in a hurry, but around lunchtime Oceanvine decided on a detour. “We’re only about thirty miles from Midon. That’s where Aritos keeps an office and He’s there most days. And I owe Him lunch at the very least. Actually, a lot of lunches.”

Ksanya admitted. “He brought me sticky buns to go with coffee once when I was on the run from the embassy.”

“And odds are I inherited a similar debt from Granddad,” Saltspray laughed. “Have you been here before?”

“No, but I have his address and phone number in the book,” Oceanvine assured her. “We’ll find the place.”

They had to stop and ask directions three times, but eventually found an old, but well-maintained brownstone building at 341 North Water Street. Then they had to circle the block three times before a parking space opened up. Eventually they made their way to the top floor in an old elevator that still required an operator.

“Which floor, ladies?” the elderly gentleman asked.

“Fifth, please,” Oceanvine responded.

“Right away,” he replied, closing first the outer door and then the inner gate. He worked the controls with the expertise of years and after only a little fine tuning, brought them precisely level with the top floor of the building. Oceanvine was impressed. There were a few old buildings left in Randona with similar manual elevators and she had grown used to having to step up or down in leaving them.

“Thank you,” she told the man politely before they moved on to the floor directory. “Hmm, Doctor Artemus Face, Suite 503. I think that’s him.”

“You think?” Ksanya asked. “I thought you knew.”

“Uncle Candle’s notes are in Randona,” Oceanvine replied. “I’m lucky I remembered this much.”

They walked down a barely lit hallway until they reached a thick wooden door with a frosted glass panel on which the words, “Dr. Artemus Face, Marriage Counselor” had been painted.

“Been here a long time, has he?” Ksanya guessed.

“I think so,” Oceanvine replied. “What makes you say so?”

“The lettering on this window is different from that on the other doors,” Ksanya replied. “It’s a different style and looks older. I guess that could have been done more recently, but since Uncle Candle had the

address in his notes, I imagine Doctor Face has been here a while.”

“Nice reasoning,” Salt spray admired.

“I play a mean game of Charades too,” Ksanya laughed.

Opening the door, they found a waiting room with a leather couch and several chairs of mixed heritage. There was no receptionist – not even a desk for one – but the door to the inner office was closed and there was a sign on the door that said, “In Session, Please Wait.”

“I guess he’s in today,” Salt spray remarked. “Oh my Gods, look at these magazines. They’re ancient!”

“This one’s older than I am,” Ksanya chuckled.

“That is taking an old joke too far,” Oceanvine commented dryly.

“Well,” Ksanya considered, “maybe He took it just far enough. Everyone expects a doctor’s office to have old magazines.”

“But where did He buy these?” Salt spray asked. “In a flea market?”

“No,” Oceanvine replied, turning one over. “He got them by subscription. I guess He’s been here fifty years or more.”

“But He doesn’t look more than about thirty, maybe thirty-five if you’re willing to stretch a point,” Ksanya objected. “Someone would see the mailing labels and find it odd, wouldn’t they?”

“Think of it as a test,” Oceanvine smiled. “Methis does the same thing in Her home; little clues to Her identity, subtle but not completely impossible to catch.”

“You mean like how there always seems to be at least one room inside than would seem to fit from the outside?” Ksanya asked.

“Yes,” Oceanvine nodded, “and how there’s always something to eat even though you’ll never catch Her bringing anything in.”

Ksanya’s reply was interrupted when the inner door opened and a young human couple stepped out. “Thank you, Doctor Face,” the woman was saying, “you’re always such a help.”

“My pleasure,” Doctor Face replied. He was wearing an Orentan silk shirt over an expensive pair of woolen slacks. “I think you two are going to be just fine, and enjoy your vacation. Arnd is lovely this time of year.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” the husband told him, shaking hands.

“Nice couple,” Aritos sighed after they had left. “Well, I must admit this is a surprise. What are you three doing in Midon?”

“We were in the area,” Oceanvine remarked. “We figured it was our turn to take you out to lunch and I had some questions.”

"I'm not surprised," Aritos laughed.

"Well, I know there's a lot You won't tell us," Oceanvine admitted, "but mostly I'm looking for opinion, I think."

"You think?" Aritos asked. "Now why do I think I'm going to have even more difficulty answering your questions than I ever did Candle's? Well, why don't we have a seat in my office and get that stuff out of the way before lunch. We'll all be more relaxed that way. Do you play Chess, by the way?"

Oceanvine looked around and spotted the Chess board and set Candle had left to Aritos. "Poorly, I'm afraid. You should try asking Six. He's gotten to be quite the enthusiast the last few years."

"I wish I had known while you were in Granom," Aritos admitted. "Well, don't be surprised if I pop in to Randona from time to time."

"You're always welcome," she replied.

"Nice view!" Saltspray enthused, looking out the windows. "You can see the entire harbor from here, can't you? What are they doing over there?"

"Building a storm barrier," Aritos remarked. "Midon's experienced damage from several hurricanes and winter storms in the last few decades and the city has decided to protect the harbor. It's not a big city, but as a fishing port, it's the number one port in the world for cod and lobster landings and second in tuna and swordfish, so keeping the harbor safe is considered essential. So, I hear you're still having troubles with One Maiyim."

"You don't have to be a god to know that!" Oceanvine remarked. "It's been all over the news."

"The news hasn't really blamed the One Maiyim organization," Aritos replied. "As far as they know, One Maiyim was disbanded years ago."

"It's a secret society," Ksanya pointed out. "It wouldn't be much of a secret if they kept open offices in Downtown Querna or even here in Midon."

"Granddad always said that three people can't keep a secret," Saltspray commented.

"An exaggeration," Aritos told her, "but not entirely wrong in spirit."

"Well, I figure they must be starting to run out of members by now," Saltspray told him. "Vine wiped out thirty-one just the other night when they attacked Dad's inn."

"They are losing members by attrition faster than they are recruiting, Saltspray," Aritos admitted. Saltspray wondered how He had known her magename, but decided being a god had its perquisites. "But there are still more to worry about."

"And yet they can stay hidden so well?" Saltspray asked.

Aritos did not answer, but Oceanvine did, "A secret can be kept by magic. Magic is very psionic in nature and a mind is quite susceptible to coercion along those lines. A spell can easily keep a person from speaking about a specific subject. Right?" she looked to Aritos for confirmation.

“Very right,” He nodded. “I and the others have done it innumerable times for many different reasons. It is also possible to make someone forget about a certain subject until previously set conditions are met.”

“It is?” Oceanvine asked. “How do you do that?”

“Oh, I’m sure you can figure that out without any hints from Me,” Aritos chuckled, “and I don’t think that’s why you came here.”

“Well, we mostly came for lunch,” Oceanvine assured Him, “but I actually wanted to ask about something that happened the other night when I used the Seal of Methis.”

“I wasn’t aware She had granted you that honor,” Aritos noted, “but then it was none of my business and I’ve always known She would eventually.”

“I’ve used it twice now,” Oceanvine admitted. “The second time it seemed to behave strangely.”

“Explain, please,” Aritos requested.

“Well, the first time it sort of came to life and I was able to use it to counter a combined Bond,” Oceanvine replied. “That went pretty much as Uncle Candle’s notes led me to expect, although no amount of description could have prepared me for the power involved and the sensation it invoked in me. It was like dealing with a living creature that wanted to help me in anything it did. However, the second time, I could swear it started acting before I had even decided what I needed it to do. It took me into the pattern and seemed to merge with me. Then when I decided what had to be done it seemed to rush ahead of my thoughts to the obvious conclusions and handled the matter without further instruction. Is that accurate?”

“I wasn’t there,” Aritos reminded her.

“Maybe I’m overstating the case,” she admitted, “but it seemed to know what I wanted before I did and it was eager to do it. And strangest of all, before I invoked Methis’ Seal, I was worried that I had to do everything I had to alone and I could swear I heard Methis tell me I wasn’t alone. Her voice came from my pendant. And then, as I said, I think I merged with the seal and after that happened everything seemed so easy.”

“Interesting,” Aritos told her after a bit. “We do not grant the use of our seals freely so it’s probable I have not encountered every possible ramification. However it is possible that Methis’ Seal is more reactive than mine. It is even more likely that something else was at work.

“One thing you need to know is that you will get your best use out of a divine seal when in using it you most closely approach the mindset and thought patterns of the god or goddess involved.”

“That’s what Uncle Candle told me,” Oceanvine admitted.

“Did he?” Aritos asked. “I wonder how he knew.”

“I think he worked it out for himself after talking to both you and Methis while we were on the Isle of Fire,” Oceanvine replied.

“That really is quite remarkable, even so,” Aritos told her. “So you know that already. Good, but I think what must have happened is you must have come extremely close to how Methis might think about and

use her abilities in the same situation. Even though you had not consciously worked out what you wanted to do, your unconscious mind had and the Seal took those thoughts hidden from you and ran with them.”

“That’s kind of scary, you know,” Oceanvine told him, “but then why do I feel like Her seal is still a part of me?”

“Do you?” Aritos countered.

“I feel that way,” she insisted, “but it could just be my mind playing tricks on me.”

“Not too likely,” Aritos replied. “You and Methis have become remarkably close these last few years. Closer than She has allowed herself to become with another mortal aside from Candle in a very long time. She has had a fair amount to do with the way you have grown up too.”

“She taught me a lot about magic,” Oceanvine agreed, “but She taught Six too.”

“She has taught many students over the centuries,” Aritos reminded her. “I understand you intend to open a new school in which She plans to teach as well.”

“Yes!” Oceanvine exclaimed. “Daddy is setting aside part of the estate for me.”

“Ah, so he has graduated back to being ‘Daddy’ again,” Aritos noted. “I was fairly certain he would come to terms with his daughter’s wayward ways. But my point is you have been especially responsive to Methis’ lessons, or maybe you just naturally think similarly to Her. However at the moment you invoked Her sign you must have been thinking as closely as possible for a mortal to think like Her. A divine seal is the symbolic representation of its god and when you approached a Methis-like thought process, the Seal recognized the affinity and sought to join with your own personal pattern.”

“Are you saying that for a brief moment, I was a goddess?” Oceanvine asked.

“No,” Aritos shook his head. “No mortal can become a god, but in that moment your spirits touched and a part of Methis’ pattern become part of your own.”

“Other than never feeling alone, will that mean anything?” Oceanvine asked.

“Other than having an unprecedentedly intimate relationship with a goddess?” Aritos countered. “While it lasts you will find it amazingly easy to invoke the Seal of Methis.”

“While it lasts?” Oceanvine echoed. “Then this isn’t something permanent.”

“That would be very unlikely,” Aritos assured her. “We all change over time. Gods change more slowly than mortals; we’re very set in our ways, but we all change. In time, probably a year or less, you’ll notice the change.”

“Oh,” Oceanvine nodded. “Good. I love Methis. She’s like everyone’s older sister – the one you don’t fight with,” she added hastily, “but using Her seal scares me a bit.”

“Scares you?” Aritos asked.

“It’s so powerful,” Oceanvine explained.

“Are you afraid of the power?” Aritos probed.

“Not as such, but I think I understand why you always say, ‘Think of it as a test.’ That’s precisely what this is. Can I use such power without abusing it? It would be so easy to let it go to my head – to take it all for granted. So that’s what I do. I think of it as a test and it’s a test I don’t ever want to fail, not so much because of what it would do to me, but because I understand I would disappoint Methis.”

“You have the right attitude,” Aritos nodded, “and I can see that Methis chose as wisely in granting you the use of Her seal as I believe I was in doing the same for Candle with my own seal.”

“Thank you,” Oceanvine replied. “I hope so.”

“Was that all you wanted to know?” Aritos asked.

“Hardly,” Oceanvine laughed, “but even I wouldn’t answer some of my questions in your place. Why don’t we get some lunch now.”

“Sure,” He agreed. “There’s a nice place just around the corner that specializes in Ellistan cuisine.”

“What’s that?” Saltspray asked.

“Lots of spinach, broccoli, beans and vinegar,” Ksanya explained. “Also chicken is the most common meat used and then there are all the cheese dishes. Stay away from those if you want a light lunch.”

Oceanvine might have kept discretely silent about certain subjects, but that did not stop Aritos from offering advice on His own. “You’ve been attracting a lot of the wrong sort of attention to yourself in recent months, Vine,” He told her while waiting for their meals.

“I don’t see how I could have done otherwise,” Oceanvine replied.

“I’m not saying you should have,” Aritos replied, “but One Maiyim has finally come to see you and Six as the major obstacles between them and their goals that you truly are. Not only that, but you have students who are turning out to be as talented as you are. They’re starting to panic and about to throw everything they have at you because they realize that if they don’t get you and your students out of their way soon, they won’t have the strength to do so later.”

“Sounds like a last stand coming up to me,” Ksanya commented.

“Exactly,” Aritos agreed, “but if they get desperate enough, they’ll settle for a war of mutual extinction.”

“Are you saying we’re getting near to the end of our troubles with of One Maiyim?” Oceanvine pressed.

Aritos paused to consider His answer. He looked at each of the women with Him in turn. Oceanvine he had known since the day of her great-grandmother’s funeral and He had watched her grow from a shy and uncertain teen into a mature confident woman and a powerful and capable mage. Ksanya was an unusual woman in anyone’s circle. She was a close cousin to the King of Granom and had grown up among royalty, but that had not shaped her in any normal manner. Instead she had rebelled against the stereotypes her society expected her to fill, even if her parents had not. Because of that she had excelled in the diplomatic arena where no Granomish woman had been allowed to even compete in the past. Sally, he had known the longest of all. In his occasional visits to Renton, he had observed her as an intelligent and inquisitive young girl and how she had grown into a brave and prematurely confident young

woman. The young Saltspray had a long way to go yet, but to Him she represented the promise of Maiyim's future every bit as much as the other two did.

"I am saying," he finally answered, "the Inner Circle of One Maiyim, or what's left of it, is frantic enough to come after you yourselves and in fact some already have."

"President Jiroshi?" Oceanvine asked.

"He was one," Aritos nodded. "There have been a few others. The one you let live on Kern, for example, and there were several among the lot you destroyed the other night. There have been a couple others – it doesn't really matter who – but their best is yet to come. Defeat them and what's left won't have enough cohesion or ability to cause much trouble. Well, not as One Maiyim in any case."

"As One Maiyim?" Ksanya echoed. "Why? Who replaces them?"

"Ideas are not as easy to eradicate as the people who spread them, Ksanya," Aritos replied, "but put that out of your mind for now. I've said too much."

"You did," Saltspray agreed, "but where's the greater harm? In telling us the rest or letting us jump to the wrong conclusions? Are you telling us we weren't supposed to know there will always be people who will be attracted to unworthy causes?"

"No," Aritos shook his head, "it just won't do you any good to get distracted from what you have to do with the notion of what might come after. Even gods can only do one thing at a time although we can all make many plans at once. Solve each problem in its turn, but you are a clever one, aren't you? All right. When this is finally over, if you win, of course, the leaders of One Maiyim will be gone. Most of their mages, certainly all those who are advanced enough to be dangerous, will be gone as well. There will, however, be a fair number of low-level members left alive. They won't go starting a new form of One Maiyim by any name, but they will have children. Children to whom they will teach their values and who, in turn, will pass them on to their own children.

"Some of One Maiyim's values are actually good things," He continued. "I think you know that. One Maiyim started out advocating inter-species cooperation and tolerance and a managed ecology. Silverwind was one of its founders and the first Oceanvine an enthusiastic member when she was your age, Vine. Both goals are worthy of pursuit. It was the Inner Circle who hijacked an essentially good movement and used it as a conspiracy to further their own ends.

"Don't worry," He laughed suddenly. "I seriously doubt you'll find life boring just because the Inner Circle isn't around anymore to threaten you."

Eleven

A door opened and closed. Sextant looked up from a large array of paper spread out over the dining room table and called, "Vine? Is that you?"

The faculty cottage they shared barely resembled the book repository it had been when Candle had lived there. By the time of his death, Candle's library was two and three books deep against shelves that stood against every vertical surface. Oceanvine had chosen to keep enough shelves to hold the books she and Sextant owned, but neither of them were literary packrats like Candle had been. Once Candle's

books had gone off to their new owners, Oceanvine and Sextant had discovered several pieces of well-made furniture, an early radio set which they donated to the King's museum, two hand-made rugs that had not seen the light of day in decades and several that were threadbare on those sections that had not been book-covered. They also discovered a fully equipped, albeit unfashionable old kitchen where they thought Candle had only owned a refrigerator in which to store the leftovers of his take-out meals. They also discovered an entirely unused closet that had somehow gone forgotten behind a double-thick stack of books.

Oceanvine stepped into the room and sat down across from Sextant. "You're up late, dear," she observed.

"Am I?" he asked, glancing through the kitchen door to look at the clock. "I didn't realize it was nearly Two in the morning. How was the trip?"

"Long," Oceanvine remarked. "We dropped off Ksanya at the embassy, then Sally dropped me off here. We would have been back about three hours ago, but we stopped off in Midon to talk to Aritos."

"Oh? How's He doing?" Sextant asked a bit distractedly.

"He misses Uncle Candle," Oceanvine replied.

"He said that?" Sextant looked up again.

"Not in as many words, but I don't think He's had a good game of Chess in three years or more," Oceanvine smiled. "I suggested He try challenging you."

"I doubt I can give Him the game Wizard Candle could," Sextant shrugged, "but I'd learn a lot about the game I might not otherwise."

"So, what are you doing up this late?" Oceanvine asked again.

"I'm trying to figure out One Maiyim's next move," Sextant replied.

"Any ideas?" Oceanvine asked, taking an interested look at the papers on the table. Seen upside down they made no sense to her, so she stood up and walked around to see them from Sextant's perspective.

"Ideas? Plenty," Sextant replied, "but I can't find a pattern."

"There may not be a pattern," Oceanvine pointed out. "All the incidents over the years – they were just as likely planned by different people each time."

"Maybe," Sextant conceded. "They like attacking royalty and other governmental leaders, but they also have a penchant for infiltrating and taking over governments as well. One thing I'm certain of; those numbers transmissions we've been hearing over the years must be One Maiyim's means of communications or at least one of them. Every one of them have been intercepted just before or just after incidents that involved a move by One Maiyim."

"Remember the first one we heard?" Sextant continued. "It was after the second tsunami to hit Sutheria."

"What about the second time?" Oceanvine asked. "The one we heard during that storm in the Methis Ocean?"

“I’m not sure,” Sextant admitted. “It happened just before the protests in Silamon turned to riots, though. It’s like this on all of them. The attempted regicide Ksanya and Maia foiled had one just before and I’ve found a record of another part of one from afterward. There were transmissions during the problems we had with the Peoples’ Party and several the year we went to Saindo and Bellinen. We heard another about the same time they started having trouble at the power plant near New Querna and there was another following the Gran 4 incident, although it may have been more closely related to the Peoples’ Party.”

“It would help if we knew what they meant,” Oceanvine noted.

“Even Aritos hasn’t figured them out yet and that really bothers Him,” Sextant replied.

“So, on the political aspect, I see you’ve been examining the Members of Parliament,” Oceanvine remarked.

“Intensely,” Sextant replied, “There are at least a dozen men and women in the House of Commons who might be affiliated with One Maiyim, but I have no proof against them.”

“I was reminded at lunch today that the original goals of One Maiyim were good and noble,” Oceanvine told him. “Many of their low-level members still believe in and support those ideals.”

“Interspecies cooperation and antipollution are something I support as well,” Sextant nodded, “but how many of those politicians are using them as planks on their platforms because they truly believe in them and how many because it helps them get re-elected?”

“That may not matter, dear,” Oceanvine replied. “I’m sure most of them are just politicians doing what politicians do. We should keep an eye on them, but we’re not His Majesty’s Royal Intelligence Agency. That sort of search is best done by them, I think.”

“I thought so too,” Sextant replied, “but Sir Forrest Gaist refuses to take my calls and two of his agents stopped by the office to let me know my assistance is not needed.”

“Does the king know about that?” Oceanvine asked concernedly.

“It happened just yesterday and Hacon Ancel won’t be back until the weekend,” Sextant replied.

“Helm and Maia then?” Oceanvine pressed.

“I didn’t want to bother them,” Sextant admitted. “We’ve never worked closely with the RIA and you know they’ve always resented it when His Majesty asked us to do something they felt was their job. I figured it was just more of that. Gaist doesn’t really fit the mold of a One Maiyim member, you know.”

“Well, put him on your watch list anyway,” Oceanvine advised. “About the MPs, though, have any of them had sudden shifts in campaign rhetoric over the years? That’s how Ksanya and Maia spotted Doctor Tall’s affiliation, a sudden change in research matter.”

“You’re kidding?” Sextant laughed bitterly. “They’re politicians. All of them have done that. Some reverse their positions every election. I tell you, they do what they must to keep their jobs. The closer to honest ones just campaign on different issues each time and avoid their beliefs in areas that would be unpopular that year, but a lot of them flop back and forth with every change of breeze.”

“It was a thought,” Oceanvine sighed. “I’m too tired to think well right now anyway. Dear, stay up if you like,” she added, kissing him lightly. “but I am going to bed.”

Twelve

Temperatures had dropped overnight and the lawns and rooftops were lightened with a coat of frost. The sun had not warmed them yet as Oceanvine and Sextant walked together toward their offices. Warm and humid air had been replaced with a cool dry air mass and the maples on campus had finally decided it was time to display their autumnal colors gloriously. In spite of the cool start, however, the air was already starting to warm up and Oceanvine found she could be comfortable in a light jacket while Sextant insisted that shirtsleeves were sufficient protection against the cold.

Normally they might have stopped for a cup of coffee, but they were both running late and decided the coffee pot in the department office would suffice for a quick jolt before classes.

They were just one hundred yards from the tall Onestone Building when Oceanvine felt a strange internal tugging sensation. She suddenly realized this was what Saltspray had felt just prior to the translocation of several attackers. Part of her remembered it had happened just a block away, but most of her concentrated on raising the strongest ward she could.

The ward was smoke-colored with tiny sparkles of energy that crackled along its outer surface. Sextant was about to ask about it when a bright blue light filled their eyes and an explosion rocked the buildings around them.

Finding their attackers was difficult through the shower of glass, leaves and even some tree limbs all around them. He didn’t have the time to look closely, but to Sextant’s eyes, none of the building facing the quad of Randona Main Campus had come through without some damage. There were students and teachers on the ground, but neither he nor Oceanvine had time to see to their aid at the moment.

As the leaves were still floating down, Oceanvine and Sextant found themselves being hammered from every direction as high energy spells splashed against Oceanvine’s non-stick ward. “Vine,” Sextant told her. “Your ward is a bit too good, I can’t fight back through it.”

“Phase through with your own ward,” she recommended.

“Is that possible” Sextant wondered out loud. “I’ve phased through wards often enough, but not when casting one of my own.”

“Then cast your own ward now and I’ll let you out,” Oceanvine replied. “Ready? Go!” It should have been a tricky move, dropping and reforming a ward while under attack, but Oceanvine was too busy trying to get clear shots at the enemy mages to worry about what she thought of as minutiae. It was only later that she realized that she had done it with barely a thought and paused to wonder if her current affinity with Methis had eased her through the tricky operation or possibly the stored power in her staff had helped.

However, their attackers were keeping Oceanvine and Sextant off balance. The constant blazes of color against their wards were blinding and all either of them could do when under siege like that was to shoot off projectile wards where they hoped an enemy might be. The siege continued several long minutes more

before it suddenly broke off and they could see what was happening outside their wards again.

Saltspray, Balance, Leotawa and Misana had seen the initial attack from the department office window and had quickly rallied other magic students and teachers. While Oceanvine and Sextant were blinded, their students had surrounded the attacking mages and taken them by surprise, so by the time her eyes had cleared, Oceanvine saw a confusing melee going on all around her.

Some of the enemies were using Bonds of Aritos to power their spells so Oceanvine and Sextant worked on disrupting those first. Two of the One Maiyim mages suddenly screamed and vanished, but four more banded together to form a massive composite Bond which formed overhead. The Bond was partially fueling the personal ward of its casters, making them impossible to reach, but it was also building up a frightening amount of power.

“Drain it, Vine!” Sextant shouted and both mages used their staves to siphon power quickly from the Bond and to shoot it harmlessly into the sky. However the power of the Bond continued to grow and Oceanvine realized it was recapturing much of the energy they were draining from it. The golden staff might be able to handle that much power, but Oceanvine knew from experience that her wooden one could not.

Instead she thought of the pendant and the Seal of Methis. This time she didn’t need to look at the pendant itself, the Seal immediately presented itself in her mind and seemed, once more, to become a part of her. Her protective ward dropped, but now she was glowing with an intense golden light and floating into the air. Spells bounced off her harmlessly and she looked down on the scene below and up at the gigantic Bond of Aritos.

Once again she reminded herself Aritos would have patiently tried to contain the power of His Children. When dealing directly with them, He would have waited out their most violent tirades. Methis would not have been so inclined and neither was Oceanvine. Instead she was thinking someone should have given the demons a sharp spanking when they were young. *You cannot reason with evil*, she reminded herself. *It has to be stopped as soon as possible* .

In a sense Oceanvine was now a part of the Seal of Methis just as it was a part of her and she did not need to apply it to a purpose or command it to her bidding, she could act directly. The one sure way to defuse a Bond of Aritos was to strip it of all power, so Oceanvine started sending the Bond’s energy upward directly without the aid of a staff. Other One Maiyim mages joined the first four and the Bond grew again. The Bond, however was a part of the demons it represented and it began to fight back, drawing on the most readily available power source, that of the mages casting the spell in the first place.

Suddenly the Bond stopped growing and became unstable. Oceanvine could see it starting to unravel and instantly understood that unless stopped this would be a disaster far greater than what had befallen the City of Medda. She concentrated on holding the Bond together and an instant later Sextant translocated it harmlessly into space just as he and Candle had done in the past.

As Oceanvine lowered herself back to the ground she saw nearly twenty frozen corpses of the mages who had been attacking. “What happened to them?” Saltspray asked. “Did you do that?”

“It was the Bond,” Oceanvine explained, noticing she was still glowing although the golden light had grown softer. “At the end it even used the heat of their bodies to gain power.”

“It used?” Balance asked. “You make it sound alive.”

“In a certain sort of way it is,” Oceanvine told him. “The Bond of a demon or the Seal of a god is the symbolic representation of that entity and I have recently come to understand it is a magical extension of that entity as well. They are more than just powerful spells, they have personality and can, if the associated entity desires, think and act to a limited extent.”

“Wouldn’t that mean the demons are not quite as imprisoned as we thought?” Misana asked.

“That may, indeed, be the case,” Oceanvine told her. “And the more mages that use their Bonds, the freer the demons are to act within the world.”

“Then they could eventually break free?” Leotawa concluded uncertainly.

“I’d have to ask,” Oceanvine admitted, “but I would guess not. Aritos told Uncle Candle that even a nuclear bomb would not suffice to break them free. It would take the combined will of the Elder Gods. But the demons can act, to a limited extent, each time their Bonds are invoked. What really bothers me is the possibility that these combined Bonds One Maiyim’s higher mages seem so fond of are allowing the demons to communicate with each other and make plans. If that’s the case, then the demons are using One Maiyim every bit as much as One Maiyim is using them.”

“Okay,” Saltspray nodded. “Now, why are you still glowing?”

“I’m still somewhat in communion with the Seal of Methis,” Oceanvine explained. “It’s starting to wear off.”

“But if you are in communion with Her, can you communicate?” Saltspray asked.

“Possibly, but I’m not even going to try,” Oceanvine told her. “It’s another test. Methis isn’t supposed to get directly involved you know. If you have questions, I suggest calling her on the phone sometime after this is over.”

Good answer! Oceanvine heard Methis’ voice within her. *I cannot get directly involved, or rather I can, but should not. However, since you’ve discovered it for yourself, I will admit you are correct about the implications of a Bond or Seal and the affiliated entity. Keep in mind, also that just as you have optimized the use of My Seal by your close emulation of Me, so can the Inner Circle as they grow closer to the demons.* Then Oceanvine felt Methis withdraw gently from her as the golden glow faded.

“Okay, so what did She just tell you?” Saltspray asked.

“Nothing you haven’t already heard, dear,” Oceanvine replied in almost the same tones Methis might have used. “Now did we get all of them?” she asked looking around at the frost-covered corpses of their erstwhile attackers. It was her first really clear view. They had been human, Granomen and Orenta, male and female and there were nearly thirty of them. Elsewhere in the quad, students and faculty members were picking themselves up and looking to the few who had been seriously wounded in the initial explosion. The sound of approaching sirens was already in the air.

“Two got away,” Sextant told her, “and you aren’t going to like this, one was Instructor Mitre and the other was Wineglass, both of our department. I got a tracer on them, however.”

“Joena Rapiniti was another, but she’s one of the frozen now,” Balance informed them.

“Two seniors and a graduate student,” Oceanvine counted grimly. “Have they been spying on us for One Maiyim all along?”

“Mitre might have,” Sextant considered. “He was always trying to get me to play at that silly students’ dueling game. Twice he bragged he could take me down in minutes.”

“He tried that with me once last year when he was still a student,” Oceanvine nodded. “I told him to grow up. Maybe he was trying to gauge our skills?”

“Could be,” Sextant agreed. “I think Wineglass and Joena were more recent converts, though. They seemed fairly wide-eyed and naïve when they first matriculated, just like most freshmen. They certainly didn’t have any skills I might have expected from one of One Maiyim’s trainees. They had trouble learning wards, in fact.”

“Wards used to not be taught until the junior year,” Oceanvine told him. “They were considered too difficult for most first year students and even the sophomores.”

“I don’t have much trouble with them,” Saltspray told her.

“You are very talented,” Oceanvine told her, “just as your friends here are. Also the curriculum is different these days. According to your grandfather’s notes, wards were taught in a different manner a century ago. Sometimes teaching techniques do actually improve. Six, you say you put a tracer on them? Well, we’d better go find them before they notice. I’m sorry we’ve been teaching that one to the juniors now.”

“What about all the people here?” Misana asked even as she followed Sextant and Oceanvine to the nearby parking lot where Sextant’s car stood.

“The medics are on the scene now,” Oceanvine replied as they got near the car. “We can best protect everyone by finding Mitre and Wineglass. Perhaps you four should help out where you can though.”

“No, we’re coming with you,” Saltspray told her rebelliously, opening the back door to let the others in.

All four students sat down while Oceanvine ordered them, “Out of there!”

“Not unless you can translocate us out,” Sally responded smugly.

Oceanvine took a deep breath. She was getting excited and one needed to be relaxed for magic to work. She tried translocating her students out of Six’s car and nothing happened. Several more attempts later, Oceanvine realized she was wasting time, but she couldn’t just allow Saltspray to win that easily. She concentrated harder and did so again, this time watching the strings of energy by which the spell worked. The spell strings whipped out at her targets and just slipped off. A ward would not have done that, she knew, at least that was not how Saltspray was doing it. She was doing something else – something Oceanvine did not understand. There was only one punishment that fit.

“I expect a paper on how you are doing that on my desk next week, young lady,” she told Saltspray sternly. Saltspray just laughed.

“Vine, you’d better drive,” Sextant suggested. “I’ll keep tabs on our fugitives with the tracer spell.”

“I want to know how to cast a tracer spell,” Saltspray announced.

“Not until I know how you blocked my translocation spell,” Oceanvine told her.

“Next week,” Saltspray promised. “If I tell you now, you might figure out a way around it before I do.”

“This isn’t a competition, Sally,” Misana complained.

“Huh?” Saltspray responded. “Of course not, but it will be a more interesting paper if I can work it all out.”

“When did you figure out how to block a translocation like that?” Leotawa asked her.

“Just now,” Saltspray laughed again. “I haven’t had time to work out all the uses and implications yet, or even some of them, really.”

“They’re headed south, and were starting and stopping a lot,” Sextant told them. “I think they must have jumped on a bus while we weren’t looking, but now they’re moving somewhat faster. They’re probably in a car now.”

“How far ahead of us are they?” Oceanvine asked.

“Just a couple of miles,” Sextant replied. “Watch out!”

Oceanvine slammed on the brakes and just narrowly avoiding hitting the car in front of them. A thick black cloud of smoke was rising up two blocks ahead of them. Oceanvine bolted from the car, shouted, “Stay there!” as she grabbed her staff from Misana who had been holding it in the back and flew off in the direction of the smoke.

Traffic was just starting to pile up around the intersection two blocks ahead, but there in the middle of it were the remains of a city bus, looking like it had been ripped open with a can opener and then set on fire. The smoke was mostly coming from the remains of the bus, but wooden-fronted buildings nearby were smoking as well. While considering what to do, Sextant and the students came running up and telekinetically opened a nearby hydrant as Balance and Leotawa directed the torrent at the sides of the buildings. Water wouldn’t put out the fire on the bus, however, and might, in fact make the matter worse.

“Sally, better call for help!” Oceanvine called down, deciding not to scold her apprentice for disobedience this time. They had all done the right thing.

“Misana’s already on the phone,” Saltspray shouted back over the din of screaming people and pointing at a nearby phone booth, whose glass walls had been shattered. “We need to do something about the Bond of Aritos!”

Oceanvine looked around and wondered how she might have missed it. There in the middle of the wreckage, the Kerawlat variant of the Bond of Aritos was visibly drawn into the street in thick dark lines that seemed to pulse with blood. Another Bond, one associated with Pohn, was rapidly giving up its power to the Bond of Kerawlat. *They used the Bond of Pohn to destroy the bus*, thought Oceanvine, *but then why...?* Then she saw it.

The Bond of Kerawlat was similar in intent to what she had seen in Querna. The Pohn spell was mere power, but the Kerawlat Bond was spreading disease. Worse, it was spreading the Hook.

The Hook had long been one of the banes of all legitimate mages on Maiyim. A relatively simple spell to cast, it acted directly on a victim's mind, forcing him or her to slavery and without the will to disobey the Hook Master. The master did not even have to be the mage who cast the spell; it did not even have to be a mage. Once the Hook had been set, it was a simple matter to transfer the ownership of the slave. Several times over the course of history it was thought that the Hook had become extinct and that all mages who knew how to cast it were dead, but somehow there was always one mage who both knew the spell and was unscrupulous or desperate enough to cast it.

For generations it was thought there was no cure for the Hook and that once enslaved a victim would follow his or her master's commands or die. The master could even command the victim to die, although it was even easier just to release their hold on the Hook and allow the slave to die slowly and painfully. Eventually a cure was found and improved on, so if now Oceanvine or Sextant came across the original form of the Hook, they would have no trouble releasing the victims safely.

One Maiyim's Inner Circle had taken the already evil Hook enslavement spell to a new level by alloying it to the Bond of Aritos. This unholy union of spells bound the victims in a deathly embrace far more immediate than the Hook alone could. Previous methods of releasing a victim would result in the death of not only the victim but of the mage attempting it as well, and death would not be the slow process it had been but immediate. Also the Bond allowed the Hook to enslave new victims without the active participation of the mage who originally cast the spell.

Victims of the Bond-Hook might be enslaved to a single master or to each other, allowing the slave master to achieve a degree of separation he might not have earlier, and the Bond-Hook Oceanvine studied now was just such a curse. The mage who cast it, and she suspected Journeyman Mitre, had not really cared what happened to the victims. They were automatically commanded to seek out new victims to whom to spread the curse. They would eventually die by starving to death since they had also been commanded to not eat.

As Oceanvine looked down on the Bond of Aritos, she saw that it also contained a visual component of infection. Anyone looking at it for too long without adequate training would soon find themselves cursed and unwillingly seeking to curse still others. The only saving grace was that it took several minutes for the Hook to be set – the original Hook took several days to be complete – so only a few people had been cursed and they had not yet had a chance to pass the curse on to many others.

Oceanvine quickly encircled the victims and brought them to a single location near Sextant. "I think you're better prepared to handle this one, Six," she told him. "Your staff should make quick work since the curse is still new in these people."

"What about the Bond itself?" he asked.

"I don't want to dispel it until after you release the victims," she replied, "but I'll keep it warded so no one else catches the infection."

She flew back upward and noticed she had begun to glow again. *Not this time*, she thought to Methis. *I can handle this without extraordinary means*. She thought she sensed a certain reluctance as the glow faded, but kept her mind on containing the Bond of Aritos below her.

Quick work it may have been, but it still took Sextant over an hour to completely release the victims. Oceanvine recalled that in Rjalkatyp and across Bellinen it had taken far longer than that, but now it was her turn to act. During the wait she had returned to ground level, explaining to the students, "That sort of thing just attracts attention." And she decided that staying grounded was not a bad idea for what

happened next.

It would have been easier with the golden staff, but Oceanvine knew her wooden one could do the job admirably so long as she remained patient. Then it occurred to her that this was something her students might need to know someday soon so she beckoned to Saltspray to join her. “This is cooperative magic,” she told her apprentice, “and very dangerous, but we’ve been working together for years now and I think you’re up to it. We’re going to use our staves to drain the energy out of the Bond and project it upward in a shower of sparks and light. Don’t try to do it all at once, we have to go at this quite slowly and patiently, in fact. If we don’t... well you’ve seen those burn marks on the end of your staff? That’s how they got there.”

“Slowly and carefully,” Saltspray nodded. “I’ll follow your lead then.”

Oceanvine started the process, describing it and directing Saltspray’s attention to how she attached a spell string between the Bond and her staff. She repeated her caution to work slowly. “We’re not in a hurry, you see. Now are you ready to try?”

“It’s pretty easy, isn’t it?” Saltspray smiled.

“The actual act is simple,” Oceanvine agreed. “Having the patience to keep it up at this rate is more difficult.”

“We’re releasing the energy into the air as light and sparks and stuff,” Sally noted. “Can’t we do something with it?”

“What did you have in mind?” Oceanvine asked.

“I’m not sure, but if this energy is really as magically neutral as it seems to be, it could be used again to do something else,” Sally observed.

“Well, I suppose if you were up to creation spells you could turn the energy into gold or lead or something else,” Oceanvine replied, “or if there was some other big spell you were trying to power, you could use the energy that way. But the thing here is to get it out of the Bond. Hmm, I think you can go a little faster safely.

“Now if I were using the golden staff,” Oceanvine continued, “we would already be done. That staff can handle a lot more power and also more can run through it before it starts to heat up, but we won’t be much longer.”

Thirteen

Seemingly, a few minutes later the Bond collapsed and disappeared harmlessly. Looking around Saltspray remarked, “Where did all the cars and people go?”

“The police started diverting traffic from the area and then the nearby cars were able to turn around and leave and ambulances have already carted away the victims,” Balance informed her.

“How long were we working on the Bond?” Saltspray asked.

“About two hours,” Balance replied.

“Time has a habit of getting away from you when doing this sort of magic,” Oceanvine commented. “Where’s Six and the others?”

“Probably about half a mile up the street,” Balance shrugged. “This was on the first of three disasters our fellow mages decided to visit on the City of Randona in their hasty retreat.”

Oceanvine looked up the street toward a rising column of greasy black smoke. “Oh Gods!” she moaned.

“They left us the car,” Balance informed her.

“Okay, you two drive on ahead or around or wherever,” Oceanvine told them. “I need to talk to the Police. I’ll catch up.” Saltspray and Balance ran back to the car while Oceanvine found the officer in charge on the scene.

“My Lady Oceanvine,” the police lieutenant greeted her.

“Uh,” Oceanvine was startled. “Am I wearing a nametag or have we met?”

“Neither, my lady,” the man smiled tightly, “but your student informed me as to your identity.”

“Ah,” Oceanvine nodded. “I just wanted to let you know this wreckage is safe to move out of here now. I imagine my husband must have explained some of what was going on.”

“Yes, my lady. Just before he moved on up the street to the fire.”

“I heard there’s something else going on beyond that?” Oceanvine prompted him.

“Yes,” he confirmed. “There was an explosion in the sewers, about two miles further on. It’s a bad day to be a cop, my lady.”

“It’s not exactly a good day to be a mage either,” Oceanvine sighed. “Is there a wide cordon around those areas, do you know?”

“Yes, my lady,” the lieutenant replied. “Your husband requested that before he left. People are being both kept out or kept in the cordoned off areas depending on where they were when we arrived.”

“Good,” Oceanvine responded. “Thank you, Lieutenant. Sounds like I’d better push on ahead then.”

“Do you need a police escort, my lady?” he asked.

“No, thanks,” she refused, rising up into the air. “I have my own ride, so to speak.”

Oceanvine flew over the city street as fast as she could manage. Uncle Candle, she remembered, had been much faster at this sort of thing, but she had been improving over the last two years. Regular early morning work-outs in this way at the University athletic field had greatly improved her abilities, although she had not had the time to practice since the end of last semester. Even though she was still dissatisfied at her ability to fly and, to herself, thought of it as a leisurely float, Oceanvine soon reached the cordon around the fire.

From her vantage point she could see that the fire here was out of control and had spread not only to all the buildings on one block, but the radiant heat was causing fires to break out on the outsides of nearer building on the neighboring blocks as well. The Fire Department had responded in excellent time and were already hosing down the fire, but with only limited results.

Oceanvine could see the cause of the fire. A composite Bond of Aritos with the features of Kerawlat and Pohn was feeding the initial fire from which the others were spreading. This one was not contagious, fortunately, but she also saw that Six was having trouble with it, even though he had the golden staff. Following the spell strings backward, Oceanvine soon settled down next to Sextant. She could see he was deep in concentration and hesitated to disturb him.

“Welcome back, Vine,” he remarked without opening his eyes.

“You’re getting pretty good at the eyes-in-back-of-your-head thing, Six,” Oceanvine remarked.

“I’d know your aura anywhere,” Sextant replied. “This is a tough one.”

“I think the Bond is drawing energy from the fire,” Oceanvine replied.

“I came to that conclusion too,” Sextant nodded. “And there was a sewer explosion further on so we can’t stay here all day. Let’s see what we can both do together.”

Oceanvine joined him and, using her staff, concentrated on drawing the power from the Bond. As soon as she started, a familiar golden aura wrapped around her once more and joined in as she applied herself. *I hope this isn’t going to become a habit*, she shot the thought outward, *but this time maybe we do need the help*.

However, Oceanvine was not about to let the Seal of Methis go do what it wanted. *Does it have desires?* She wondered, then shelved the notion. It was a question for a quiet evening, not the middle of a disaster. Another thought came unbidden; *Do I treat this as a pet, a servant or a valued friend and ally?* That seemed a bit more immediate and she promptly decided it was an ally until she understood more of what was going on.

Then she remembered Saltspray’s earlier question and something Uncle Candle had done in Bellinen. The Bond and the disaster it was causing had been much larger in the City of Tis, but the solution could be the same. She reached over and placed her free hand over Sextant’s on the golden Staff of Aritos. “Don’t fight me, dear,” she warned him.

“Go for it,” Sextant replied.

Oceanvine brought the Seal of Methis into full manifestation and applied it to the composite Bond at the heart of the fire. Then she directed the Seal to squelch the Bond, by drawing out all the power and into the Staff. It was more than Oceanvine had ever dealt with in a single surge, but she had her mind firmly on what she had to do. As she worked, the Bond fought back by drawing increasingly more energy from the fire and matter around it. Oceanvine was just considering erecting a defensive ward around the bond, when one appeared. That nearly threw her off balance, but she recovered in time and re-established a link with the Seal of Methis, now inside that ward with the Bond. *Darned good thing this ward is selectively permeable*, she thought furiously. The energy continued to flow into the gold-colored staff and then out of it as Oceanvine directed.

Finally, inside the ward, the Bond of Aritos ran out of resources and was swallowed up by the Seal of Methis and Oceanvine was able to relax once more. At her feet was a pile of gold ingots.”

“If we don’t watch it, we’re going to devalue gold to the point where we have to mint pennies out of it,” Sextant remarked. “Looks like you got several hundred pounds that time. It’s a lot more than in Tis.”

“The Bond in Tis wasn’t converting the matter around it into energy, Six,” Oceanvine remarked.

“That was incredible!” Leotawa enthused.

“It *was* most impressive,” Misana agreed, “but what are you going to do with all the gold?”

“Give it away,” Oceanvine replied. “Where are Saltspray and Balance? They should be here with the car by now.”

“They arrived an hour ago,” Misana explained. “They are helping on the other side of the fire.”

“What fire?” Leotawa asked impudently. “I see no fire.” Before the Bond ran out of energy to draw upon, it had extinguished the fire it had originally been cast to create.

“You know what I’m talking about, ‘Tawa,” she shot back with an uncharacteristic trace of anger in her voice.

“Children, play nice,” Sextant told them dryly. “Vine, there was a sewer explosion a few miles to the south of here.”

“I heard about it,” Oceanvine replied. “Sounds like it’s our next stop.”

“Sir?” a captain of the Randona Fire Brigade came running up. “You extinguished the fire completely. That was incredible.”

“Actually it’s my wife, the Lady Oceanvine, who gets most of the credit this time,” Sextant replied, opting not to go into all the details. “Captain, I believe you’ll be able to assist us, however.”

“Anything,” the man promised.

“We seem to have a lot of gold here that we don’t need,” Sextant explained dryly, “but allowing it to go to looters would be a shame.”

“Captain,” Oceanvine cut in immediately. Sextant, she felt, was having too much fun with the incredulous look on the fire captain’s face. “I imagine there have been injuries and possibly fatalities among both Fire and Police Departments today. Would you please see to it that this gold goes toward covering medical expenses and anything left over goes to the Widows and Orphans funds of both departments?” Given the amount of gold that had been created she was certain most of it would go into the funds.

“Yes, my lady,” the captain agreed. “I will see to it immediately.”

“Thank you,” she replied, “Now do you know anything about the explosion to the south?”

“Only that it happened, my lady,” the captain replied. “We’ve been a bit preoccupied, you might say.”

“Well, he might say it,” Oceanvine chuckled, indicating Sextant. “Where’s the car?” she asked Misana.

A short time later they found themselves outside the next police cordon. “I’m sorry, folks, but you’ll have to take the detour,” a young cop informed them as they drove up. “No vehicles are allow inside the line.”

“Officer,” Sextant replied, “is your sergeant or lieutenant on site here?”

“Sir, they both are,” the young man replied stiffly, “but they are both too busy to...”

“Get one of them on that radio on your belt!” Oceanvine ordered the man. “And you tell him Lady Oceanvine and Sir Sextant are here.”

“And is that supposed to mean something to them, my lady?” the cop bristled with sarcasm.

“It should,” she replied. “I did send word ahead that we were on the way.”

“I’ll call, but if they don’t know who you are...” he started and stopped abruptly as the car began to glow and lifted gently up into the air.

“Then we shall introduce ourselves,” Oceanvine called down to him as she levitated the car beyond the barrier.

“That was fun!” Leotawa told her as they continued on.

“Don’t do it for the fun,” Oceanvine warned him. “That sort of behavior is why some people don’t trust lawyers, politicians, nobles and anyone else who might behave as though the law is for someone else. Mages too for that matter.”

“I thought they didn’t trust mages because they feared the power,” Balance commented.

“Perhaps, but it’s the arrogance that really turns people off,” Sextant replied.

“My apologies for the office at the barrier,” the sergeant they found another block further on told them. “He’s been reprimanded.”

“He was doing his job, Sergeant,” Sextant replied. “And he didn’t really slow us down. I’m sure he’d have let us right through had he known to expect us. Now how far out from the site of the explosion are we?”

“Five blocks and it’s a series of explosions, sir,” the sergeant replied. “They’re still going on. You’ll find another line two blocks ahead. I hear it’s strange in there.”

“Strange?” Sextant asked. “How so?” The sergeant merely shrugged. “I guess we’ll find out for ourselves soon enough.”

The inner cordoned-off area was a scene of chaos. There were hundreds of people just inside throwing rocks and debris at the officers who were doing their best to keep them from breaking out and behind them were the sounds of small explosions and an eerie moaning sound as well.

“These people are cursed, aren’t they?” Saltspray observed.

“They are,” Oceanvine agreed. “This is really going to take some time to sort out. Six, can we cure more than one at a time?”

“I don’t think so,” Sextant replied. “We both know the Bond of Kerawlat is best suited to the spread of contagion among animal life. We’re going to have to work on them one at a time.”

“That could take days,” Oceanvine protested.

“Can’t be helped,” he shrugged. “We can’t leave these people to their fates and I think it’s only a matter of time before they break out and try infecting others. It’s not the Hook, this time, though.”

“No,” Oceanvine agreed. “That would not have spread so quickly. This is a direct infection from the Bond. The compulsion is not there, but there is an element of delusory nightmares similar to what I did on Kern, although it isn’t quite the same. These people are panicked and the illusions they see are keeping them that way. The Gods only know what they think they are fighting against.”

“Hmm, so this is more like what we first encountered in the hospital in Rjalkatyp,” Sextant remarked. “Well, the good news is that we can show our students how to help.”

“And we can call for reinforcements,” Oceanvine added. “Misana, dear, please find a telephone and call Kara in the department. We’re going to need every faculty member and student above the freshman level down here as soon as they can join us.” Misana nodded and ran off while Oceanvine and Sextant started instructing the others.

It was slow going, especially when Oceanvine and Sextant had to stop to teach still more arriving mages, but they worked all night, gradually curing all the victims of the curse. As each was cured, they were handed over to the waiting medics because none had come through the ordeal without at least bites and scratches. Some were in far worse shape.

Finally, two hours after dawn the mages had made their way through the victims and now encountered the center of the curse itself. “What is causing that moaning noise?” old Master Sunray asked.

“I don’t know for sure, sir,” Sextant replied. “It seems to be a part of the Bond of Aritos.”

“I really don’t like exposing our students to this sort of thing, Sextant,” Sunray admitted. “In my day we never even heard of the Bond of Aritos before earning our masters degrees.”

“If I had a choice, sir,” Sextant replied politely, “I would rather no one ever heard of it, but it’s here and One Maiyim has a penchant for using it. I’m just glad we’ve given our students the necessary training to resist it. Now the question is how to deal with this. After that I need to find a place to sleep.”

“What about Mitre and Wineglass?” Oceanvine asked. “We have to go after them.”

Sextant concentrated a moment. “They’re not moving. And they don’t seem aware of the tracer, Vine. How do I know that?”

“Lucky guess?” Oceanvine asked. “Maybe they’re waiting for us to come after them so they left the tracers active?”

“No, I know they aren’t aware of it. It’s a certainty,” Sextant replied.

“It must be the Staff then,” Oceanvine remarked. “Uncle Candle always said it increased his mental abilities and allowed him to read minds. It sounds as though it has a similar effect on you.”

“I’m not reading their thoughts,” Sextant remarked, “but I do know their current mental state. “It’s a jumble of emotions, but they think they’re safe for now and are looking forward to going wherever it is they’re going.”

“I know where they’re going when we catch up with them,” Oceanvine growled, “but you’re right. We’re exhausted. Let’s defuse the Bond here and then go back and get some sleep.”

That turned out to be far easier to say than to actually accomplish. Once again the two renegade mages had used two Bonds of Aritos, but instead of a single composite bond they had used the power from the Bond of Pohn to generate a Bond of Kerawlat. The Bond of Kerawlat had spread the curse that had kept the mages working all night, but it had also been tied back into the Bond of Pohn in a feedback loop that regenerated the cycle every few seconds. The combination kept the spells fresh and ever-increasing in power.

“I never realized those two were so creative,” Oceanvine observed grimly after two unsuccessful attempts to dispel the combined curse. “To tell the truth, I had serious doubts as to whether Mitre should have graduated in the first place.”

“It’s a hell of a way to get our respect,” Sextant retorted. “This perversion of magic is more than either of us can handle even with Aritos’ Staff and Methis’ Seal.”

“I don’t think so,” Oceanvine disagreed. “At least I don’t think the Staff and Seal are lacking, but this may be more than only two mortal minds can handle safely.”

“Cooperative magic is very dangerous,” Sunray warned them.

“It is,” Sextant agreed, “but four of our students... Well, you remember the special class we sponsored this past summer? Well, Fireiron is one of the best teachers on Maiyim and she trained Saltspray, Balance, Misana and Leotawa in various advanced techniques, including cooperative spells.”

“And translocation,” Oceanvine added. “We’re going to need that too I think.”

“Translocation?” Sunray worried. “Are you certain that is an appropriate subject to teach undergraduates?”

“Fireiron determined they were ready,” Sextant replied, “and they’ve been warned not to try translocating living creatures.”

“I believe I would like to meet this Fireiron someday,” Sunray commented. “She appears to be teaching our students techniques I am not capable of and I don’t feel comfortable about it without getting to know her.”

“I’ll invite her to Randona,” Oceanvine promised as Sextant signaled to their special students to join them. “She will be on the faculty of my new school anyway.”

“You’re founding a new school?” Sunray asked. “Does that mean you’ll be leaving University?”

“Not immediately,” Oceanvine assured him. “I’m building this school on the same model as my great-grandmother’s Renton School. We’ll start off teaching during summer and winter breaks at first, and I’ll only be in Olen, not too far away. In any case, we need to build the school first so I doubt we’ll be able to open for the first session until summer after next. By then we should have other masters available to teach and there will be qualified professors from Merinne and Querna too.”

“The Renton School was very popular in its day,” Sunray recalled. “And running any school is very complex and time-consuming. I believe you will find yourself too busy to teach here full time once you open your school in Olen. The University will want you to remain on the faculty, though. There is a certain amount of prestige involved.”

“I’m not my great-grandparents,” she shook off the compliment. “And even if I get that busy, I can still teach an annual seminar or two. Right now, though, I’m far more concerned in seeing that renegade mages like the ones who created this monstrosity never get to do so again. Okay, people,” she turned to Saltspray, Misana, Leotawa and Balance, “I’ll admit to wondering what M... uh, Fireiron had in mind drilling you on cooperative magic this summer, although Six and I had been doing this sort of thing from the start, but right now, I’m glad she did. What I would like you four to do is place an impermeable ward around the manifestations of the Bonds of Pohn and Kerawlat. I wish we’d had time to teach you how to cast an Oceanvine ward, but...”

“A what?” Leotawa asked.

“It’s what the University at Querna is calling an invention of Vine’s great-grandmother,” Balance explained.

“That’s right,” Oceanvine nodded. “It was originally called an alternating current ward because it looked as though the energy flow was going every way at once, but I wrote a paper few years ago that proved they were actually multi-phased in nature. I guess I convinced enough people I was right, so the name was changed.”

“That was probably Southgate’s doing,” Sextant commented.

“Anyway,” Oceanvine continued, “it’s not something we’ve gone over yet and while you might be capable, it’s not something I care to risk.”

“What about the other Oceanvine ward?” Saltspray asked, “one of your non-stick jobs?”

“There would be no real benefit at this point in using anything particularly exotic,” Oceanvine told her. “Just make it as impermeable as you can. Sally, I want you to be the team leader on this. Your wards are the best in your class. Everyone else, give her the power she needs as she needs it. This is going to be just like it was in class.”

“If we make it truly impermeable, won’t that make it impossible for you to do anything inside the ward?” Saltspray asked.

“That will be your next lab session,” Oceanvine told her, “and a matter of practice for some time to come, I think. There is a way to phase through a conventional ward. When it’s your own ward you tend to cast spells through it naturally, by briefly opening a hole in it. It makes you vulnerable for an instant, of course, but once you learn how to phase through a ward...”

“Vine, we don’t really have time for a lecture right now,” Sextant stopped her. “They know what to do,

let's discuss it later.”

“Of course,” Oceanvine agreed. “I’m very tired and…”

“When you get tired you get hyperactive to compensate, I’ve noticed,” Sextant finished the thought. He yawned and added, “I just get tired.”

The students stood in a circle and held hands. It was not really necessary to stand in any particular arrangement or to even be in physical contact, but most mages had found that such behavior helped in cooperative magic. Modern psychologists and biologists claimed physical contact was often an intensely rich form of communications and the act of standing together was a form of teamwork all by itself.

Then Saltspray cast the ward and the others lent her their power. Seeing the ward take shape was the cue for Oceanvine and Sextant to perform cooperatively as well. They no longer needed to worry about subtlety. The students’ ward would suffice to hold in the released force of the two Bonds. The Seal of Methis formed in Oceanvine’s mind once again, but manifested from the tip of Sextant’s staff and then settled over the students’ ward. Then with a supreme effort of will, Oceanvine invoked the Seal of Methis a second time and sent it to join the first. Then she willed both Seals to phase through the ward. The first tangled itself with the Bond of Pohn and the second immediately attacked the Bond of Kerawlat. Special instructions weren’t necessary. Oceanvine’s spell was far more powerful than those of Mitre and Wineglass. The only danger was in the massive release of energy.

Taking care of that was Sextant’s job and just as he had assisted Oceanvine in her invocations of Methis’ Seals, now she aided him in translocating the entire exploding construct. Translocating an exploding Bond into space had become an old trick since Candle had first done it in Querna a few years earlier, but both Sextant and Oceanvine knew it could not be done without the aid of the golden Staff of Aritos. Even two mortals acting in concert would have been unable to muster the power needed to translocate anything far enough up to achieve even a temporarily stable orbit, but the most basic property of the Staff was that it would multiply the power of a spell.

“Did you send it high enough?” Sunray worried. “I can still see the burst of energy.”

“And you probably will for a day or two,” Sextant told him tiredly. “There was a lot of energy in that and it was converting the mass around it into still more. Now that it’s been isolated from convenient mass, it will burn out. The Seal of Methis has already neutralized the curse, but the energy will take a while. Now that it is neutralized I could just convert it into a brick or two of something heavy, but Vine’s done that enough for one day.”

Fourteen

“Kornedd,” Sextant told Oceanvine the next morning. “At least that’s what it looks like.”

“You can see where they are?” she asked, looking into her closet for something to wear. Knowing that she was going into a potential battle, she decided that the “Old School Uniform” of a floral print shirt over a cream-colored skirt was not her choice of clothing should they have to scramble. Jeans and a t-shirt might be more to the point, but Kornedd was a special place and on learning that was her destination she decided the “uniform” would be more appropriate in most parts of that city.

“Not really,” Sextant admitted, reaching into his own closet for a pair of jeans. “I can feel they are awed

by where they are or maybe with whom they have met. I can't tell which. As for their location, the tracer tells me they're off to the southwest of here and the distance feels about right for Kornedd."

"You're not wearing jeans to Kornedd, are you?" Oceanvine asked.

"I ruined a perfectly good pair of slacks yesterday," he replied.

"You wouldn't go to church in jeans, would you?" she countered.

"I did all the time on Ketch," he replied. "I doubt the Gods minded."

"Well, you don't when we visit the Temple of Nildar here in Randona, do you?" she pointed out.

"My wife would kill me," he replied straight-faced. "That's different anyway. The Temples are more formal, the small church at home is less so."

"Well, Kornedd is like one really big Temple," Oceanvine informed him. "It's the holiest city in Emmine. It's where Emtos and Emmine lived after the creation of the world and where Nildar was born."

"I've always wondered if that was really true," Sextant replied.

"I could give Nildar a call and ask him if you want," Oceanvine pointed out, lifting the book of Candle's notes for emphasis.

"It doesn't really matter, I suppose," Sextant decided. "If you'll feel more comfortable if I dress well, I will."

"Wear the sort of things you had on yesterday," she recommended. "It's a weekday and while you'd be expected to be dressed cleanly and neatly, no one would think it odd if you did not wear a suit."

"I'll have to keep that in mind, I suppose," Sextant replied. "It does beg the question of what Silverwind might have worn to Kornedd."

"A business suit at the least," she replied, "and my great-grandmother would have worn a full-length dress. There used to be laws about that in Kornedd."

"So your great-grandmother, the one who wore bathing suits that still make you blush, would have covered herself from the neck down in Kornedd?" Sextant laughed.

"And worn a hat with a veil," Oceanvine added. "Well, maybe not, she was a hell-raiser, but she would have been arrested for indecent exposure if her skirt had not been ankle-length."

"Only in Kornedd, right?" Sextant made sure.

"I imagine so," Oceanvine replied. "She dressed like an Orentan woman most of the time at least when she was my age, although come to think of it, she did mention once how she wore more modest and less colorful clothing when in Granom. Perhaps she would have dressed appropriately in Kornedd, but I don't know if she ever went there."

"Have you?"

"I used to go once each year with my family on Nildar's Day," Oceanvine told him. "Most noble families from this end of the island do. It doesn't seem to make as much sense since I've actually met the gods though."

"But you insist we dress well to go to Kornedd today?" Sextant asked, slightly amused.

"Well, there are appearances to maintain," she replied primly.

"Dear, you married way below your station," Sextant laughed. "Appearances are not normally your concern."

"Oh, that!" Oceanvine rolled her eyes upward. "Mages are beyond considerations of rank. At least I always thought so. Why, Six? Does it bother you?"

"No, of course not," Sextant shook his head emphatically. "I would have never asked you to marry me if it did. Besides, we don't have nobles on Ketch. Someone might hold the island in the King's name, or not, but if they do, even they must not realize it."

"Not every bit of land is held by a noble," Oceanvine remarked. "Most of the smaller islands are king's lands. Your Celenan Islands are probably among them."

They finished dressing and rushed down the stairs to discover the four students sitting quietly in the living room. "Hey, boss!" Saltspray greeted Oceanvine cheerfully. "Ready to get back on the road?"

"Were you guys here all night?" Sextant asked.

"No, just the last two hours," Leotawa replied. "You really ought to ward that door of yours, though. One Maiyim could have done anything while you were asleep."

"Must have been more tired than I thought," Sextant remarked. "Did we at least remember to lock the door?"

"Oh sure," Leotawa told him. "Not that it slowed us down."

"What are you all doing here?" Sextant demanded.

"Sitting," Balance replied. "Waiting patiently."

"You didn't think we were going to let you sneak back out of town, did you?" Saltspray asked.

"I had not even considered it," Oceanvine replied. It was true. She had been so tired, the thought had not crossed her mind. If it had, she and Sextant would have left right after dropping the students off at their dormitory.

"Well, let's get going. We can pick up some breakfast on the way," Oceanvine remarked practically. "We have a long drive ahead of us, and it would be nice to get out of the city this time."

Getting out of Randona was not too difficult this time, but it turned out that Mitre and Wineglass had destroyed several bridges on the highway that ran south toward Kornedd. There were long lines of cars where they still hadn't been diverted to other roads, but Oceanvine decided she was not going to put up with the delays any longer. Using Sextant's staff, because she could hold it easily inside the car, she

telekinetically lifted the vehicle each time they came to a gap in the road. They were slightly delayed each time when they stopped to make sure no magical traps had been set for them, but then they would drive on to the next missing bridge.

Finally, after five such gaps in the road, the two renegades had evidently stopped blowing up bridges and Oceanvine, Sextant and the students could continue on without having to stop every few minutes. It was not the end of the delays, however.

An hour south of Randona, several trees came crashing down on the road just in front of Sextant's car. Oceanvine, still handling the golden staff quickly lifted the car up and over the fallen trees, but two other cars behind them were not so fortunate.

They stopped to help the accident victims and to clear the trees off the road. The Highway Patrol was just arriving as Oceanvine scanned the area for spell traces and they had to stop to explain what had happened.

"What did you find?" Saltspray asked her once they were moving again.

"That was a trap specifically set for us," Oceanvine reported. "Well, it was set for Sextant and me in any case. It was just a simple low-level curtain ward across the highway with a conditional trigger. Only Six and I would have set it off. And once disrupted by one of us there was a small explosive spell that sent the trees over the road.

"The execution was crude, but the technique should have been very new to them," Oceanvine continued. "We only started teaching conditional modifiers last year. That was something else from Uncle Candle's notes."

"So now we need to keep an eye out for similar traps," Sextant remarked.

The students took the suggestion to heart and spotted two more wards in their path in the next hour. Caught in advance, they were no obstacle and Oceanvine dispelled them quickly and efficiently each time. "I thought of just phasing us through them," she remarked, "but decided it was not worth the risk."

They stopped for a light lunch not long after entering the mountainous region in which Kornedd had been built. When they continued on, Balance noted, "I'm seeing a lot of modern buildings for a region that is supposed to be among the holiest on Maiyim."

"Kornedd," Oceanvine told him, "is an odd amalgam of the sacred and the secular. After the Elder Gods created Maiyim, Emtos and Emmine made their home here, or rather about ten miles ahead where the District of Holies is. The center of the city holds many shrines, churches and temples that commemorate places where, according to legend and religion, the Gods of this archipelago did various things.

"From here you can see the tower of the Central Temple of Nildar, for example," she continued. "I was raised to believe that is the site on which Nildar was born. There is also a wide open area in the center of the city, surrounded by huge standing stones. We are taught that Emtos crowned Merolan, the first human king there. Most historians now tell us that Merolan was fictitious and if he existed at all was probably just one of a collection of tribal chieftains. More likely his legend was made up of a combination of all the chieftains of the time.

"There is also a sacred garden near the center of town which it is thought was first planted by Emmine. It stands right behind that other large Temple you can see from here which was supposedly built on the site

of Emtos and Emmine's home here."

"You don't sound as though you believe all that," Misana observed.

"Experience has taught me to accept miracles," Oceanvine replied, "but with my eyes wide open. Ask most serious historians these days and they'll tell you that most of those holy sites were identified millennia after the fact. For all I know, the real Kornedd was somewhere in Bellinen."

"Now that would probably upset most of the priests," Saltspray remarked lightly.

"Could be," Oceanvine agreed, "but I don't plan on being the one to tell them that. Besides all these places might just be what they are believed to be. I don't know and I wasn't there."

"So what's with all the factories and laboratories?" Leotawa asked.

"Kornedd was also the initial center of tech-magic in Emmine," Sextant informed him. "There are many research and tech-magic firms here on the north side of the city as you can see."

"I thought it was Silverwind who started the move toward tech-magic," Balance remarked.

"He did," Sextant replied, "so I guess you could say the real birthplace of tech-magic was Renton, but the first big research facilities were founded here."

"Why here?" Saltspray asked.

"Believe it or not, the Church of Nildar invested a lot of funds into research," Oceanvine told her. "The priests may seem old-fashioned and set in their ways at times, but some of them also represent the most forward-thinkers in Emmine. It all depends on who you're talking to. Six, are we still headed into the city?"

"We are," Six replied. "Maybe you should take over the driving so I don't get distracted at the wrong time. Following the tracer spell could get tricky in the city."

"Better yet," she told him, "I can follow the tracer for you."

"You can do that?" Leotawa asked.

"It's just a matter of following a spell string, 'Tawa," Saltspray told him. "Granddad told me that, back in the old days, a master would place a special sort of binding spell on a new apprentice to sort of seal the relationship between them and that Silverwind had once found him via the spell string that connected them. Vine? Why didn't you cast that spell on me?"

"Well, for starters," Oceanvine replied, "I didn't know it was expected of me and until I had Uncle Candle's book I didn't know how. And then, there is no spell on Maiyim capable of binding you to the task of being my apprentice more effectively than the force of your own willing enthusiasm. Really, Sally, it was an old-fashioned ritual."

"As old-fashioned as a prospective apprentice asking his or her master, 'Teach me?'" Saltspray asked.

"Yes," Oceanvine nodded, "although coming from you, it was more like a demand. It was also a sincere and heartfelt request. Back in your grandfather's day students at University were required to chant,

“Teach me,” at the start of each class because of that dusty old tradition. Repeat it a thousand times and more and it soon becomes just another meaningless noise. I think that was the first point Uncle Candle and I truly disagreed on. He didn’t demand it of Six and me, but once we started having formal magic classes at university again, he thought we should revive the old custom. I told him what I thought of that and fortunately I had Maia to back me up, and that’s why the old ritual has fallen by the wayside. Would you really rather we revived it?”

“Not when you put it that way,” Saltspray replied. “I’m glad I did it personally with you though, Vine.”

“So am I, Saltspray,” Oceanvine admitted. “Six, we’re going to have to park. Driving is not allowed inside the District of Holies.”

“Didn’t think it would be,” Six nodded. He parked the car and looked around for the tracer spell. “Looks like they are in the biggest Temple.”

“The Holy High Temple of Emtos and Emmine,” Oceanvine named it. “I was afraid of that. If they are claiming sanctuary... Well, the hell with that. I am not letting One Maiyim make a mockery of all that is holy. Let’s go.”

Fifteen

“Vine, we could be excommunicated for violating sanctuary,” Sextant warned her.

“If that’s the price of clearing away the infection of One Maiyim, so be it,” Oceanvine growled. “So I won’t be able to go to church or Temple anymore. I can live with that.”

“You won’t be able to go to the Palace anymore either,” Sextant pointed out and I doubt anyone will want to attend a school owned by someone who was excommunicated.”

“The Granomen and Orenta won’t care,” Oceanvine replied.

“And your family won’t be allowed to talk to you either on pain of excommunication themselves,” Sextant added.

“Then I will move to Querna or Rjalkatyp or Saindo if I really must, Six,” she replied bleakly, “but I will not let One Maiyim win this! Besides it may not come to that. Let’s see how this plays out.”

“There are too many of us,” Sextant noted. “We’d better not all go in together.”

“Good idea,” Oceanvine agreed. “We’ll go in first. Sally, you and Misana wait two minutes and then follow. Tawa and Balance, you follow them.” The students nodded and Oceanvine and Sextant, staves in hand, started up the tall marble staircase and into the Holy High Temple. “Keep your wards up!”

They made it up the steps without incident and into the sanctuary, a large hall with a high, vaulted ceiling and beautifully carved pillars. The sanctuary was nearly empty and there were only a few lights on. Most of the available light arrived through the ornate leaded glass windows that had been set high up in the Temple’s walls, but Sextant’s tracer spell indicated Mitre and Wineglass were seated about midway up in the pews just to the left of the central aisle.

Sextant and Oceanvine walked quietly down the aisle and turned to look at the two renegades. Mitre was laying down on the wide bench seat, but Wineglass had fallen to the floor. Both mages had been dead for hours.

Before Sextant and Oceanvine could react, however, the lights came on and they realized they were surrounded. All around the edge of the sanctuary stood pairs of men and women all wearing ocean blue robes instead of more modern clothing and gold circlets on their heads. The robes were ornately embroidered in gold thread along the borders in a complex wave pattern. At the head of the hall where the holy platform stood, another man was dressed similarly except that his robe was dark blue and even more richly embroidered than the others. There was also an elderly woman standing next to him in robes of the palest blue that had only a thin line of embellishment along the borders..

“Wicked girl!” she berated Oceanvine shrilly. “How dare you come to this holiest of places with thoughts of violence?”

“I did not choose the place, Grandmother,” Oceanvine pointed out more calmly than she felt. “I did not start the violence either. So this is One Maiyim, is it? Or did I arrive in time for choir practice?”

“Be quiet in the presence of your betters, girl,” Countess Myrrha shouted.

“Ah, choir practice it is then,” Oceanvine shot back. “I’m not really much of a singer. I’m a fair listener, though.”

“Watch your smart mouth!” Myrra told her.

“Grandmother,” Oceanvine replied, “I really thought you kept better company than this.”

“Silence!” the man next to the countess roared. “I do not have time for girls with impudent mouths.”

“No doubt he has even less time for me,” Sextant commented dryly.

“Trade you,” Oceanvine shot back.

The man in dark blue robes frowned. “You children have been a thorn in my side for several years now,” he growled. “I had hoped getting rid of that old fossil, Candle, would have stopped you, but I suppose you’re either too stubborn or too stupid. Neither is a survival trait.

“You, Mister Hardisty, are common born. One can only expect so much from one like you, but I would have thought the Lady Elinor Jenynges would have been brought up better than this.”

“Sadly, no,” Oceanvine replied with a laugh. “I was brought up to respect the law, the Gods and to treat all people with the same respect I hope to receive from them, unlike a certain sacrilegious high priest. You didn’t think I recognized you? Nildar! You’ve been in charge around here since before I was born. I didn’t realize you had betrayed your God, however.

“You know, Theodorus,” Oceanvine continued, “it’s a very good thing for you Holy Emtos is out exploring the universe at the moment. I doubt He would approve of your demonic studies and practices.”

“What would a child know of that?” Theodorus sneered.

“Oh, let’s see,” she replied lightly. “As I understand it, One Maiyim not only employs mages, they train

their own. Did you know that, Grandmother? Did you know your precious One Maiyim is nothing but a sham that uses more destructive magic than all the previous mages the world has ever known?"

"Lies!" Countess Myrrha replied angrily.

"I never lie," Oceanvine replied. "You did teach me that much, Grandmother. Let me tell you how One Maiyim trains its mages. There were five demons – five Children of Aritos. Pohn was the strongest, Gredac had an affinity for affecting plant life, Kerawlat had power over the animal world, Xenlabit's powers ebb and flow with the tide, but he was best suited to handle tectonic forces and spells dealing with acceleration and gravity. And then there was Arithan. He was the most clever of them all, with a special ability to affect people's minds.

"Arithan is dead," Oceanvine continued speaking more to the high priest than to her grandmother. "Good thing too, but his brothers were imprisoned eternally by the Elder Gods. That worked out well for One Maiyim, didn't it, since it meant you could use the so-called Bond of Aritos without fear of raising a demon. Of course that just means that eventually the demon will bring you to him, but I'm sure you all think you'll know when to stop. Just like Jiroshi. Oh, wait, he went too far, didn't he? You never found so much as a shred of him, did you?

"So you've set all your mages to learning how to use the Bond of Aritos and each one must specialize in a single Bond at first. And your ranks are named for the demon you study, right? Adamant was a Xenlabit, Petrana Hawakamala was a Gredac, Victory was a Pohn and Justice was a Kerawlat, I think. And then there are those of you who learned to use more than one of the Bonds. Is that a sign of mastery or just fear that the first demon will get you if you use his sign too much?

"You call that rank..." Oceanvine paused, "Well I don't have to tell you, do I? You're an Arithan, obviously. Disgusting."

"Show respect, child!" Myrrha tried commanding one more time.

Oceanvine raised an eyebrow at her grandmother. It was strange, but when she started talking she had used this off-handedly light manner to cover her nervousness, but, as she had continued, any nervousness had drained away. She really was as calm and confident as she sounded. "I would, Grandmother," Oceanvine replied, "if he was worthy of it, but this man has broken his holy vows in exchange for the power of a demon."

"Not just a demon, little girl!" Theodorus shouted his reply again. "All demons!" he raised his arms and almost instantly invoked a composite Bond of Aritos incorporating features from the four living demons. Around the hall the other people raised their arms and chanted "Maiyim will be One!" Each one was encased in a bright blue aura, but nothing else happened and Saltspray and the other students came running up the aisle to help defend Oceanvine and Sextant. Countess Myrrha's look of anger directed toward Oceanvine turned abruptly to shock as the truth about One Maiyim finally began to sink in.

"We'll handle the defenses!" Saltspray told Oceanvine and Sextant. "You work on the offense." She grasped hands with her friends and formed a large dome-shaped non-stick ward. Sextant dropped his and turned to fire various spells off at Theodorus.

"What did you do to the choir?" Oceanvine asked Saltspray.

"I've been hearing about that stupid ring spell for years, you know?" Saltspray replied. "It forms a network of spell stings to make a strong cooperative spell. I just wondered what would happen if the

network of spell strings couldn't form because there were wards in the way."

"It seems to have stopped it fairly well," Oceanvine commented as she tried sending projectile wards at the blue-encased mages.

"I was hoping they'd blow up," Saltspray told her.

"Apparently not," Oceanvine shot back as Theodorus' Bond spell slammed down on the students' ward, shaking everyone inside. "We need to stop that," she noted as the bond slammed against the ward again. She started to invoke the Seal of Methis, but as soon as she thought of it, the mystic symbol was already between them and the Bond. "Six, work on the choir boys and girls."

Oceanvine directed the Seal to attack the Bond. There was no subtlety involved. This was raw power against raw power. Theodorus shouted something and, still glowing blue, the surrounding members of the Inner Circle, joined their own Bonds of Aritos to the one he had cast. The composite Bond glowed and sparkled all the colors of the rainbow and still more besides. The sound was unimaginable, varying between a shriek, a moan and the arrhythmic beating of a diseased heart. Oceanvine felt the Seal of Methis start to buckle under the strain. Methis herself might have been able to face up to this assault, but Oceanvine had a finite amount of power.

"Six! Join me!" she shouted as the power stored in her staff began to dwindle. He moved the golden staff closer to her and she latched on to it like a life preserver in a storm. Above them the Seal of Methis flared to new life and folded itself around the Bond of Aritos. Oceanvine thought it was trying to douse the Bond in the same way she might douse a fire. Then she remembered the Seal, for all its power and intricacies, was really just another spell. It would not really do anything without her direction, but without her conscious direction it was obviously taking orders from her subconscious. That she realized was probably not a good idea. A semester of Introductory Psychology had taught her just enough about the subconscious mind to realize she really couldn't depend on it, so she put more of her will to work with the Seal.

Once she did that, the Seal became an extension of her body, she could feel the Bond squirming within her grasp and she attempted to crush it. Four of the Inner Circle burst into flames and the composite Bond weakened slightly.

Sextant was not a passive partner in the battle. He discovered he too could direct the Seal of Methis in a limited manner. He could not order it as Oceanvine did, but he could make suggestions. When the first four members of the Inner Circle fell, he sent two more fireballs at other enemy mages, and the Seal reinforced them.

Countess Myrrha was aghast at the display of magic, especially from the members of One Maiyim. She knew her granddaughter had performed abhorrent magic, but that the leaders of One Maiyim, the organization to which she had dedicated her life to, the organization that supposedly sought to ban magic from all Maiyim, would do so as well, was horrifying.

"Magic is abomination!" the old countess screamed at Theodorus. "How dare you?"

"Shut up, you foolish old hag!" Theodorus sneered at her and renewed his attacks on Oceanvine, Sextant and their students. Three more of the Inner Circle fell to their deaths when Sextant translocated them to the ceiling of the sanctuary, so Theodorus shouted, "Use the rings again!"

They did, and without Saltspray's interrupting wards in the way, a bright blue beam slammed into the

dome ward the students were maintaining. The blue light had no effect as it slipped off the non-stick ward, but Theodorus did not really care. He wanted the rest of the Inner Circle distracted from the Bond so he could use it to invoke a still stronger form, one that brought the Bond of Arithan to life.

Inside the crushing embrace of the Seal of Methis, the combined Bond of Aritos changed and grew as the attributes of the Demon Arithan were added to it. This was a difficult technique and only two of One Maiyim's mages had ever been capable of it. The powers and attributes of the four living demons were used to animate the Bond of the one dead one. Only a mage capable of casting all four Bonds could do it, and most who had tried had disappeared mysteriously on their first attempts.

The new Bond was so much more powerful than the previous one. As it flared to full power, Oceanvine was stunned and fought to bring the Seal of Methis back to bear on the Bond.

In the same instant, Theodorus used every last drop of power in the Bond of Aritos to attack the student's ward, this time incorporating the Bonds of the rest of the Inner Circle. The ward had sloughed off all the previous attacks. It was hard to disrupt a non-stick ward because most attacks would just slip off, but no ward was perfect and the Inner Circle brought so much power to bear that even a non-stick ward could not hold up forever. They had already been struggling back and forth for two hours and exhaustion was starting to set in.

"Stop this at once!" Countess Myrrha screamed at the High Priest. She rushed forward and tried to slap his face. He pushed her away roughly and continued to direct the Inner Circle.

Oceanvine desperately used the Seal of Methis to reinforce the ward, but the crushing power of the Bond broke through at last, leaving her, Sextant and the students stunned and completely exposed to Inner Circle's attack.

Seeing them lying helpless on the ground, barely able to move, Theodorus gloated, "At last! Destroy them now. Their lives are ours!"

"No!" Myrrha's voice broke into enraged tears. "That's my granddaughter!" and shoved a large heavy gold candelabra over and on top of Theodorus. The Bond wavered, and seeing an opportunity, the countess attacked the priest directly, with nothing but her large handbag. With the High Priest distracted, the other mages were thrown mentally off balance and the Bond began to turn on them. Three of the Inner Circle disappeared with claps of thunder and two more simply died on the spot. The remaining mages were completely occupied in fending off the effects of the great but evil spell.

Theodorus telekinetically hurled Myrrha away from him and the old countess flew through the air until she crashed into one of the massive, carved stone pillars and slumped gracelessly to the ground.

A momentary respite was all Oceanvine and Sextant needed and in that time, with Sextant's help, she invoked the Seal of Methis once again. This time it did not form in the air above her, but all around as though replacing her personal aura. Inside the Seal, Oceanvine felt as though the comforting arms of the Goddess were wrapped as warmly around her as they had been when they had last parted company. And then the Seal went even further and became a part of her. Oceanvine seemed to grow in that moment although it was the golden glow all around her that made her seem larger.

"I warned you all what would happen if you hurt anyone again," Oceanvine snarled at the remainder of the Inner Circle, "especially my family!" She opened her arms and rays of golden light flashed out of Oceanvine's body and struck each of the Inner Circle. There was no time to scream and a moment later they were as motionless as statues. The glow around Oceanvine faded and the room finally became quiet.

“Did you kill them?” Saltspray asked.

“No,” Oceanvine shook her head. “Not this lot. Just the opposite, in fact. Methis told me they have been seeking immortality and in a sense have found that by stealing the life force of others, they can increase their own lives for a brief amount of time. Instead I gave them another form of near-immortality. I slowed them down.”

“Slowed them down?” Misana asked. “How?”

“Time!” Leotawa replied excitedly. “You stopped time for them.”

“Not quite, although they might think so,” Sextant told him. “You did that better than I could have, Vine.”

“I had help,” Oceanvine replied and turned back to the students. “As Six reminded me not too long ago, life is a series of chemical reactions. Magic cannot affect the passage of time, but it can suspend a chemical reaction. These people are still very much alive, but slowed down so much that I doubt they could move more than a foot in the next ten thousand years.”

“They might not die,” Balance considered the spell, “but they won’t really live either, will they?”

“I wouldn’t call it life,” Oceanvine told him. “They will eventually starve to death since they can’t eat food before it rots away to nothing. I figure that will take a million years or more.” She was about to say more but she was interrupted by a soft moan coming from a far corner of the sanctuary. “Grandmother!”

Oceanvine raced to Countess Myrrha’s side. Her grandmother was badly wounded and bleeding internally. “Get help!” Oceanvine shouted to the students.

Misana and Leotawa shot out of the temple while Saltspray hurried to join Oceanvine. Saltspray’s novice healing talents, however, were not enough. “I’m sorry, Vine,” Saltspray told her. “I just don’t know enough. I’m not sure anyone does.”

“What’s wrong with her?” Oceanvine asked, a tear slipping down her face. A part of her mind wondered why she was crying for this woman who had made her so miserable for so much of her life, but another part replied, *She’s family*.

“Broken back,” Saltspray replied, “and several other bones. Really bad internal bleeding. The concussion is really the least of it. I can and will make her more comfortable, though.”

“Hold on, Grandmother,” Oceanvine nearly begged. “Help is coming.”

Myrrha opened her eyes. “I... I’ve been so wrong,” she whispered hoarsely. For a few minutes she said nothing else. Oceanvine did not know what to say, but the tears streaking her face spoke eloquently. “I’m sorry,” Myrrha continued at last. “So very, very sorry. Can you forgive me, Oceanvine?”

It was the first time she had heard her grandmother use that name. As far back as Oceanvine could recall, Countess Myrrha had mostly called her, “Child” or “Girl” and almost never affectionately.

“Of course,” Oceanvine told her gently, realizing she actually meant it. “We’re family.”

Myrrha smiled through the pain for a moment and then became still, although she continued to breathe raggedly for another minute. With her last breath, Myrrha whispered, "Thank you, Mama. I love you."

Sixteen

Oceanvine wept openly while Saltspray and Sextant tried to comfort her. Misana and Leotawa returned with help but it was already too late. Finally while the local authorities were talking to Sextant and most of the students, Saltspray helped Oceanvine to one of the pews.

"She thought I was her mother?" Oceanvine wondered, tears flowing freely again.

"Probably not," Saltspray shook her head, "At least I don't think so, Vine, but she felt the need for her mother's forgiveness. I'll bet that's been the one thing she's wanted for a very long time."

"She only had to ask," Oceanvine replied. "Anytime while my great-grandmother was still alive, she could have visited. She didn't have to apologize. Her mother would have known. I'm sure of it."

"Grandfather always said something about how his sister had changed the day Myrrha left Renton," Saltspray remarked. "I think you're right, but he also said that Myrrha still had a lot of growing up to do. Does that make sense?"

"Maybe," Oceanvine nodded, "but in those last moments, did she see me or her mother?"

"I think she saw both of you," Saltspray told her after only a slight pause. Oceanvine nodded and swept her student up in a fierce embrace.

They were still hugging when a policeman interrupted, "Forgive me, my lady, but I need to ask you some questions." Oceanvine nodded and spent the next quarter of an hour giving answers.

The others were being interrogated as well and being led from one stasis-bound member of One Maiyim to the next and asked if they recognized any of them. "Some of them do look familiar," Sextant admitted, "but I can't place them. Vine?"

"Oh, Nildar!" Oceanvine swore, getting her first really good look at her erstwhile attackers. "These two are Lord and Lady Narnda. They always seemed so nice. I think this is Phillon Grasmere."

"The real estate billionaire?" Balance asked.

"I think so," Oceanvine replied.

"Yes, I thought he looked familiar," Sextant noted. "I've seen him at the Palace. I don't know the Granomen or Orenta, though."

"This chap is Senator Gien from Orona in Bellinen," Leotawa announced from the far side of the sanctuary. "He's been running for Senate President. I get the feeling this will really ruin him in the polls, though," he added with a chuckle.

"And this Granom is General Rossof of the Air Force on the Isle of Fire," Balance announced a minute later.

“And, of course,” Leotawa stepped in exuberantly, “I’ll bet everyone here recognizes High...” he trailed off, realizing there was no one where he was pointing. “Where’s the High Priest?”
Arithan

“He got away?” Saltspray asked disbelievingly.

“Hold on,” Sextant told her. He closed his eyes and checked for spell traces. “Yeah, I thought so. He translocated himself out of here. That may be why his comrades here folded so suddenly. He must have used that Bond of Aritos to absorb the translocation shock.”

“And it would have then passed that on to the rest of them,” Oceanvine nodded. “But where did he go? It’s so far, I can’t see the end of the trail.”

“Only one way to find out,” Sextant replied pulling the golden pen out of his pocket once more and letting it expand into a staff. “Are you ready?”

“Let’s go!” Oceanvine replied, picking up her own staff with one hand and taking Sextant’s spare hand in her other.

“Hey!” Saltspray complained. “Wait for me!” but a moment later a thunderclap marked their sudden absence from the sanctuary. “Oh no! You’re not leaving me behind again!” And then Saltspray too, disappeared.

“Where are we?” Oceanvine wondered

“Not exactly the vacation spot of the year,” Sextant replied looking around. The landscape was desolate. In the distance they could hear the crash of surf over a rocky beach, but from here all they could see was grass, sand and some twisted and stunted scrub trees. “Not even a sign of an animal path through all this.”

There was a whoosh of wind and Saltspray suddenly appeared next to them. Just as suddenly, she fell to the ground. “Is she all right?” Sextant asked.

“Unconscious,” Oceanvine replied. “She knows how to translocate, but she forgot about the shock.”

“I doubt she’ll make that mistake again,” Sextant chuckled, telekinetically lifting Oceanvine’s apprentice up and then setting her down gently in the lee of a boulder on some grassy sand. “That’s as comfortable as I can make her for now,” he remarked as Oceanvine placed Saltspray’s staff next to her..

“No, we can do one more thing,” Oceanvine told him and concentrated for a moment before creating a pillow and a blanket. She put the pillow under Saltspray’s head and tucked the blanket around her. “That’s better. Any notion of where Theodorus is?”

“He may have translocated away again, but if he’s around here, we should be able to spot his aura,” Sextant remarked.

Before they could look, however, a quake shook the ground beneath them and they started falling into the liquefied ground. They levitated back out and looked around. “I see him,” Oceanvine growled. She

shot several projectile wards at the high priest, with fire to back them up. The quake stopped abruptly, but the grass and scrub started whipping around as though in a gale. The nearer branches and blades started grabbing at Oceanvine and Sextant, but their wards held off such purely physical attacks for a moment until a root erupted from under Sextant and snaked its way around his leg, tripping him up painfully.

“Foolish children!” Theodorus blustered, rising into sight above the scrubby vegetation. “You dare to follow me here of all places? Here to the heart of all power. Know that this is the Island Arithan, the mightiest of all demons!”

“Arithan is dead,” Oceanvine shot back, adding sourly, “which makes him a better conversationalist than you.”

“Dead? Perhaps,” Theodorus conceded, “but by the power of Aritos, I shall raise him from the dead to serve me.”

“Now that would be something worth watching,” Sextant commented, shooting off a spell to shatter the root that had tripped him up. He tried getting to his feet, but his right ankle hurt, so he assisted himself magically.

“From another world maybe,” Oceanvine added. “Give it up, Theodorus. Nothing can bring Arithan back from the dead.”

“Theodorus,” the High Priest mused. “Don’t you want to know my mage name, Elinor? Don’t you want to know who you have really chosen to face?”

“Not especially,” Oceanvine remarked. “You don’t care about mine and the feeling is mutual. I know you’re the leader of One Maiyim’s Inner Circle, though. That was obvious enough. Even that won’t last forever.”

“No?” Theodorus laughed, the mask of sanity peeling back to reveal the madman beneath. “No? I shall raise Lord Arithan and He will grant me immortality.”

“What comic books have you been reading?” Oceanvine shot back, slipping in half a dozen small projectile wards. The projectiles bounce harmlessly off Theodorus’ ward, which only now Oceanvine realized was the five-in-one Bond of Aritos the High Priest seemed to prefer.

Theodorus fired back literally with a wall of molten rock that suddenly erupted out of the ground between them. Oceanvine worked quickly to push the lava away and then noticed Theodorus had slipped away again. “Nowwhere is he?” she asked out loud.

Sextant didn’t answer, but sent a blast of sand in the general direction Theodorus had been a moment earlier. “Invisible?” he wondered aloud as an outline appeared in the airblown pattern of the sand. “That should be impossible.”

A blast of wind struck their wards, knocking them flat on their backs. Oceanvine and Sextant rolled away from each other and got back to their feet. “Vine, that got through my ward!”

“The spell phased through,” Oceanvine remarked, recasting her own protection. It was too easy to cast a conventional ward, but there was nothing she knew of that could get past a multi-phase ward. The problem was it also limited her options. She could fire off bits of the ward as projectiles, but unlike with a

conventional ward, she could not cast a spell through it. As she had tried to explain to the students, you were automatically in phase with your own ward, but Theodorus had cast a spell that went right through the ones she and Sextant had been using. If he had used fire, they might not have survived.

Sextant moved closer to Oceanvine and told her, "I need a distraction."

She nodded and started firing projectile wards as fast as she could at where she thought Theodorus was. Sextant ducked behind a boulder and was soon out of sight. Theodorus sent several spells back in her direction, but none could get through her new ward. A few minutes later, however, Theodorus' attacks halted. Then Oceanvine saw him lifted off his feet abruptly along with the stone he had been standing on. He fell only a foot before catching himself telekinetically.

"You'll have to do better than that!" he shouted down at Sextant. The Bond of Aritos formed once more and a firestorm poured down. Oceanvine retaliated with a large ball of fire that surged off her staff and a large rock that flew toward Theodorus from behind. Theodorus was trapped between the twin attacks, but his wards held and he struck back.

When Oceanvine was able to see again, he had disappeared once more. "It's illusion, Vine," Sextant told her. "He's using a simple illusion to make it seem like he isn't there."

Oceanvine threw up a storm of sand but this time there were no visible results. She hastily recast her multiphase ward and looked around. "He's used the cover to move somewhere else," Oceanvine commented. Then she thought of something. "Of course it's illusion. Arithan was the demon of illusion. He loved playing with the minds of his victims. Illusion would come naturally here."

"We'd better find him before he finds us then," Sextant remarked.

"And use illusions to our advantage as well," Oceanvine told him. An image of her appeared instantly a few dozen yards to their right. "He shouldn't be able to see me from front or back, but I'm vulnerable from the side. That's what the ward is for, of course." Sextant did likewise, sending his image off to the left and they started walking.

They searched for nearly an hour while the sun rose slightly higher in the sky. "We're really far south, aren't we?" Sextant remarked, "And it's a good thing we arrived just after dawn."

"This is going to get impossible when the sun sets, which is likely in only another hour," Oceanvine replied. "I wonder how Sally is. She must have woken up by now."

"I just hope she isn't silly enough to come looking for us," Sextant replied. "If she's really smart she'll translocate back before it starts snowing."

"It is cold," Oceanvine commented. "So you think it's really going to snow so early in the year?"

"We're not far from Robander's Island here. Wait a minute," he paused and used the gold staff to create a pair of warm woolen coats. He picked one up and handed it to Oceanvine.

"Thanks, Six. I've been using magic to stay warm," she told him. "You, know it does sort of smell like snow, doesn't it?"

"And those dark clouds to the west are coming in fast," he pointed out. "Wait. Footprints headed off to the right."

They rushed along in that direction and, on cresting a low hill, looked down and saw a tremendous Bond of Arithan that had been formed on the ground of the valley below. Around that Bond four others circled along the perimeter, each one representing one of the living demons.

“Hear me, Dread Aritos!” Theodorus shouted to the rising wind. “Hear me and come to my aid!”

“I wonder if the gods sit around and swap stories about the gullible mortals who try stuff like this,” Sextant remarked dryly.

“We have to stop this, Six,” Oceanvine insisted.

“Those Bonds are part of a very odd sort of ward,” Sextant noted. “I think you’ll need to use the Seal of Methis again.”

“Must I?” she asked. Down below Theodorus continued to pray to Aritos.

“What’s the matter, Vine?” Sextant asked.

“You have no idea what it’s like, Six,” she told him. “Every time I use the Seal it feels more like I’m doing its bidding rather than the other way around. I love Methis. Really, I do, but I’m my own person. I don’t want to feel like She’s controlling me.”

“I seriously doubt She’s doing that,” Sextant replied.

“No?” Oceanvine asked. “While we were on the way to Sutheria She told me we had a lot to do together. What if She meant we were supposed to join as a single mind. What would I become?”

“Vine, I seriously doubt Methis would ever do that,” Sextant replied. “Aritos never tried something like that with Wizard Candle. Is that why you haven’t used the Seal since we got here?”

“It’s one reason,” she admitted. “The other is... well, ‘Think of it as a test,’” she quoted. “The gods are always saying that to us, aren’t they? Just what is the test here? I think it could be in knowing when not to use the Seal. Maybe I shouldn’t use it at all.”

“Then why would Methis have given you permission at all?” Sextant argued.

“A test,” Oceanvine replied worriedly. “It’s a test, and I don’t even know what question I’m supposed to be answering.”

“It doesn’t make sense to me, Vine,” Sextant told her. “Methis loves you. She may want to test you, but She would never try to destroy you. I seriously doubt she would test you in a way that would harm you, should you get it wrong. More likely she would just take back her permission to use the Seal.”

“No,” Oceanvine shook her head. “Uncle Candle told me it’s the sort of thing the gods never want to take back.”

“Sometimes we all have to do things we don’t want to, Vine,” he told her. “If you fail, you just cannot use the Seal.”

“I wish I could know that for certain,” Oceanvine told him. “Maybe we can handle this with our staves?”

“If Theodorus were not here and we were just trying to defuse this Bond construct, I’d be willing to try, Vine, but...” he stopped because Oceanvine shook her head violently and fell to the ground and curled up into a fetal position. “Vine?” he asked, but immediately checked her aura. “What’s that spell string?” he asked, not really expecting her to answer. He followed it and saw that it went back toward where Theodorus continued to chant in the middle of the large Bond of Arithan. A quick diagnosis told him what he needed to know and without waiting any more time, he cut the thread, but magically kept hold of it.

Oceanvine uncurled immediately and sat up. “Oh, I’m sorry, Six,” she told Sextant. “I don’t understand what just happened.”

“I do,” Sextant told her. “Look at this spell string. It was affecting your thoughts.”

“It’s not the Hook,” she noted clinically, getting back to her feet. “But it does have a strong mental component. I wonder if I can reverse the current flow on that.”

“It would have to be reattached,” Sextant pointed out, “and I’m not going to let you do that. In fact I have another idea. Remember what Candle did with those spell strings back in Rjalkatyp?” He took a deep breath and then sent a massive surge of energy back up the thread, letting go of it immediately.

A moment later the entire mystical construct Theodorus had set up glowed a vivid orange and the High Priest looked up curiously as the power shot back at Sextant and Oceanvine.

Only Oceanvine’s hastily erected ward saved them, but Theodorus was sending bursts of bright blue light toward them. His aim was bad, but anywhere the beam of light struck there was a sizzle of steam and sometimes the cracking of rock.

“A laser,” Sextant realized. “He’s magically producing a laser. How?”

“Time for experimentation later,” Oceanvine told him. “I just wonder where he learned to aim spells. Doesn’t he realize he can cast the spell the same way you do that trick with the fireballs and the beer bottle?”

“Possibly not,” Sextant replied as they crawled back down the hill a few feet. “But I’m not disposed toward going over there and correcting his technique.”

“I am,” Oceanvine remarked. “I’m going to correct it into the next world.” She shot five fireballs straight up into the air and directed them back into the unholy circle described by the large Bond. When they peaked back over the hill, however, there was no sign that Theodorus had even been disturbed. She concentrated and managed to draw enough electricity from the area around them to send a lightning bolt at the Bond. It glowed slightly brighter but was otherwise unchanged. “The damned thing is absorbing everything we send at it.”

“And it reflects anything that might damage it,” Sextant replied, remembering his first attack. “I don’t think I want to try translocating it. If it reflects that I could end up in orbit and there’s not a lot of air to breath up there.”

“Drain it with your staff?” Oceanvine suggested.

“It won’t be fast enough,” Sextant replied. “We need the Seal of Methis. Only the power of a god can neutralize the power of four demons.”

“Okay,” Oceanvine nodded reluctantly. She realized that her earlier misgivings had their roots in her own feelings, but without the nagging doubt engendered by the curse that had affected her, she still trusted Methis.

Once more, Oceanvine closed her eyes to summon the Seal of Methis and she realized the Seal had never completely left her. It sprang forth immediately, but this time she held it back and forced it to gather more energy until it had enough so that Oceanvine felt confident it would be able to cancel out Theodorus’ Bond of Aritos construct. When she was ready, she held out her hand and told Sextant, “I’m going to need your staff.”

“Wizard Candle did tell us to share,” he chuckled accepting hers in exchange. It wasn’t fully charged, but he decided that might be a good thing in a few minutes.

Oceanvine took one more deep breath then finally allowed the Seal of Methis to attack the Bond of Aritos. As it swept through the four floating Bonds it absorbed the power of each one. The Seal would not remain stable that way for more than a few seconds and Oceanvine used the Staff to absorb as much as she could and transmute the remainder into pure silver. *Been making too much gold lately* she thought to herself wryly.

The ground shook violently and Oceanvine looked up just in time to see the Bond of Xenlabit slamming down on her and Sextant. It hit them three times before she lost consciousness.

“Oh good, you’re awake,” Theodorus remarked as Oceanvine opened her eyes again. She was unable to move and her thoughts were fuzzy. She could move her eyes, however and she found Sextant lying on the ground next to her.

No, she thought vaguely, We’re floating over the ground. And it’s not the ground. She saw they were floating over a wide metallic platform and she realized that Theodorus must have reshaped the silve she had created and mmade it int the large shining platform underneath her. The sun had set and the sky was a dark gray canvas from which snow was falling and evidently had been for some time since everything outside the circle looked like white lumps.

“I suddenly realized what I was doing wrong,” Theodorus remarked off handedly. “You can’t raise a demon without a blood sacrifice, and given the demon’s nature it would be best if you were aware of what was happening. Hmm? I do thank you for all this silver, however. It was the perfect material for an altar.”

Oceanvine continued looking around and realized Theodorus had formed a physical representation of the Bond of Arithan into the surface of the silver high place. Her mind cleared a little and she realized the Bond of Arithan was glowing and producing the only really useable light. The Bonds of the other demons continued to circle the perimeter of the larger Arithan Bond, giving it the power to feign a life of its own.

“Great Aritos, come to me!” Theodorus shouted joyously from the center of the platform. “Come lend me your power and witness the rebirth of your favorite son! I, the General, call you here!”

The General? Oceanvine thought. *Stupid mage name!* She tried to concentrate, but her thoughts kept slipping back to what was happening. Theodorus had unsheathed an ancient curved knife and was waving it in what she supposed were mystic passes over her and Sextant. The horror was starting to set in and, try though she might, she was unable to slip into the self-hypnotic trance that was her last resort. It had been a while since she had to use self-hypnosis to cast a spell, but now she knew it would be

essential. She forced herself to relax and quickly ran through the mental exercises her great-grandmother had taught her years earlier. She finally began to slip into the trance state. She heard Theodorus grunt in pain followed rapidly by something clattering on the platform. Then felt herself being pulled rapidly away feet first.

She felt the cold snow beneath her and opened her eyes just in time to see the glowing Bond of Aritos lift off the silver platform disc and wrap itself around Theodorus. His scream lasted only a second before the explosion. In Oceanvine's clearing mind it was like watching a natural disaster on television.

Then, as she sat up she realized she was being protected by a ward. She turned her head and saw Saltspray standing in the snow, holding the golden staff and with three fist-sized rocks floating around her head. She still wore the blanket Sextant had created, wrapped around her like a cape. She was obviously using a warming spell on it because it was visibly steaming in the wintry air.

"Horrible way to wake up," Sextant muttered on Oceanvine's left.

"Be thankful we woke up at all," Oceanvine told him. "Thank you, Saltspray."

Saltspray grinned and told her, "I think I like it better when you still call me Sally." She lifted Oceanvine to her feet and hugged her firmly.

"Ow!" Oceanvine grunted as one of the floating rocks hit her. "Isn't that a bit show-offish?"

"Hey, don't knock it," Saltspray laughed, letting the rocks drop to the ground, but keeping her hold on Oceanvine. "That's what saved your life. I kept remembering what Granddad use to say most often about magic."

"It's not what you know so much as how you use it," Oceanvine remarked.

"Yeah," Saltspray hugged her again, then finally let go. She handed the golden staff to Sextant. "I thought of using a projectile ward, but that Bond of Aritos he was using didn't look very stable. It was already starting to unravel at the edges, so I figured one well-placed rock and, well, you saw for yourself."

"I did, indeed," Aritos told her, stepping through the ward she continued to maintain.

"Nice to see you," Saltspray greeted him, "but what are you doing here? Checking in on us?"

"Actually I was curious as to who was calling to me and here of all places," Aritos admitted. "I'm not exactly worshipped worldwide, you know. I was a bit surprised to see you three as well."

"Just playing Follow the Leader," Oceanvine told him. "Nearly killed ourselves doing it though."

"Yes, that was fairly close, but not as close as you might think," Aritos told her. "Did you realize you were still glowing?"

"I am?" Oceanvine looked down at herself and saw it was true.

"You are," Aritos confirmed. "That's most impressive, you know, being able to maintain a spell while unconscious, that is. It means a part of your mind was still working on keeping the spell intact."

"I thought the Seal had come to life inside me," Oceanvine told him.

“A divine seal is just a symbol,” Aritos told her. “When you invoke it, it is just another spell. It’s a very powerful and flexible spell, but just a spell.”

“Then why can’t I get it to, well, turn off?” Oceanvine asked. “It feels like it’s grafted itself on to me.”

“Your subconscious doesn’t want you to turn it off,” Aritos told her. “Deep down you like the feeling that Methis is with you. I told you that at this time your thought patterns are as similar to hers as a mortal’s can get. It feels like a part of you because it’s really very similar to your own personal pattern.”

“Really?” Oceanvine asked. She closed her eyes and looked inward. Uncle Candle had once told her that knowing what her own pattern looked like would not be magically useful, so when she found the notes in his book about it, she had not bothered to look for herself. She did now though and saw Aritos was right. She saw the Seal of Methis and then just beneath it, the pattern that was her own personal symbol. It was similar, although not as complex as that of Methis and not precisely in synchronization with that of the goddess. That last relieved Oceanvine on a number of levels. Then with an unspoken, *Goodbye, dear*, she allowed the Seal to fade out.

“It’s dark out here,” Saltspray complained, “and cold. Why don’t we go find out how the others are doing back in Kornedd.”

“Kornedd?” Aritos asked. “It’s been a long time since I went there.” But a moment later they were standing once more in the High Holy Temple of Emtos and Emmine. “The place looks like someone’s not been keeping up the maintenance,” He commented.

“A certain apostate High Priest was redecorating the place. Hi, Artifice,” Balance replied from nearby, remembering Aritos’ mage name. “Welcome back,” he told the others. “We’ve been waiting for you in shifts. Tawa and Misana are sleeping in the car. What did we miss?”

“More to the point,” Sextant retorted, “what did *we* miss?”

“I asked first, old boy,” Balance shot back.

“Yeah, but I’m the teacher,” Sextant chuckled.

“Point,” Balance conceded. “All right. Well, we spent a long time talking to both Temple Security and the Kornedd Police. Insisted we do it here though because none of us wanted you to get back and find the place empty.”

“So you sat a vigil here in the chapel,” Aritos noted. “That sort of thing’s been out of style for a few centuries.”

“Yes, well, it’s not the first time a teacher has been late, is it?” Balance shot back.

“Looks like someone’s been cleaning up a bit in here,” Oceanvine noted.

“Yeah,” Balance agreed. “We have. That’s what you missed. The Temple staff was so upset about the mess in here we offered to help clear away the debris and sweep the floors while waiting for you. Of course, we didn’t think that would mean all day.”

“At least it isn’t snowing here,” Saltspray told him. “I woke up just in time to see the first few flakes.

Good thing I figured out how to cast a spell for warmth. Why didn't you ever teach me that?" she asked Oceanvine.

"When would you have needed it?" Oceanvine countered.

"My feet get cold some winter nights," Saltspray replied. "Winter's a lot milder back in Renton."

"It's about the same in Olen," Oceanvine remarked, "although shorter by a couple of weeks. Well, I guess, I never taught you how because there was just too much else to teach, and you do seem to have figured it out for yourself. At least you knew enough to cast the spell on your clothing."

"Well, on this blanket," Saltspray shrugged, "but that was obvious. If I cast it on myself, I'd just have a fever."

"So you talked to the police and helped clean up," Sextant commented to Balance. "Anything else you want to tell us?"

"They want to talk to you too, sir," Balance replied.

"Yes, that doesn't surprise me," Sextant replied dryly. "I meant about the rest of the Inner Circle. In your efforts to clean, I see you moved them out of here too. Vine's spell can be dispelled again by another mage if we aren't careful."

"You know, old boy," Balance chuckled, "that's what we thought. Misana wanted us to wait until you got back here before we did anything. You know how careful and respectful she is, but Tawa and I pointed out that we didn't know for certain if we got them all."

"You did." Aritos told him. "There will be a few minor incidents, probably, but the Inner Circle is gone now. Much like a snake with its head cut off, the body will thrash about for a while, but it's still dead."

"Right," Balance nodded, obviously glad to hear that, "but since you weren't here to assure us we decided you can't be too careful. Besides it seemed likely that a century or two from now, some idiotic historian would decide the best way to find out what really happened would be to thaw one or more of them out. You know how historians can be."

"As curious as any mage?" Aritos suggested. "Interested in poking at something until he or she understands it?"

"Um, yes," Balance admitted. "Well, we're only mortal, you know."

"And I would not have you any other way," Aritos smiled.

"Thanks, old boy," Balance nodded.

"You would make terrible gods," Aritos let the other shoe drop, but grinned to take the sting out of it. "And one terrible god on this world is enough, trust me!"

"Right," Balance drawled. "Where was I? Oh yes. Anyway, we didn't really think bringing any of the Inner Circle up to speed would be a good idea, so we decided to put them somewhere safe."

"Are we going to have to drag this out of you one bit at a time?" Saltspray demanded. "Really, Balance,

you are enjoying yourself far too much. Maybe we should go wake up 'Tawa. At least he talks faster."

Balance laughed. "The local peace officers evidently thought the same. They kept telling him to slow down, even in short hand their stenographer couldn't keep up."

"What did you do with the Inner Circle?" Oceanvine asked.

"Them?" Balance shrugged theatrically. "We decided starving to death in a million years or so was too good for them even if we could count on posterity to leave them as rather ugly statues. And you know, it's quite likely some civil rights organization may well go to court and argue that a millennium is sufficient time served for their crimes, right?"

"Spill it already!" Saltspray told him.

"We translocated them," Balance replied, "to the Niriliand Trench. You know just west of the islands that form a barrier that protects western Rallena?"

"That trench is over six miles deep," Sextant noted.

"Yes and we weighted them down with a few rocks," Balance replied, "just to make sure they wouldn't come floating to the surface. That area is a tectonic subduction zone, isn't it? At least that's what I learned in geology class this semester. We figured that if the Inner Circle didn't slowly drown to death, a million years from now they would likely be encased in stone."

"Well," Aritos considered, "They might get spit back up to the surface by a volcano or be floating around in the mantle beneath Maiyim's crust, but most likely the heat of the magma will melt or burn them up in fairly short order. Interesting thought. I'll have to look into that."

"But we're well rid of them that way, right?" Balance asked.

"Oh yes," Aritos nodded. "About the only safer place you might have tossed them would have been into the sun."

"We were fairly sure we couldn't reach that far," Balance replied. "I mean the laws of physics do apply here and given the power one needs to get out of Maiyim's gravity well..." he trailed off.

"Yes, quite," Aritos agreed with the Granomish student.

"And I'd hate to think I was reading by the light of the burning Inner Circle of One Maiyim," Balance added whimsically.

Epilogue – Rallena

"Madame Ksanya," Crown Prince Helm greeted the pretty Granomish woman. "You didn't forget this ball was fancy dress did you? Everyone else is wearing a mask."

"I didn't forget," she laughed, "and I'm not Ksanya. She's on the other side of the hall chatting with the ambassador from Ellisto."

“Lady Oceanvine?” Helm’s eyes widened at the sound of her voice.

“I do have a distinctive voice, don’t I?” Oceanvine chuckled. Instead of wearing a costume, Oceanvine, Sextant and their students had chosen to use illusion instead. “This is a pretty good disguise, but, Helm, didn’t you notice the pearl?” The large pearl Queen Orya had given her was, as usual, circling her head.

“I couldn’t do that if I hooked a motor up to it,” Ksanya added, coming up from behind the crown prince. She was wearing the same gown Oceanvine was, but with a matching domino mask and an antique tiara that had once belonged to her great-grandmother. “Vine, you probably ought to wear a mask, though.”

“I don’t see why,” Oceanvine laughed. “Besides this was your idea. Oh, by the way, I worked out a treaty with Winnil for you.”

“What?” Ksanya asked, taken aback until she saw her own face laughing back at her. “You’re just lucky I can’t look like you.”

“That would have been fun,” Oceanvine admitted. “Have you seen Saltspray or the others recently?”

“Sally and Misana are being chatted up by the North Horalia twins,” Ksanya replied. “Leotawa, I mean Jetstream,” she giggled at the name. Privately Oceanvine believed Leotawa would change his mind about a mage name at least twice before graduation. “Well, Jetstream is doing his best to keep Misana’s attention on him and Balance is dancing with the daughter of the ambassador from the Isle of Fire.”

“And here come the other two most beautiful women here tonight,” Helm commented. Princess Maia was walking toward them with Jollin Smith.

“I’m so glad to hear the repairs are on schedule, Madame Mayor,” Maia was saying to Jollin.

“Thank you, your highness,” Jollin replied. “We’re a bit crowded together, but at least everyone has a room and a warm home to live in now that winter has set in. We plan to hold the Blessing of the Fleet as usual this spring. I hope you and his highness will be able to join us.”

“I’ll make a point of it,” Maia assured her. “Vine, do the kids know how to present themselves?”

“Sir Ranoulf and I coached them just before the ball started,” Oceanvine replied.

“Honey, how did you know which was which?” Helm asked her.

“It was obvious,” Maia shrugged. “Vine might look like Ksanya, but she’s holding herself all wrong.”

Helm studied both women and replied, “I don’t see any difference.”

“Of course, dear,” Maia replied gently and kissed him on the cheek. “The pearl was a giveaway too.”

“And they know Their Majesties will hold court directly after the grand procession,” Oceanvine added.

“Has anyone seen Six?” Maia asked.

“He is with Misana’s parents,” Oceanvine replied. “Misana may have acclimated to life in Emmine, but her parents have never been away from the back islands of Merinta. Civilization is strange to them, but I

think they're getting a new perspective on all those tourists that visit Merinta. They seem to understand our dancing, but they think we're far too serious for this to be a celebration."

"I can't say I blame them," Ksanya laughed. "If this were an Orentan party it would be a lot more active."

"I doubt they would enjoy the Orentan version of a party either," Oceanvine remarked. "Merintans tolerate their more civilized neighbors, but don't think they are appropriately respectful of the gods."

"And they think we are?" Maia asked.

"We're humans and Granomen, they figure that makes a difference, I think," Oceanvine replied. "The thing is Orentans are the same species as Merinta. They look too much alike and they worship the same gods. It's a cultural thing or a religious thing, I guess."

"Are you ready for the trip to Querna next week?" Ksanya asked her.

"I'm ready, but you know I don't care for any more honors," Oceanvine replied.

"Well, Hacon Ancel may have taken your refusal and Six's with good grace, but Veras is not going to take no for an answer," Ksanya told her.

"We'll have to see about that," Oceanvine remarked. "I'm only going to witness the students being inducted into Gran's Order of Merit."

"We will see," Ksanya nodded, "but I know my cousin better than you do."

"He's my cousin too," Oceanvine pointed out.

"Yes, but I grew up with him," Ksanya retorted. "He is going to elevate Six and you to Marquess and Marquessa of Sentendir. It seems appropriate, since it used to belong to Silverwind."

"And Uncle Candle," Oceanvine remarked. "It would be more appropriate for it to go to Saltspray. Why only the Order of Merit for the kids, though? Why not the Silver Stay?"

"The Silver Stay is the highest honor grantable in Granom short of elevation to the nobility," Ksanya replied. "Your students did great service for the Kingdom of Granom, but only when not compared to what you and Six did during the Counterrevolution, and they are also being granted arms by the King of Emmine."

"Then why give Sentendir to Six and Me now?" Oceanvine asked.

"Well, you did save his life again," Ksanya shrugged. "That sort of thing can go to a king's head, you know."

"And my students helped," Oceanvine pointed out.

"Good point. I'll try talking to Veras about that later," Ksanya nodded. "Although I think the Order of Merit is about right."

"Oh, I heard from Aritos this morning," Oceanvine told them. "He's finally deciphered all those numbers

broadcasts, not that it will do us much good.”

“Why not?” Ksanya asked.

“As we suspected, they were coded messages between various members of One Maiyim,” Oceanvine explained. “Now that One Maiyim is headless, there won’t likely be any more messages.”

“I think the Royal Intelligence Agency would still be interested,” Helm told her. “There may still be a few middle management types willing to stir up trouble. And there must have been members below the Inner Circle who actually sent and received those messages. If they send any more like that, we may intercept them, you know.”

“And I believe the Royal Bureau of Investigation in Querna would have a similar interest,” Ksanya told her. “I know the Gods told you this was the end of One Maiyim, but it may not be the end of trouble by their former members. If they use the numbers broadcasts and we can decipher them in time, we may be able to stop problems from that quarter before they start.”

“I’ll talk to Aritos,” Oceanvine promised. “Mind you, it’s His decision as to whether to share the knowledge. He may decide that it’s too dangerous to spread around.”

“Why would He do that?” Helm asked.

“He’s a god, Helm,” Oceanvine told him seriously. “He may not be omniscient, but he does know a lot more than we do. If He thinks the knowledge will do more harm than good or if He believes it is something we need to figure out for ourselves, then He won’t say a thing.”

A round of applause broke out and they turned to see what had happened. “Ah,” Helm sighed. “Time to do the funny walk.” King Hacon Ancel and Queen Melloise had just entered the hall with King Ksaveras XI and Queen Orezhda.

“Funny walk?” Maia asked.

“The Pavanne,” Oceanvine replied. “It’s what we used to call it in prep school.” The Pavanne was a very old dance that most resembled a stylized form of walking although it was rarely performed except during the unmasking at the Emmine Royal Winter Ball.

Oceanvine looked around and saw Six approaching with Misana’s parents. Ksanya’s date for the evening, a senator from the Isle of Fire, found her as they sandwiched the Merintan couple between them so Ksanya could set an example and Oceanvine could softly whisper instructions if it became necessary.

Further back in the line, Oceanvine noticed Leotawa escorting Misana and Balance standing just behind them with the ambassador’s daughter. Saltspray refused to choose between the twins from North Horalia and so danced forward with both of them.

Both Saltspray and Misana had their usual satellites in orbit about their heads, although several other young ladies in the hall did likewise. She smiled, recalling that Uncle Candle would have delighted in the sight. He had often remarked that magic, especially simple spells like that, should be a part of everyday life and not just as something manufactured in the tech-magic factories. He saw no reason small children could not be taught levitation; no reason they could not use it to play catch or other common games. While Uncle Candle had often poked fun at Oceanvine’s habit with the pearl, she felt happy to see that at least this small part of his dream had come true and that she had something to do with it.

The procession proceeded smoothly although somewhat slower than normal as the attendees had to bow to two sets of royalty before moving along to one side of the hall or the other. Ksaveras started a bit to see his cousin Ksanya in the line twice until Oceanvine “unmasked” to reveal her identity and then he applauded, clapping loudly in appreciation.

Seeing the reaction, Saltspray changed her appearance to mimic Oceanvine and got a laugh from the Granomish king when she finally unmasked as well. “Cute,” Oceanvine whispered to Saltspray a moment later.

“Sure,” Saltspray replied, “I’m the cute one. And they do say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, you know.”

“You get away with stuff I never could,” Oceanvine told her with just a touch of jealousy.

“Like I said,” Saltspray reminded her, “I’m the cute one. You’re pretty and beautiful too, but you aren’t cute. However, I really think you never got away with those things because you were too well-brought up to try.”

“Hmm, maybe,” Oceanvine agreed conditionally.

Finally at the end of the unmasking, Helm and Maia were beckoned to sit beside Helm’s parents and Hacon Ancel made a brief speech thanking everyone for attending the ball. “As you know this year we are honoring the Lady Oceanvine, Sir Sextant and their students who have served our kingdom above and beyond the calls of loyalty,” the king added. A thunderous applause filled the hall at that announcement.

“I am also honored to welcome Their Granomish Majesties, Ksaveras and Orezhda,” Hacon Ancel continued. “Never before has a foreign monarch attended our Winter Ball.” There was another round of enthusiastic applause.

“Normally,” Hacon Ancel went on, “welcoming you all is the sum total of what we do at this time, but there are certain honors we wish to bestow.”

The herald, Sir Ranoulf, called, “Miss Sally Saltspray Candleson, Miss Misana Tintawao, Mister Kaspero Balance Nasperov and Mister Leotawa Jetstream Setanada are hereby summoned into the royal court of His Majesty, Hacon Ancel of Emmine.”

The four students came forward, bowed or curtsied and then kneeled before the King. Hacon Ancel went on to describe the events starting with the disaster in Medda and continuing on through the showdown in Kornedd and then concluded by inducting all four into the Order of the Star of Emmine.

Oceanvine recalled the afternoon that she had been inducted into that order. At the time she had been the youngest grantee of the highest service award granted by a king of Emmine, but except for Balance, the others had beaten her record by a year. She glanced across the hall and caught sight of her parents. Hacon Ancel had wanted to hold a ball in Oceanvine’s and Sextant’s honor soon after their return from Kornedd, but Oceanvine had convinced him to wait until after the official mourning period for Countess Myrrha.

It surprised Oceanvine, but she had genuinely mourned the death of her grandmother even though the woman had made young Elie’s life a misery and had ruined the day her king had chosen to honor

Oceanvine for her service in Sutheria. Perhaps that was why she and Six had declined any further honors.

Hacon Ancel had wanted to grant them a barony in one of the dry islands in the Celenan sub-archipelago, but both Oceanvine and Sextant agreed that they would not feel comfortable in accepting the honor. At the time Oceanvine could not really explain why she felt that way, but now she thought it might have been because her grandmother had set such store by prestige and courtly rank and honors.

No amount of elevation appealed to Oceanvine. It was nice she supposed, and she felt good knowing His Majesty appreciated what she had done. But she did not care to own a barony. She wanted to open the Olen School and teach eager, motivated students and she had everything she would ever need to do that.

The Olen School. They held the ground-breaking ceremony just a few days earlier. It was traditional to use shiny new shovels to perform a ground breaking with and those actually breaking the ground got to keep their shovels. Sextant and Oceanvine had used magic to create golden shovels. The gold was only ten carat because they wanted to make sure it would be hard enough to dig through the partially frozen soil and not get bent. In all there were five people breaking ground besides Oceanvine and Sextant, including Helm, Fredrik, Erinne, Ksanya, and Saltspray.

When the four students had been inducted into the Order of the Star of Emmine, the herald proclaimed their names and the hall filled with polite applause. "There being no further business," Sir Ranoulf began to close the court in the name of His Majesty, but he was cut off by a voice that filled the hall and yet seemed to come from everywhere at once.

"A moment of your time, if you please, Your Majesties," Oceanvine heard the voice of Aritos speak. Four glowing lights of differing hues appeared in the space between the royalty and their guests. The lights grew brighter and larger and gradually assumed anthropomorphic shapes and resolved into what Oceanvine had come to think of as the normal appearances of Aritos, Methis, Nildar and Wenni.

"Who are you," Hacon Ancel asked, but Maia quickly leaned over and whispered something in his ear. "Forgive me, Divine Ones," the king requested, getting out of his chair to kneel before them. An odd, astonished buzz rippled back and forth through the hall.

"Please, that will not be necessary, Your Majesty," Nildar told him, assisting the elderly king back to his feet.

"In fact," Wenni added politely, "We are the ones interrupting your court without warning and you have Our sincere apologies for that."

"But with your leave," Methis told him, "We have business to conduct this evening and request you all serve as our witnesses."

"Our court is ever at Your divine service, Holy Ones," Hacon Ancel replied with a formal bow that everyone in the hall echoed with bows or curtsies of their own.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Aritos told him. He waited for everyone to straighten back up again. "We have chosen to stay out of mortal affairs for the most part which is why none of the Gods have appeared only in public in over one thousand years. I assure you our sudden appearance like this will not become commonplace, but the nature of what we have to do this evening necessitates it. When mortals first began to learn and practice magic We were the ones who taught them. We were also the ones who decided

when those early mages had sufficiently mastered the art of magic to be worthy of the title Wizard.”

“As the ancient era ended,” Methis told them, “and the Age of Faith took hold, the three great Universities were founded and We allowed the wizards of those schools to determine when a colleague had joined the ranks of the ‘Wise Ones.’”

“However,” Nildar picked up the thread of narration, “in spite of all the progress you have made since then, there are no wizards left on Maiyim.”

“Therefore,” concluded Wenni, “We are taking back that prerogative for one night.”

“Master Sextant,” Aritos announced, “You have come a long way in a very short time and Wizard Candle chose well when he left the golden staff to you. From our conversations I know you understand that there is still so much more to learn, but in truth, you know as much or more than most wizards did even a century ago. You have demonstrated the wisdom to know when and when not to use your power, you have chosen wisely when you did and your accomplishments are amazing. We hereby declare you Wizard Sextant. Accept this mage stone and continue to lead the way into the new magical art.”

Sextant nodded wordlessly as Aritos handed him a palm-sized, oblong piece of crystal with a symbol set beneath the surface. As the stone touched Sextant’s hand the symbol within glowed bright gold, but Methis was already speaking to Oceanvine.

“Dear Oceanvine,” Methis told her, “I fell in love with you the very first time we met. If Sextant has come a long way since then, you have come even further. The Gods rarely grant a mage permission to wield their power directly, you know, and I will admit it was with some trepidation that I gave you permission to use my Seal. In the past such permission has never been granted until after decades of study in the magical arts, but I knew you had an almost insurmountable task ahead of you. It was all anyone could do to prepare you, and yet you exceeded My most optimistic hopes. Never before has a mortal mage shown such ability and affinity with My Seal. Now I know what it might have been like if I had a twin sister and that is an experience I will cherish all My life. Please accept this mage stone, Wizard Oceanvine.”

Oceanvine accepted the piece of crystal and peered deeply into the golden glowing symbol within. “What is this?” she asked. “I’ve never seen this symbol. It’s not like the one in my great-grandmother’s stone.”

“No,” Aritos explained, smiling. “That, as you know, is the Seal of Aritos.”

“And of course you know my sign intimately,” Methis added. “This is the symbol for all Maiyim.”

“But...” Oceanvine trailed off, trying to understand.

“We have literally given you the world,” Nildar told her.

“Let’s see what you make of it,” Wenni added challengingly.

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