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The Red Light of Dawn

by

Jonathan Edward Feinstein

Author's Foreword

I am always of two minds about forewords. I usually skip ahead on them, in fact. However now that it's my turn to write one it seems I can't resist. I promise to keep it short.

A story should stand on its own merits and not need explanation and maybe that's true in this case, but I'll go ahead and explain a few things any way. When I wrote this I was tired of reading historical fantasy set in pseudo-medieval worlds. I mean really really tired! But since fantasy in a modern environment requires it to be set in the modern world as we know it or in an analogue of it, that wasn't what I really wanted to do either. I wanted to create a world of my own that was not Earth, but was vaguely analogous to a non-medieval Earth. What I got was something even more different than I expected when I set out. The world this takes place in is called simply the World, but don't worry about that, the subject never actually comes up over the course of the story, it was just something I scribbled on the map I made to help plan the story. The cultures on the World are roughly similar to early 19th Century Earth, with one major exception, one I call the Cilben Empire which is an odd amalgam of Imperial Roman and Japanese cultures. Other cultures have their own analogues in our world, but even then there are differences. My best advice is to not try to work on figuring out where I got what – most came out of my own mind, so the moment you think, "Ah ha! This is England!" you'll find something that doesn't quite fit that picture. That was intentional. Take each culture on its own merits, it's easier in the long run.

I say all that because the professional readers (editors, prospective agents, etc.) who saw this manuscript would write back advising me that coffee and cigars are not medieval. Well, heck, I knew that! That's why I put them in. Strangely, none of those readers had problems with tea, which came to Europe even later than coffee or cocoa or with tall ships, which don't even make an appearance for centuries after the Middle Ages. Go figure. Non-professional readers – friends, most of whom were fellow would-be authors (and one professionally published one) didn't seem to have any problem with the non-medieval World I describe here.

Technology on this world is based on both magic and physical science, but not everything here is perfectly analogous to Earth. The tall ship in this book is a very early example of a bark-rigged ship and was based on several actual early 19th Century ships. There were larger ships in our world at the time, just as there are in the World at this time, just not in the part of the World the action is taking place. However, gunpowder is not used as a weapon in this world. I'm not sure why, I just chose to keep it as a minor temple mystery from a far off land (an idea I freely admit I stole from H. Beam Piper's "Lord Kalvan" series). So as I've tried to say. Don't get bogged down trying to figure out just where I got stuff

here. The World is not Earth; there are a lot of differences, but I think they are interesting ones.

This is perhaps a good time to mention this is actually the first book of a three book series (the second is currently being plotted and ought to be posted here by the end of 2003) so you may notice a lot of hints of what life is like in other parts of the World. Don't worry we'll get there eventually...

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

J. E. Feinstein
Westport, MA January 12, 2003

Prologue

"You shouldn't have come here, Arturus. It's too dangerous. You should have left the road and circled around Wahton. You know how closely they watch the border towns."

"I had to make sure somebody knew the truth, old friend," Arturus replied. He was a mature man, still in the prime of life with just a hint of silver in his curly blond hair. He stood tall; his clean-shaven features might well have been used as the model for any number of statues of the gods. He was the very epitome of the proper Cilben patrician. It was only natural that he would have powerful enemies.

"Still," his friend, Clortius, continued, "coming into town was too risky. You should have headed straight for the Thimdra States."

"That's the other reason I came to see you. Advice. Do you really think the Thimdras are safe enough? They're almost subservient client states to the Empire."

"Where then? The Parch? Nobody can survive in the Parch, Arturus."

"I've heard stories," Arturus said uncertainty.

"And that's all they are, friend," Clortius told him. "Now you finish up that stew and as soon as the moon goes down..." He was interrupted by a loud pounding on the outer door. "Damn! They've found you

already. Go out the back way. I'll delay them as long as possible."

Arturus scrambled to pick up his pack and sling it over his shoulder. It was a good thing he had taken care of his horse before he sat down to rest and eat one last meal with Clortius. The beast was loaded with food and water. In spite of his friend's advice, he was ready to try losing his pursuers in the Parch if it came to that. Surely all those tales were just superstitious stories.

"Where is he?" Arturus heard the shouted question from inside the house. Clortius' house was part of a long row of residences in the center of Wahton. It was a two-story wood and stucco structure that surrounded a large, oblong, park-like garden, built and positioned to catch every breeze this tropical environment offered.

A wide street ran by the front door and Arturus knew that there was a small troop of legionaries waiting for him there, but another street - more a wide alley - could be accessed through the back gate of the house.

Arturus quietly led his horse, a powerful but compactly-built palomino - a small animal more commonly considered suitable to one of the Equestrian Order rather than a man born to the higher senatorial rank. A larger beast more fitting his rank wouldn't last a day out in the Parch. This one might, if he didn't travel too deeply into the world's largest desert.

"You there!" a man shouted in front of Arturus from just outside the back gate. "Halt and identify yourself!" There were a dozen armed soldiers waiting for him with swords drawn.

"Jube!" Arturus swore the name of the chief Cilben god fervently. Swinging himself up into the light saddle, he turned the small powerful horse around and urged it to charge the front gate.

Surprise was on his side and he was able to force his way past the stunned legionaries waiting for him there. He had to threaten to run them down, but they managed to jump aside from Arturus' chosen path, allowing him to pass. Then they ran after him, rapidly losing ground as he galloped up the street, but whoever had been given the job of arresting him was prepared for such a tactic. Within minutes five horsemen took up the pursuit - expert trackers all.

Clortius was right, Arturus decided. Even if the stories were gross exaggeration, the Parch was too dangerous to risk. He headed east out of the frontier town, but turned north less than a league out of town when he came to a stream. The tactic was ineffective. When his pursuers reached the stream they merely split up and staying on hard ground, the two who had turned north soon caught up to him.

Arturus continued to ride as he fitted a quarrel into the slot of his arbalest. Then, without warning, he spun around and shot at the closest tracker. It was a lucky shot and the force of impact as it lodged in the man's shoulder shoved him off balance and he fell, wounded, to the ground.

The second tracker also had an arbalest and even as Arturus shot one man, the other one sent a signal flare high into the night sky, calling his colleagues. Arturus charged as he let the small crossbow hang from a leather thong and drew his sword. The other man was still fumbling as Arturus brought the flat of his blade hard upon his opponent's forehead.

Arturus felt no anxiety at the thought of killing. As a former general in Cilben's legions, he had done so often enough, but he balked at killing a man when disabling him was sufficient. He might have paused to kill both men had the signal flare not been shot off, but now it would only be a waste and the delay could cost him dearly. He sighed and pushed on. Another league brought the first glimmerings of false dawn, a

dim glow on the eastern horizon that quickly brightened until the sky became the color of burnished silver with a bright gold patch in the east.

Ahead of him he saw another five horsemen silhouetted on the crest of the next hill. He paused and looked behind him. There was no sign of the men he knew were there. Were these others looking for him too? Then all uncertainty was banished when one of them pointed at Arturus and ordered a charge.

"Looks like it's the Parch after all," Arturus said with resignation. "Jube!" He turned east in time to see the sun launch upwards from the horizon and urged his mount onward. The trackers knew their business and their horses were faster. Arturus' own mount had been chosen for stamina not speed. He used every trick he had ever learned in his years with the legions just to get through the day.

The trackers stayed with him most of the way. Occasionally he would lose them and they'd fan out until they found some sign that marked his passing. Arturus would hear the whistling and the sharp crack that went with one of their arbalest-fired flares and knew that he had been found again.

He managed to ambush three of his pursuers and take their flares. The addition of extra long fuses may have given him a lead the first time he set one off, but the second time he tried to confuse his trail that way, it backfired and he ran straight into two trackers. He regretted having to kill them and regretted even more having to stop to take their supplies. After dark he cut deeply to the south again and finally found a sheltered spot where he could stop to sleep a while.

The sturdy little horse was showing signs of wear after the previous day's workout, but Arturus chose to push on anyway. He led it when he could and only once, when he thought he saw one of the trackers in the distance, did he ride at any real speed. At noon he reached the final edge of the frontier.

The Parch began almost between steps. There was no gradual transition between the great desert and the grass lands of the Minue Valley that formed its western edge. There was a sudden rise of fifty feet and then, at the top, his eyes took in a blindingly bright stretch of sun-bleached sand. There was a light breeze here at the edge of the Parch blowing in from the river valley that almost counter-balanced the dry radiant heat that blasted at Arturus and his horse from the sky and the sands, but even here on the edge the legendary desert was taking its toll on them.

He stayed near the edge, making his way north once more toward the Thimdra States. At dusk, however, he heard the noise and saw the glare of yet another of the trackers' flares.

"Jube damn it!" Arturus swore. There was no choice now. He would have to brave the interior of the Parch and pray he could find shelter before dawn. The wind changed after dark and cold dry air assaulted him and his mount through the night. His carefully hoarded water was half gone when the dawn found him leagues from the frontier.

As the first rays of day bathed his face, Arturus spied a large hill two leagues away to the east. Weary and without having slept, he led the small horse through the unbearable desert. They used up the water by the time they reached that hill but it proved steep enough to provide shade from the afternoon sun.

Arturus was awakened at dusk by the pain-filled squeals of the small palomino. The horse was dying. When he was sure of that, Arturus made a clean cut across its throat to grant it a painless death, then swallowed his disgust back down and filled his water containers from the only available source of liquid. It would only make him thirstier in the long run, but it was better than nothing at all. He made a short blessing over his former mount, commending its spirit to Jube and Merco - the patron gods of his house - and then continued on foot.

Coming to the Parch was a mistake. He knew that now. Never in his very wide experience could he possibly have imagined that a desert could take its toll so quickly. No wonder that the trackers gave up their pursuit when he crossed over the frontier boundary.

They would be waiting for him at the western edge if he tried to make his way back now, so Arturus headed north, hoping to make it to the Thimdras. The cold desert winds chilled him so that even the fur-lined cloak he carried was insufficient protection, and then the sun rose and he was forced to seek shelter where there was none.

On that second day in the Parch Arturus buried himself in the sand of a dune and set his cloak up as a lean-to to protect his exposed portions. By nightfall he decided that it was no longer safe to drink the horse's blood and without water he was dead. He dragged himself weakly out of the sand and trudged back toward civilization.

The Parch was not, as he had initially thought, all loose and blowing sand. Between the sifting dunes he found hard, cracked ground and rocks that looked as if they had once been a stream bed. Tars, the larger of two moons was full that night providing adequate light to see by. Mialla, the smaller moon was moving through the sky as well, but its light was useless, a dull spot in the sky that made its circuit at least once each night.

The hard ground of the Parch was easy to traverse, but the sands required too much energy when he was forced to walk over them. By dawn he had been reduced to crawling and it took almost everything he had left to set up his makeshift shelter that morning. At dusk he didn't have the strength to dig himself back out of the sand. His last sight before losing consciousness was the cold, dark light of Mialla as it coursed through the sky.

Part I Narmouth

One

Ever since she was a child, Gaenor of Narmouth wanted to be an adept, a worker of magic, a wizard. Such an ambition was difficult to fulfill in the best of circumstances, but she was of common birth, her family was poor, and, worst of all, she was a girl.

Gaenor, however wasn't one to let impossibility get in her way and when the town wizard, Artur the Southlander, put a notice up in the town square stating that he was looking for an assistant to aid him in his magical works, she was the first to arrive at his door. No matter that the other girls her age were frightened of the powerful man who walked the streets of Narmouth with unconscious confidence; Gaenor sensibly concluded that if the newcomer adept - he had only been living in Narmouth for eight years - were the sort to harm defenseless young girls, he would have done so by now.

So she hurried to the adept's cottage that stood on a small hill in farm country overlooking the River Nar about a league from the center of town, and discovered that he wasn't at home. He kept a pair of varnished wicker chairs outside the door on the front porch, so she sat down in one and prepared to wait

for him. It was a warm autumn day and she allowed herself to bask in the unaccustomed luxury of having nothing to do. She would pay for that, she knew, when she arrived home with her afternoon and evening chores still undone, but it would be worth it, if she got the job.

She began practicing the little speech she would make when the adept came home. Ma always told her that first impressions were the most important and she was determined to make a good one. However the excitement she felt soon turned to boredom as the sun reached its zenith and began its long lazy slide down to the horizon. It was nearly dusk when Gaenor woke up to see Artur the Southlander walking up the path.

"Good evening," he greeted her with his pleasant baritone. "May I help you, miss?"

Gaenor froze briefly. All the carefully rehearsed words fled and danced around just beyond her mental grasp. "You advertised for an assistant," she blurted out. "Here I am."

Artur was unable to hide his surprise. "Really," he replied, getting himself back under control. "I only just put the notice up this morning."

"I know," Gaenor told him. "I saw you."

"Have you been waiting long?" he asked, concerned.

"All day." Gaenor saw no reason to lie politely.

"I'm sorry you had to spend so much time waiting for me," he told her at last. "If you had asked me in town I could have saved you the trip out here. The job will require my assistant to live here with me."

"So?"

Artur was taken aback. That explanation should have been sufficient. Was she slow or just plain stubborn? "You appear to be a well brought-up girl, young, pretty. If I were to hire you and have you move in here with me, what do you suppose people would think?"

"What do I care what they think?" Gaenor retorted. An angry shake of her head brought a long dark brown curl of hair into her eyes. She brushed it back automatically and continued. "You want a good assistant? There's no one better in Narmouth! I want to learn magic."

"There aren't many female adepts," Artur pointed out. "I don't believe I've ever met one."

"So what? I can do the work. Try me!"

"I'm sorry, Miss..."

"Gaenor. Gaenor of Narmouth."

"I'm sorry, Miss Gaenor, but it's absolutely unthinkable. For reasons of propriety alone I could only consider you if you were the only applicant and the mayor assures me that there are at least a dozen boys in the village who will jump at this chance. May I offer you some tea before you leave?"

"No, thank you!" she replied with stormy politeness. "I'll be back in the morning." She walked off briskly before he could tell her not to bother.

Artur just stood there on the porch watching her walk away. If only she were a boy, he thought.

Gaenor went home and quietly endured her mother's scolding for neglecting her chores. She worked until midnight to catch up and then woke up three hours later to do her morning chores before leaving to take up her vigil outside Artur's house. On her way through the town square, she stopped to remove the adept's advertisement; no need to make things harder on herself than necessary.

Artur woke at dawn as the first golden rays of light came through the small window of the sleeping room in the loft of his cottage. He rolled out of the feather bed and stretched away the last vestiges of sleep. Magic had kept him young and he neither looked nor felt the more than sixty years he had lived so far. Shrugging on a loose robe, he walked down the narrow staircase to the main floor of the house and into the kitchen where he lit the wood stove and put some water on to boil. On his way back to the loft, something outside caught his eye. He pushed the drapes aside and looked out the window.

Gaenor was sitting patiently under a tree about thirty feet away. She looked up and smiled at him. He shrugged and let the curtain fall back into place. If the girl insisted on sitting in his yard until he hired one of the village lads that was her lookout. When he was dressed, he came back down the stairs and started to brew a single cup of tea. The tealeaves were imported overland from several hundred leagues away, but were highly prized throughout Mishanda.

Then he realized that the girl was company, although uninvited, and decided to make a whole pot. If she didn't want any, he could drink it cold this afternoon. He found a fresh loaf of bread in the pantry that he had bought in town the day before and a pot of jam.

He went to the door and beckoned to Gaenor who got eagerly to her feet and came forward with as much speed as she could without seeming rushed.

"Have you eaten?" Artur asked. She shook her head and followed him into the kitchen. "I still cannot hire you," he told her as he poured the tea.

"You will," she told him confidently. "I'll wait." Artur shrugged and they had their breakfast together in silence. When they were done, Gaenor thanked him politely and returned to her place under the tree. Artur went about his business, but kept a covert eye on her from time to time. She had brought a basket with her. Most times when he checked on her she was sitting patiently, working on some knitting. She seemed to know when he was looking at her for invariably she would look up and smile as though she knew the secrets of the universe and got the joke.

In spite of the destruction of Artur's sign, enough people had seen it that first day for the word to spread, but Gaenor was prepared on that count. It was mid-morning when the first village boy arrived to apply.

"Hello, Gaenor," the sandy haired lad greeted her. "What are you doing here?"

"Hi, Tobe!" she replied cheerfully. "Watching. Just watching."

"Watching what?" Tobe asked nervously.

"The adept," she said with what she hoped was just a touch of mystery. "I heard he was looking for a new assistant and I just wanted to make sure that the rumors aren't true."

"What rumors?"

"You haven't heard? Well, they're probably not true anyway," she told him off-handedly.

"Tell me!"

"Magic is pretty dangerous stuff, you know. Takes special handling." Tobe nodded. That was common knowledge. "Well, I hear he had another assistant before he settled down here. Just watch out. If he asks you to pledge absolute obedience, get details. You know what I mean?" Tobe's face went white. "Good luck, Tobe!" she told him as he started on toward the front door.

He visibly flinched, but managed to get as far as the front door and use the knocker, but when the adept opened the door and smiled pleasantly, Tobe nearly fainted. He left a few minutes later looking as though he had faced death and been granted a last minute reprieve.

The next applicant was a tall, black-haired lad called Daner. He arrived about an hour after Noon. Gaenor told him the same story she had given Tobe. He seemed a little braver than his predecessor as he walked toward the small barn Artur used as a workshop, but when the adept inadvertently startled the lad, he bolted, running away as quickly as he could persuade his legs to carry him.

Artur looked over at Gaenor suspiciously, but she just shrugged with a puzzled expression on her face. From her vantage point she could see that Daner encountered another boy who was coming up from the village. Whatever Daner told him, it persuaded him not to complete his journey. So much the better.

Artur expected to see Gaenor still sitting under the tree when he stopped working for the day, but at dusk she was nowhere in sight. However, she was back the next morning. Once more he invited her in for breakfast. They spoke pleasantly about the weather and the harvest this year, but absolutely avoided the subject of gainful employment.

Only one applicant arrived that day, causing Gaenor some genuine consternation. It was a middle-aged man she had seen from time to time in the village. He was a jack-of-all-trades who had once been the town blacksmith until a few years earlier when an accident at the forge nearly ruined his arm. In time the injury had healed but it left the arm without sufficient strength to continue on, so he had sold his shop to his chief assistant and helped out there when he could, but mostly he just did odd jobs for people. He didn't need the money - selling his shop had set him up comfortably - but after a life of constant activity, he was unable to settle into retirement. He paid Gaenor very little attention other than to wish her a good morning.

He and the adept spoke for over an hour, and in the end the old smith walked away from the barn-workshop with a large roll of vellum in his hand.

"Did he give you the job?" Gaenor asked a bit fearfully.

"No," the old smith replied with a slight smile, holding up the vellum, "but he gave me another one." Then he walked away.

"What job did you give him?" Gaenor asked without preamble over breakfast the next day.

"Who?"

"The old smith."

"Oh. There are some tools I've been needing for some time now and I arranged for him to make them for me."

"I thought he couldn't work a forge anymore," Gaenor commented.

"For many uses, yes," Artur replied, "but I imagine he'll find a way to do what I need. Just because he can no longer lift a heavy sledge hammer, doesn't mean he can't be a smith. I gave him the responsibility of making those tools; how he delegates the work is completely up to him."

"You could have gone to the new smith long ago," Gaenor pointed out.

"I could have," Artur admitted easily, "but that wouldn't have been the same." That simple remark gave Gaenor something to think about the rest of the day.

It started raining around mid-morning and Gaenor moved from under her tree to the refuge of Artur's porch, sitting in one of the large wicker chairs. No other applicants arrived and the only other time she saw Artur was when he brought her a cup of tea a couple hours past noon. They sat together sipping their tea in silence. When they were finished, he brought the empty cups back inside and Gaenor didn't see him again before she left for the day.

She got absolutely no sleep that night. By the time she finished her afternoon and evening chores it was time to start in on her morning chores. It might have been far worse, but her little sister Marlie filled in where she could. None of her other siblings could understand what had gotten into Gaenor, but Marlie, while dreadfully worried, did what she could to lessen the load.

When Gaenor finished her morning chores, she found she still had an hour to spare but feared that if she went to sleep she might not wake up in time, so instead she went into the kitchen. Marlie was already there; it was her turn this week to make breakfast.

"Are you up early or late this morning?" Marlie asked as Gaenor entered.

"Mmmph," Gaenor grunted affirmatively to both alternatives.

"You don't look too good," Marlie told her. "Maybe you should take the morning off."

"No!" Gaenor replied, immediately shaking the exhaustion from her. "What's for breakfast this morning?"

"The usual," Marlie pointed at the large pot which was usually used to make gruel or porridge.

"How about biscuits to go with it?" Gaenor suggested. "I'll make them."

"All right," Marlie shrugged. She lit the oven while Gaenor started working. When her sister stumbled a bit Marlie asked, greatly concerned, "Maybe I should do that? You really need the rest, Gae."

"No, I have to keep moving," Gaenor replied simply. Marlie noted that Gaenor was making too many biscuits but suspected why. Her suspicions were confirmed when Gaenor promptly packed a dozen of them in her basket before hurrying out the door.

Artur woke up earlier than usual. He had taken time out from his usual pursuits the day before to make a device that would wake him up at a pre-determined time. After waking up, he decided that next time he'd time an alarm with a loud noise, rather than something to lift his bed a few inches and then drop it. Too

hard on the floor and his nerves. He peered out his window but in the pre-dawn darkness he couldn't see if Gaenor had arrived yet, but doubted she had.

He was already dressed and had water on the stove when the first glimmer of false dawn revealed that Gaenor was already sitting on a warm woolen blanket under her tree. Artur thought it strange that he already thought of the tree as hers. It had only been four days since he had first put up the notice that brought her here.

"I brought some fresh biscuits," she told him brightly as he opened the door to invite her in. Artur smiled. How had she known he was out of fresh bread and had been too busy to bake or even buy any himself?

"Very good," he told her sincerely as he took his first bite. Gaenor was still young and innocent enough to blush at the complement.

Gaenor had trouble staying awake that day, and had to prop herself up against the tree, hoping that when she dozed off it might only look as though she was in a state of quiet contemplation. She woke up two hours after breakfast when the milkman arrived, but she was asleep again when he left. At Noon the butcher also arrived, and after that she managed to keep herself awake until late afternoon when she hurried home for yet another lecture and a night of chores.

"Wake up, Gae," Marlie tried to shake her sister awake.

"Just another few minutes," Gaenor pleaded sleepily.

"Okay," Marlie shrugged, "but it's almost dawn. I guess you decided to quit trying for the job?"

"What?" Gaenor bolted out of bed and quickly got dressed. "What about my chores?" she wailed.

"I'll help," Marlie sighed, "but you'll owe me."

Artur woke up with a feeling that there was something missing. He shrugged it off and went through his usual morning ritual of walking downstairs to put the water on before getting washed and dressed, but as he headed back to the loft he decided to wave good morning to Gaenor. Without realizing it, he had become accustomed to her presence. It was a foggy morning but there was sufficient light to see that Gaenor hadn't arrived yet.

"Running late this morning," he said to himself with a grin. However, when he came back downstairs she still wasn't outside. He made the usual pot of tea and took a large mug of the dark amber liquid out to the front porch. He told himself that he did this to watch the fog dissipate while he had breakfast, but he was really hoping to see Gaenor arrive. He finished the tea and went back inside to find something to eat. All the while the feeling that something was missing continued, only now he knew what it was. An hour and a half later he was on his way to his workshop when he saw Gaenor run stumbling up the road.

She doesn't look too good, Artur thought to himself. Aloud he greeted her, "Good morning, Miss Gaenor."

"Good morning, sir," she replied breathlessly.

"You're late today," he commented lightly with a big smile. "I was beginning to think you wouldn't show up."

"You don't get rid of me that easily, adept," she retorted. "I'll be here every day until you give me that job."

"All right," Artur said agreeably. "Sleep late today?" Gaenor nodded. There were dark bags under her eyes, making her look like a tired raccoon. Her spirit was as strong as ever but the last several days had taken a lot out of her stamina. She slumped a bit unconsciously and when she spoke it sounded as though she could easily take a nap between words. "Well," Artur continued, "I suppose I have no choice then. I haven't had any other suitable candidates and by now I thought I would have. You're hired."

"Really?" Gaenor asked, unwilling to believe she had won.

"Really, but now that I see how dedicated you can be, you're going to have to promise me that you will never neglect yourself so thoroughly again. Don't you know you can kill yourself if you don't get enough sleep?"

"I feel half dead already," she admitted.

"I can imagine. Go home and get some sleep. Tomorrow morning come back here and be prepared to work. Your first task will be to make the loft in the barn liveable."

Two

Refinishing the barn to make it livable took nearly a month. Artur hired twice as many workers as were really needed in the hopes that the word would spread that Gaenor would be living in an entirely separate building from him. The people of Mishanda took such things very seriously and he might lose business or even be driven away if the locals believed he had taken Gaenor as a mistress. Morality in the cities was somewhat looser, but Narmouth was a small, provincial town.

Actually Artur need not have worried. Very few had the courage to question the motives of an adept; at least not to his face. Also the citizenry of Narmouth knew Gaenor. She was widely regarded as being strange for a girl. At an age where most of her companions were preoccupied with thoughts of marriage and having children of their own, she was spending every spare moment in the small town library or pestering Master Prendur, the teacher of the one-room schoolhouse, for private advanced lessons. This was usually just a matter of inquiring why scholars disagreed with each other on what seemed to be an important and self-evident point, but the townsfolk didn't know that.

Those who truly understood Gaenor realized that if she had been a boy there would have been no doubt but that a collection would have been taken up to send her to the University at Misha or maybe even the more prestigious school in Es. Most, however, sympathized with her parents who, they felt, would be forced to support this unmarriageable misfit all her life.

When it became known that Artur had hired Gaenor as his assistant, there was a collective sigh of relief from people of both viewpoints. Most secretly thought this was the adept's way of courting the pretty but unusual girl, and that the separate living quarters were just his way of putting up the proper appearances. The action, although misunderstood, was highly approved of and Artur's standing in public opinion went up because Mishandans really care more for the appearance of morality rather than the actual fact.

The first floor of the building had been kept relatively neat considering that it had been used at one time several years previously to house animals and farm equipment, but Artur had been using the loft for long-term storage and it was chokingly dusty up there. It was also unheated and poorly ventilated.

Heating in subtropical Narmouth was only important for two or three months each year, but it was well past the autumnal equinox and nights were starting to become chilled. Artur kept a small wood stove in the work room, but decided that if he were going to recondition the barn, he might as well do it right and had a chimney installed with fireplaces on both floors.

He tried to give Gaenor a free hand in decorating the loft, but was shocked by her Spartan tastes. She let him talk her into putting plaster and wallpaper over the rough boards she found already in place in the loft. She also readily agreed when he suggested a pair of dormers to give her additional space and skylights to help illuminate the formerly dark loft, and windows that could be opened were an absolute necessity.

However, she insisted that one small closet would be sufficient to hold all her clothing especially since she only owned two different changes of everyday clothing and one fancy suit for special occasions. Artur made certain, however, that she had at least double the space she would need, and although she had always slept on a straw pallet, he bought the best feather bed he could find for her in town and a matching dresser and chair to go with it.

Gaenor was afraid to complain about the bed, but it was far bigger than anything she had ever slept in. Why, she could lie down in the middle of it and stretch her arms out to both sides and not quite touch the edges.

When he was finished giving Gaenor a clean and respectable place to live, Artur took a close look at his own workshop. It seemed a bit shoddy by comparison. He had the floor sanded and varnished. Next the walls were paneled; nothing fancy, just some simple boards painted an eye-pleasing, lightly tinted white. The ceiling was left exposed, but this too was cleaned and painted.

When Gaenor finally moved in after the first two weeks, but while the workshop was still being remodeled, she had finally gained enough confidence in her position to make some strong suggestions.

"What about the furniture in here?" she asked sweeping her hands about to include the entire workshop.

"Sturdy, wooden work benches, counters, and shelves," Artur replied, slightly puzzled. "What's wrong with that?"

"The shelves are just fine, but look at the bench and the counters," Gaenor demanded. "They're chipped and cut. The corner is broken off the counter against the east wall and if I'm not mistaken this bench is showing signs of dry rot."

"Miss Gaenor," Artur replied formally, "This is an adept's workshop. The furniture is apt to take a bit of a beating."

"Then build it that way," she retorted. "You're the one who's concerned about appearances. Considering your position, this is just plain disreputable!"

"What do you suggest?"

"Stone," she replied. "Marble, perhaps. Replace or cover the counter tops with sheets of marble. The

bench will have to be replaced, but give the new one a marble top as well."

Artur considered that. "Not marble," he said at last, "we'll be working with acid from time to time, and one drop would leave a deep pit in the counter. I'll speak with the stone mason and see what he suggests." They finally decided on slate.

After that it was time to get down to Artur's much-delayed work. Gaenor was just getting comfortably situated when the first emergency came up.

A messenger arrived breathlessly from the town of Nistor, about thirty leagues upstream from Narmouth. His horse had been ridden hard and sweat was dripping out of its fur. In the chill evening air, Gaenor rubbed the poor animal - a panting and nervous brown mare - down with wool while Artur spoke with the messenger. She had no sooner finished when Artur came outside with the messenger.

"Miss Gaenor, this is Walledur of Nistor. We'll be needing to leave by first light. I want you to ride to town with Walledur and hire a pair of horses and a carriage from the Livery. Put it on my tab."

"Not on this horse," she replied, standing protectively in front of the mare. "She's exhausted. I would rather walk all the way to Nistor than force this beast to take another step until she's rested."

"I did ride her hard," Walledur admitted. "Is it far into Narmouth?"

"A league," Artur admitted, "maybe a bit less."

"Then walking wouldn't take all that much longer and poor Vessie here deserves a better rest than merely overnight. I'll walk into town with Miss Gaenor if you like." Artur shrugged his acquiescence and they started walking.

Gaenor and Walledur were not comfortable with each other and they walked over half the way into town before either of them spoke.

There was a mild sea breeze coming up the hill when Walledur finally broke the silence, "What is that odd smell?" he asked.

Gaenor sniffed the air. It had the same fresh tang to it she had grown up with. Never having traveled she had no idea that it was the special quality that air only seems to have near the coast of the ocean. "It's just air," she shrugged.

"No, it's different, very fresh. Sort of like the air in a forest, but the scent is different. It must be what is meant by salt air. Are you sure you can't smell it?"

"I said so, didn't I?" Gaenor snapped.

"Sorry." They were silent again until they reached the outskirts of Narmouth. "Nice town," Walledur commented, breaking the silence once more.

"It's okay, I guess," Gaenor replied.

"You're not too friendly," Walledur told her.

There was something about him that just brought out the worst in her. She had trouble figuring it out until

she remembered the condition of his horse. The mare had been shivering as she rubbed her down. Gaenor had trouble imagining any problem important enough to justify such horrendous treatment and she told him so.

"Oh, so that's why you don't like me," he replied. "I chose Vessie because she was in better shape and had more stamina than any other horse in Nistor. I had to get here with all possible speed, otherwise I would never have ridden so hard."

"And what is so important?"

"A curse," he replied simply. Gaenor gasped and looked at the young man to see if he was serious. He returned her scrutiny without flinching.

"What sort of curse?" she asked at last.

"Terrible. There was a roar of thunder without a flash of lightning or even a cloud in sight and when the noise subsided the warehouse of a rich merchant had been reduced to rubble and neighboring buildings were burning. At least five people were killed. I left before the fires had been completely put out."

"That's horrible," Gaenor admitted. "What caused it?"

"We don't know," Walledur replied. "That's why we need Master Artur. If we knew the cause then our priests could ameliorate the curse, but this is something none of us have ever encountered." Gaenor nodded.

The keeper of the town livery was a distant cousin of Gaenor's, but in such a small town it was not unusual that almost half the people were at least third cousins. He politely inquired as to how Gaenor was getting along with the adept. She replied that all was well and then quickly moved on to the matter at hand and half an hour later she and Walledur were riding back to Artur's cottage in a rich brown cabriolet drawn by two freshly fed and watered horses.

Gaenor was up the next morning an hour before dawn and working in the kitchen, so by the time Artur and Walledur joined her, the tea was ready and she was busily pouring pancake batter on the hot griddle on top of the stove. When they were finished she started cleaning up, but Artur stopped her, explaining that since she had done the cooking the very least he and Walledur could do was clean the dishes. Walledur look decidedly uncomfortable at the prospect and Gaenor suspected that he had never so much as rinsed out a teacup in his life. However, under Artur's direction, he dried the dishes as the adept washed them. Later, on the road, Gaenor asked Artur about that.

"Miss Gaenor, you are my assistant, not my servant," Artur explained. "We will be sharing the chores of this household and I wanted Walledur to know that. Also," he confided further, "Walledur is the son of the Lord of Nistor and just a bit on the spoiled and pampered side. I couldn't resist setting him to such a common chore." Artur grinned with just a hint of maliciousness. "I've never had a lot of respect for titles for their own sake."

Gaenor returned his grin and they rode on. This new job might be even better than she originally thought.

"Don't get too used to it, though," he warned her. "I doubt we'll be hobnobbing with the nobility too often. A good deal of my business involves far more mundane applications of magic."

"Such as?"

"Good luck charms, anti-evil talismans, love potions; that sort of thing. At least I think that's how they're being sold."

"Love potions? I never heard of you selling those."

"I don't sell them in Narmouth. I hate to admit it, but you're my assistant now so you might as well know, most charms of that sort are a sham in any case. I don't think there really is such a thing."

"Why sell them then, and to whom?"

"There's a merchant from Gostrina who buys them from me to sell in the Thimdra States. The people there are very superstitious and really believe such things will work. Oddly, all magic is illegal there, but they buy them anyway. I can't enchant them to bring good luck or make someone fall in love, so I put a health spell in them. I hear that Bubonic Plague is still the biggest killer in the Thimdras, so my good luck charms protect the wearer against that disease. The love potions, on the other hand, are just a mild herbal stimulant. I sell those items for what they are, but I learned a couple of years ago that the merchant who sells them, lies a lot."

"Why keep selling them to him then?"

"They're harmless, and the anti-plague spells actually help the people who use them."

"But why can't magic directly affect the way someone thinks?"

"Thoughts are abstract and don't manifest sufficiently on the physical plane. Magic manipulates matter and energy. With knowledge and imagination you can do nearly everything, but how can you change something you can't see?"

"How are thoughts generated?" Gaenor asked.

"Excellent question. Philosophers the world over have argued that one for centuries, but I haven't come across any clear consensus."

"Are they result of brain activity?" she persisted.

"That's the theory I subscribe to, although there's a large camp in favor of the opinion that thoughts come from the soul."

"Can magic affect brain activity?"

"In theory, yes," Artur answered, "that would be a physical manifestation. However, I see where you're going. Until we properly understand how the brain works we can't predictably control it. Magic isn't a matter of wishing for something to happen. It is very strictly controlled by the laws of sympathy and contagion."

"Sympathy and contagion?"

"Right. They are the two basic laws of magic. All known magic relates in some way to one or both principles. The law of sympathy, sometimes called the law of similarity, states that like produces like. Spells using sympathy often involve actions that symbolically represent or else enact on a small scale what

you expect the spell to do for real. The law of contagion, on the other hand, says that two or more objects once in contact will continue to act upon each other."

"That's all there is to it?"

"Those are the basics. It's a bit more complicated than that. Releasing and harnessing the necessary power to fuel a spell can take far longer than the actual spell. Also most useful works of magic are actually well orchestrated groups of spells all intricately woven together. That sort of thing can get very tricky."

"Can you teach me a simple spell?" Gaenor asked eagerly.

"I can teach you the mechanics, of course, but you still wouldn't be able to make it work," Artur replied.

"Why not?" she demanded.

"The ritual mechanics of magic are only half of what you need. Everyone has the potential ability to work magic, but that ability sleeps in most of us. It can only be awakened through a very complex spell."

"How complex?"

"It requires three adepts working in shifts for a full twenty-four hours."

"Three adepts!" Gaenor's disappointment was evident. "Where can you find three in one place long enough to make any new adepts?"

"It doesn't happen very often," he admitted, "except at the University."

"At Misha?" Gaenor asked.

"Right. One or two new adepts graduate each year and the ritual is part of graduation."

"I'd have to go through the University to become an adept?"

"That's one way, but I fear the University isn't quite ready yet to matriculate a girl. When you've learned enough, I'll see about having you initiated to magic, but it will take years and a lot of hard work before you're ready."

"I'll do it," she promised him. "You've never seen anyone work as hard as I will!"

Artur smiled.

Three

They rode all day and two hours more into the night before stopping at an inn. Then they were up at dawn and once more on the road so they arrived in Nistor shortly before Noon.

They were formally met by Walledur's father, Lord Mayor Wullace, a nervous, fat, bald man who kept looking over his shoulder as though worried that the next curse might strike him. After speaking with the man for all of two minutes Artur decided that was, indeed, the case.

"Thank you for coming so promptly," the mayor said repeatedly. "It has been a nervous time for all of us since the disaster."

"My pleasure, m'lord," Artur replied smoothly. "If you don't mind, my assistant and I would like to have a light lunch and then get straight to work."

"Of course, Master Artur. I would be honored if you and Miss..."

"Gaenor," Walledur supplied.

"...would dine with me," Wullace completed the sentence smoothly. "Also, I hope you will stay here in my house as long as you are in Nistor."

Artur noted that Wullace spoke formally and without contractions, trying to enunciate each word clearly and concisely. He found it an annoying eccentricity, but reminded himself that at worst he should only have to endure it for a few days. "The honor is ours, my lord," Artur replied.

Wullace's idea of a light lunch could have adequately fed fifty very hungry people. Gaenor just stared at the meal that represented more food than she had ever seen at one time, but Artur, considerably more worldly, skeptically wondered what would happen to the left-overs. There had been no beggars in evidence as they drove through the town, but Artur had caught glimpses of buildings in exceptionally poor repair and people, rail-thin and dressed in rags, who peeked with cautious interest at him from deep within dark and narrow alleys.

Artur could see that Lord Mayor Wullace intended to take the better part of two hours on lunch before allowing the adept to start working, so rather than resort to rudeness by attempting to leave early, Artur started his investigation right there while they ate.

"Lord Wullace," he began respectfully, "your son wasn't able to give us any details, perhaps we can talk as we eat."

"Mmph!" the mayor grunted between bites. "Very well. What would you like to know?"

"Why not assume we know nothing about the situation here. That's very nearly true."

"Four days ago we heard a loud noise. It was just a half-mile from here, down by the river. A warehouse belonging to Sir Manford Quarry, a leading businessman here in Nistor, burst into a ball of flame that sent fragments flying scores of rods in distance. Neighboring buildings were severely damaged and we would have lost the entire riverside area in the ensuing fire if it had not been raining heavily the previous day."

"An explosion," Artur thought out loud.

"Excuse me, Master Artur?" Wullace asked.

"Just thinking, my lord. It sounds like there was an accident with a highly explosive material, but I wasn't aware that there were any substances that volatile in common usage in Mishanda. The Cilbens have an

incendiary weapon that can be explosive if mishandled, but... Oh, never mind. Please go on."

"We investigated, naturally, but this is like nothing we have ever seen before. Our priests did what they could, but none of them have a knowledge of magic and were unable to fully understand the nature of the curse. Now that you are here, I am sure you will be able to analyze the problem and instruct us on what we must do in order to keep this from happening again."

"What makes you so sure this disaster is the result of a curse, my lord?" Gaenor asked a fraction of a second before Artur could.

Lord Wullace looked disapprovingly at the girl until Artur spoke. "Yes, Lord Mayor," he seconded the question, "why do you assume it is a curse?"

"Surely such a disaster can only have been brought about by the gods," Wullace explained, quickly adding, "blessed and sanctified be their names!" He looked nervously at the ceiling.

Artur decided not to press the matter. Instead he asked, "Was there anyone inside the warehouse?"

"Sir Manford was there, and his secretary. The curse struck just after he had dismissed the warehouse crew for the day. Several others in the neighboring building were killed, however."

"And does Sir Manford leave any survivors?"

"A son, currently serving at the court in Misha and a daughter who married a young knight from somewhere up north. Neither of them are in Nistor at the moment."

"No wife?"

"No, sir. She died of a fever two years ago. It was very sad."

"How old was Sir Manford?"

"Excuse me, but what has this got to do with anything?"

"I don't know if it relates at all, my lord," Artur replied. "That's what I'm trying to find out. It may be that this explosion is not the result of a curse, in which case I imagine I'll be asking a lot of irrelevant questions while looking for the cause. Maybe I'm assuming too much, my lord. Am I being hired to discover the cause of the explosion or just to verify whether or not a curse is at work here?"

"The cause, Master Artur," Wullace affirmed. "Do you really think this might be a natural disaster?"

"Natural, my lord? Not a chance, but not necessarily magical in origin."

After the meal, Artur and Gaenor rode to the site of the disaster.

"It's a bit chilly, isn't it?" Gaenor remarked conversationally while Artur drove the cabriolet.

"Winter's coming," Artur told her, "and we're deep into the foothills. If I remember, that's Mount Krenda to the northwest. It stays warmer on the coast, but I wouldn't be surprised if they have snow here before the month is out."

"I didn't bring any warm clothing," Gaenor admitted with a slight shiver as a passing cloud put them briefly in shadow.

"I'll buy you a cloak," Artur told her, "but it'll come out of your salary. Can it wait until we're finished at the warehouse?"

Gaenor looked up at the sky. There were a few clouds, but the sky was mostly clear. "I think so. May I ask a question?"

"Best way to learn," Artur replied easily.

"What is a curse? I mean in technical terms how does a curse differ from any other spell?"

"It doesn't. What we call a curse is a spell that has been cast with malicious intent, although there are people who refer to a long-term run of bad luck as a curse as well."

"But if there are so few adepts in the world how is it that curses seem to be so plentiful?" Gaenor asked.

"I'm not sure that they are. People have a tendency to be superstitious. If they suffer a case of bad luck, they call it a curse. If they burn their dinner, they call it a curse. I've known children playing ball who, on breaking a window, tried to claim it was a curse." Gaenor laughed, remembering her brother trying that defense. "All magic, however, leaves traces behind that are detectable. We'll have no trouble determining whether magic was used here and if so we'll know the nature of the spell as well."

Artur's desire to examine the warehouse could only be described as optimistic. What he and Gaenor found was a larger pile of charred rubble that included the remains of the warehouse's immediate neighbors. Workmen were still clearing the street in front of the ruins.

"Not a whole lot left, is there?" Artur commented dryly.

Gaenor nodded distractedly. "What's that smell? It's sort of like rotten eggs, but burnt."

"Sulfur," Artur said uncertainly, "but there's something else alloyed to it."

"Sulfur?"

"I believe you call it brimstone."

"Tasan's work?" Gaenor gasped, frightened. Tasan was the name of the Mishandan devil god.

"Maybe not," Artur shrugged. "Brimstone is relatively common as a spell ingredient and fairly easy to come by."

"So it was a curse then?"

"That's what we're about to find out. Hand me that leather bag, please." He took the large black handbag from her and climbed out of the vehicle. Gaenor tied the horses up to a hitching post that somehow survived the blast while Artur started selecting tools from out of the bag and neatly arranging them on an errant block of stone nearby. "This is going to take a few minutes," he told Gaenor. "Would you find the foreman of the workers clearing the debris and ask whether anything has been done yet here at the warehouse site?"

"That would make a difference?" Gaenor asked with interest.

"Probably not," Artur admitted, "but it's best to check out all the possibilities."

He turned back to his preparations. Gaenor wanted to stay and watch, but forced herself to carry out the assignment Artur had given her. She looked around, but all the workmen seemed to be working without active direction. Finally she stopped one and asked who their foreman might be. The fellow grunted a name at her and pointed toward a tavern several doors down and across the street from the rubble.

The tavern was a dark hole-in-the-wall type of place with oil-soaked wooden floors, rough furniture, and an unidentifiable but unwholesome odor. There were about a dozen men sitting at tables and the bar in various states of inebriation. A pair of disheveled barmaids threaded their way between the closely packed tables. There was a bartender in one of the far corners, but Gaenor couldn't get a clear view of him.

The only eyes that did not turn toward Gaenor as she entered the room belonged to the three men who had passed out at their tables. The rest followed her every movement with an unhealthy appreciation that made her feel unclean just being there.

She hesitantly took a step forward and asked, "Is there a man named Drogo here?" Several men responded by waving their arms or calling her over.

Gaenor was about to bolt when one of the barmaids told her, "Save yer time, honey. Dat's him over dere." Gaenor followed the helpful barmaid's pointing finger to a nearby table where one of the hopelessly drunken men sat with face against the table. "You can try talkin' to him, but I doubt he'll answer." Gaenor tried to rouse the man several times but soon gave up and, after dodging several drunken and poorly aimed grabs, made her exit from the foul-smelling tap room.

The cool autumn air that assaulted her as she made her way back outside chilled her deeply and made her fingers ache, but it was preferable to the warmth she had endured in the tavern. She spoke to several of the workers outside and finally learned that nobody had dared to go near the destroyed warehouse for fear of "catching the curse."

Artur was just finishing up when Gaenor returned. "What took you so long?" he asked. Gaenor told him and he blanched. "You went in there?" he asked. "I'm not sure I would have."

"You wanted to know if the site had been disturbed, didn't you?" Gaenor pointed out.

"It wasn't important enough to go into such a low dive to find out."

"Maybe you should have made that clear from the outset," Gaenor told him heatedly.

"I said it probably wouldn't make a difference either way. I'm sorry I wasn't clear enough. I've never had an assistant before and I'm not used to explaining things that are obvious to me."

"Well, it wasn't obvious to me."

"I see that. Tell you what, the cloak is on me, and in the future I'll try to be more careful about giving you instructions until we get to know each other better. In the meantime you can assume that I don't want you

to put yourself at any risk I don't share with you. All right?"

Gaenor nodded and asked, "So was it magic that caused the explosion?"

"I don't think so," Artur replied. "At least it wasn't the primary force involved. The level of magical traces are slightly stronger than normal, but that was probably due to the storage of enchanted devices or materials. Certainly nothing that could have caused this much damage."

"So what next?" Gaenor asked.

"A lot of questions, I imagine," Artur replied, as they put the bag in the cab and untied the horses. "We'll talk to the survivors who used to work here and we'll pay a visit to Sir Manford's home and talk to his servants. Maybe someone who knew him can tell us something that will give us a clue. First, however, we're going to buy you a cloak before you catch your death."

Gaenor chose a warm woolen cloak that had been dyed a deep, rich green with a lining the color of ripened wheat that neatly complemented her brown hair and eyes. Artur decided to throw in a pair of lined doe-skin gloves for her hands because he'd noticed that she had been flexing and rubbing them to ward off the cold. With that behind them they drove back to the lord mayor's mansion to see if they could track down any of Sir Manford's former employees.

"How would I know that?" Wullace asked, perplexedly.

"I had hoped," Artur explained, "That you might at least know the name of his warehouse manager."

"I'm sorry," the mayor replied, "but aside from social events, I had very little business with the gentleman. Perhaps you should try asking his household steward."

"I will. Thank you, my lord."

Sir Manford had lived at northeast edge of town. His two-story home overlooked the town commons - a large field where cattle were put out to graze. The back yard afforded a picturesque view of Mount Krenda. Although none of the knight's immediate family had arrived yet, the servants had already dutifully painted the beautiful knocker and the other brass fittings on the double front doors with flat black paint - the sign of a house in mourning.

Artur knocked on the door and was about to apologize for intruding when the doorman spoke first. "You will be Master Artur the Southlander."

"I suppose I will be," Artur replied dryly.

The doorman cracked a small, humorless smile that acknowledged that the adept had made what he evidently thought was a joke. "Follow me please, sir." He led them to a small waiting room just inside, beyond the atrium. "Master Holace of Es will be with you presently." Then he left closing the door behind him.

The room was richly appointed with expensive Nimbrian tapestries on the walls and a multi-colored, ornately designed Karkominian carpet on the floor. A large window facing southeast let sufficient light into the room even during the late afternoon hours, although servants had thoughtfully lighted a pair of exquisitely made, bronze oil lamps on either side of a large leather couch. A low table was situated in front of the couch with a fully equipped game board on it.

"What's this?" Gaenor asked, pointing at the game board.

"Stones," Artur replied. "It's a game they play a lot in the Cilben Empire. Sometimes it's called 'Maelstrom'."

"How is it played? Do you know how?"

"I've played a game or two in my time," he admitted. "The basics are quite simple. Each player starts out with twelve pieces, or stones that are placed at one of two opposite starting positions or homes. The object is to be the first to get all your stones through the spiral course - the Maelstrom - and into your opponent's home. The amount of spaces you may move is determined by the throw of two dice. Now you may move your stones in either direction, but you must move if you can."

"That's all?"

"One more rule," Artur replied. "If you land on a space where one of your opponent's stones is, it is sent back to home. However you may not land on any space on which two or more of your opponent's stones are resting."

"That's why you said 'you must move if you can'," Gaenor concluded. "It's possible to be blocked."

"Exactly."

"It seems pretty simple. What's the catch?"

"It is pretty simple. The only real catch is in the roll of the dice and what you do with what you get. Even so I've seen complete novices at the game take out experts, simply because they were rolling lucky that day."

"So it's all a matter of luck?" Gaenor asked.

"No. Usually skill and experience will win a game, but the element of luck makes it a popular, low-stakes gambling game. Here I'll show you. What color stones do you want? Red or gray?"

They were just finishing up when a tall, gray-haired man entered the room. "You know how to play Maelstrom," he noted dispassionately. "How unusual. You are Master Artur?"

"And this is Miss Gaenor of Narmouth," Artur introduced, "my assistant. I assume you are Master Holace?"

"That is correct, sir," Holace replied formally.

"You know I am conducting the investigation into Sir Manford's death?" Holace nodded. "Let's get started then. What was your relationship to the deceased?"

"I am his steward," Master Holace said with a slight tone of disapproval at Artur's use of the past tense. As far as Holace was concerned he was Sir Manford's steward and would remain so until there was either a new head of the household in residence or he found a new employer. "I am the chief servant of this household and direct the daily activities here. In my native Gostrina, I would be the butler, but here that title is reserved for the servant in charge of the wine cellars."

"All right. I assume you were close to Sir Manford."

"On a professional level only, sir. I realize that there are some servants who have been serving their masters for generations; however I came to this household but five years ago. Consequently, while it has been my job to keep track of Sir Manford's busy schedule, we were not close friends."

Artur nodded and plunged on. "Did Sir Manford have any enemies? Someone who wanted him dead?"

"Hardly, sir. Sir Manford was not the sort to dabble in palace politics. His business competitors might have preferred it if he had retired a few years ago, but I believe that all respected him. Do you really think someone set a curse on him?"

"I'm exploring all the possibilities, sir," Artur replied, side-stepping the question. "Just what was Sir Manford's business? I gather that he was more than just the owner of a warehouse."

"Indeed, sir," Holace replied. "Sir Manford was an importer of the finest foreign luxury items. This waiting room, in fact, is very representative of his business. There is not a single item in here that is of domestic origin from the Cilben game board you were just using to the high quality Barian tobacco in this mahogany-lined soapstone humidor from Sorvohn."

"I had suspected as much," Artur admitted, eyeing the tobacco. Smoking the occasional pipeful had once been a favorite pastime, but it had been many years since he had been able to enjoy tobacco of any sort. It was an exceedingly rare commodity in Mishanda, although it was quite common in the lands to the South.

"Sir." Holace picked up the box and politely held it for Artur.

"Thank you, Master Holace. Another time, perhaps," Artur responded regretfully. Without a pipe the tobacco would do him no good, and Sir Manford did not seem to have any of the disposable clay pipes a good host in Cilbe would have for use by his guests. "Had Sir Manford been importing this very long?"

"Only these past two years," Holace replied, "and only in small quantities. A few of the local gentlemen have taken up the habit, but it has not been Sir Manford's greatest business success."

Artur nodded then got back to the matter at hand. "Did Sir Manford keep any business records here in his home?"

"No, sir. Sir Manford was most adamant about keeping his business dealings separate from his social life. I advised him repeatedly to keep archival copies here, but he would not listen."

"Did he keep any sort of records here? A journal perhaps, or a diary?"

"Sir!" Holace seemed shocked. "I cannot allow you to read Sir Manford's personal journals. It simply would not be proper!"

"Master Holace," Artur retorted, "we are investigating a possible case of murder. There is nothing proper about that. If necessary I will ask the Lord Mayor to order you to turn them over to the constable at which time I will read them."

Holace thought about that for a moment. "You are right, of course. May I rely on your honor to keep

whatever you find within them a secret?"

"Except as pertains to this case," Artur replied, "of course."

"Very well. There is just one problem. Sir Manford kept his journals in his private vault and only he could open it."

"I might be able to help out there," Artur replied. "Is the locking mechanism magical or mechanical in nature?"

"Mechanical, sir. He had it made specially for him in Misha."

"That shouldn't be a problem then," Artur smiled, standing up and grabbing his leather bag. "Miss Gaenor, I'll need that humidor. Master Holace, please lead the way."

Holace conducted them to a small study that was part of the master bedroom suite. Unlike the rest of the house, Sir Manford's private suite had been kept simple. The furniture was utilitarian in design, although sturdy and well made with none of the ornate carving that was present in the furniture Artur and Gaenor had seen there so far.

"The vault," Holace told them, "is built into the right side of Sir Manford's desk."

"Thank you," Artur replied. He hoped it would be taken as a dismissal, but the steward remained in the room. Artur opened his bag and pulled out several tools of his trade; a short rod of ash wood, a bronze coin from the Cilben Empire, a small jar of oil, a clean cotton rag, and a piece of heavy vellum on which a multiplication table had been neatly calligraphed. He took another look at the vault and returned the coin to his bag and replaced it with a small ingot of steel.

Next he took the cigar box from Gaenor and placed it on the desk directly over the vault. On the box he put the vellum with the steel bar on top of both. Holding the ash wand in his left hand and dipping his right index finger into the oil, he recited a quick incantation. Then he rubbed a smear of oil around the edge of the steel bar and recited the incantation again. When he was finished he picked up the rag and wiped off his finger. Finally, he transferred the ash wand to his right hand and, without further incantation, used it to lift to the lid of the soapstone box.

As the lid of the box was lifted and the vellum and steel fell off, the tumblers of the vault's lock clicked into place and the door popped open, revealing several bound volumes inside. A quick inspection revealed that they contained the personal observations of the late Sir Manford for the last ten years of his life.

"Master Holace," Artur said, "it is getting late. I'll borrow these and read them this evening and return them in the morning."

"No, sir," Holace objected. "You may read them here, but I will not permit those books to leave this house. Protest to the mayor if you like, but you still won't be able to see them before tomorrow."

Artur briefly considered turning the man into a toad, but quickly decided that Holace had done that to himself long ago. "Very well," he said at last, returning the books to the safe. "I will return here shortly after breakfast on the morrow." And with that he shut the vault door, locking it securely.

Four

"Why did you lock the journals back up in the desk?" Gaenor asked as they drove back to the Lord Mayor's mansion.

"Safe keeping," Artur explained. "Master Holace seemed just a bit too worried about letting those journals out of the house and I wanted to make sure nothing happened to them before I could return."

"We could have stayed until you were finished."

"Girl, I don't have your youthful vigor. We traveled hard for a day and a half and then went right to work. Right now, I think I'd like a long hot bath and a tall, ice-cold tankard of ale."

"Ice-cold?" Gaenor asked. "I don't drink ale, but isn't it served at cellar temperature?"

"To each his own, girl. I prefer it much colder, even if I have to chill it myself."

"How do you do that?" Gaenor asked, hoping for a lesson in magic theory. She had been watching Artur work, but so far they hadn't been in a circumstance where she could ask questions.

"Pack ice around a mug or even around a full keg," he told her.

"Oh," she sighed.

"Something wrong?"

"I was hoping you did it by magic. Could you?"

"I suppose I could," Artur allowed, "but it's easier to buy a quantity from the ice house. They don't usually run out before early autumn."

"How would you do it by magic, though?"

"A magic spell has two basic parts; incantation and ritual. The incantation summons the power you intend to use and states the use to which you are going to put it. The ritual is the means by which you actually put it to use.

"Now, to make something cold involves the transfer of heat from the subject of the spell to something else. In this case I suppose it wouldn't do any harm to heat the surrounding air a few degrees."

"Why would you have to?"

"The energy has to go somewhere. Anyway, that's just the physical manifestation of the spell - the results - but you have to keep that in mind when you invent a spell. New spells can be very dangerous. There are times when you might accidentally release energy totally out of proportion with the wording of the incantation and the materials and gestures used in the ritual.

"The word for that is 'alloying'. Adepts borrowed the word from the ancient smiths. If you mix gold and silver together, you get electrum, which is harder than either gold or silver is together. Similar results occur in the manufacture of bronze, brass, and steel. In magic we sometimes stumble on new combinations of incantations and rituals that produce far stronger results than previous experience might indicate we can expect. It is for that reason that most adepts never attempt any spell that hasn't been thoroughly tested by someone else."

"What about you?"

"I make extra money selling new spells I invent. It's my greatest source of income."

"New spells and phony love potions," Gaenor laughed. "What a combination! So how would you invent a coldness spell?"

"The spell doesn't produce coldness," Artur corrected her, "it transfers heat from one place to another. You may call it a frigidation spell if you like since, although you could use the same process to heat something up. It would just be a matter of transferring the heat from the surrounding air to the object in question rather than the other way around." He paused to breathe and then continued, "We'll leave aside the considerations of the incantation for the moment."

"Why?"

"I do all mine in the Old Tongue. That isn't strictly necessary, but that's the way I learned it, and it sounds more impressive than chanting in Shandi. Incantations often sound quite insipid when taken out of context so I feel more comfortable if I use a language that very few others know."

"I can speak Gostri too, you know," Gaenor told him.

"You can? Very good, but the Old Tongue has almost nothing in common with Gostri or Shandi."

"Could you teach it to me?"

"I suppose I could," Artur nodded, "but I'm not sure what use you'll have for it. It's only spoken in two parts of the world; on Ichtar where no human is welcome and in the Parch where very few can survive. But we're getting off the subject. The incantation is the simplest part of the spell to invent, although some minor changes can be used to increase or diminish the potency of the end result."

"The real key to making the spell work is to match the ritual to the incantation. If you were to recite an incantation for a fire spell, while doing the ritual for a rain storm, you probably wouldn't get any results at all."

"That's a relief," Gaenor told him with a nervous laugh. "I'd hate to see it rain fire."

"That's possible too, but not with that combination. The incantation must clearly state what you intend to do and the ritual must relate to the stated intention. The danger comes from failing to accurately predict the results."

"How do you make the ritual match the incantation then?" Gaenor asked.

"Carefully. Let's take this frigidation spell. There are several ways to do any magic, but we have to find

one that will chill the ale down to below cellar temperature but won't freeze it solid. Given the nature of things, I believe that it would be best to use the law of sympathy and in some way enact the transfer of heat from the ale to something else."

"I still don't understand why you have to transfer the heat to something else?"

"Heat is a form of energy, child," Artur explained patiently. "Energy can neither be created nor destroyed, all you can do is change its form or move it somewhere else. The same is true about matter."

"Fire can destroy wood," Gaenor insisted, "or coal."

"No, it only changes the form of the matter from what we call wood into ashes and various other products of combustion. It also releases energy that was stored in the wood. Understand?" Gaenor was still confused, but she nodded anyway and Artur continued. "Okay. So we want to symbolize the transfer of heat. If we had some ice, we could pack it around a small container of ale and as the ice melted, drawing heat from the ale, the ale in our hypothetical cask would also become chilled."

"That sounds pretty easy," Gaenor admitted.

"Yes it is."

"But if you had the ice, you could just pack it around the ale barrel in the first place," she went on.

"Exactly," Artur smiled at the girl's practical logic.

"How would you do it without ice?"

Artur thought about that. "By reversal," he told her a minute later. "Instead of chilling the sample of ale, I would heat it up over a candle and then use some token to symbolize a reversal of the process."

"What sort of token?"

"A coin would work. Just turn it over from heads to tails. That should be enough to reverse the symbolism of warming the ale."

"Is that all there is to it?" Gaenor asked.

"Pretty much so, yes, although, you're very unusual. Many people I've met wouldn't have understood my explanation. It's not that it's all that hard to follow, but too many people have false preconceptions about how magic works."

"But you still need to be initiated in order to cast a spell," Gaenor concluded. "It isn't fair."

"It's the way it is."

The next morning Artur sent Gaenor to Nistor's civic offices to examine the tax and import records. "I need a list of everything they've had in that warehouse over the past year or so. You won't find a complete record, since items that stay within Mishanda aren't taxed, but we'll see." Artur, himself returned to Sir Manford's house.

The Lord Mayor's personal secretary supplied her with several sheets of paper to take notes on. It was

the first time Gaenor had encountered paper. It wasn't as durable as vellum, she noted, and was far too thin to be used more than once, but it was cheaper than either vellum or parchment, she was told, and thinner and more durable than wax tablets; ideal for taking notes on.

Gaenor lost track of the time until hunger pangs made her realize that it was well past lunch. She and Artur had been in so much of a hurry that she had forgotten to take the few bronze coins she had to her name with her so she could not go out and buy lunch at one of the nearby pubs. Deciding that it was too much bother to go back to the mayor's house, she settled for a cup of water and went back to work until she was finished three hours later.

"What did you find?" Artur asked her as she trudged tiredly into the small room that he had taken to using as an office.

"Sir Manford was a very busy businessman," she replied, dropping a small stack of paper on the table in front of Artur.

"Did you detect any patterns?"

"Without knowing what to look for? There were several commodities that he handled frequently; silk, tea, and a wide range of spices."

"See? You did detect a pattern. I think we can discount any of his regular items. Oh, that's interesting."

"What?"

"That Gostri merchant who's been buying my trinkets was evidently working for Sir Manford. Oh well, I never liked that part of the business anyway."

"He worked for Sir Manford?"

Artur shrugged. "Sometimes a businessman will hire an agent to represent him without revealing their connection."

"Why bother?"

Artur stifled a chuckle at Gaenor's naivité. "For any number of reasons; some of them are even legitimate. In this case, however, he stood for Sir Manford because it wouldn't be in Sir Manford's best interest to buy those items directly from me. Mishandan nobles aren't supposed to dabble in magic, it's considered bad form, even though his Majesty has been known to elevate certain adepts, and some younger sons of nobles have been known to study magic as well. I guess it's okay to be an adept as long as you don't actually hold a landed title when you start."

"That's stupid!" Gaenor told him flatly.

"Yes," Artur agreed. "I rather think so. I'm sure there must have been a rationale behind it at one point or another, but the reasoning escapes me. Let's see what else we can find in your notes. Miss Gaenor, please sit down, this is likely to take a couple hours or more. What's wrong, girl?" Gaenor had been fidgeting and was unsuccessful in covering her reluctance to sit down.

"It's just that I haven't eaten yet," she explained.

"Why not?" She explained. "Oh. Here," he handed her a few coins without bothering to count them. "Consider this an advance on your salary. In the meantime..." He reached behind him and pulled a silken bell rope. A maid entered a minute later. "Miss Gaenor," Artur explained, "would like something to eat. Would you bring us a light snack of some sort, say a small plate of bread and cheese and maybe a piece or two of fresh fruit?" He looked at Gaenor for confirmation. She nodded. "Oh, and something to drink for both of us, please."

"Right away, sir." The maid curtsied and left. A few minutes later, Gaenor was busily eating while trying to discuss her notes with the adept.

Artur had crossed out all the items that the records showed had been moved out of the warehouse, then he crossed out the commodities that Sir Manford dealt with on a regular basis. Those items that remained he wrote down on an additional sheet of paper.

"Paper's an amazing thing," he told Gaenor when he looked up a half hour later. "Just think. Until eighty or ninety years ago all we had to make permanent records on were parchment, vellum, and other sorts of cured animal tissues."

"Isn't there supposed to be some sort of plant they write on in the southlands?" Gaenor asked.

"Papyrus," Artur told her. "It's a sort of reed that they flatten out and stick together in sheets. It's where the idea for paper came from, so I'm told. Some anonymous genius living along the Nider Valley looked at papyrus and wondered if other plants could be used to make a writing surface. Eventually he tried a very fine cotton felt and discovered blotting paper."

"You can't write on blotting paper," Gaenor pointed out.

"No, you can't," Artur agreed, "so somehow he must have decided that he had to make the paper less absorbent. Very clever, he was."

"Why do you keep saying he? If we don't know who it was," Gaenor replied, "it might have been a woman."

"It might have been, yes, but probably wasn't," Artur answered. "Men, I have noticed, tend to be the inventors. They're always looking for a new toy to play with or a new way of doing things. Women on the other hand have far more patience so once the men invent something and grow bored with it, it's the women who continue to use and improve it. I suppose, however, there might be exceptions. It's a big world after all."

"Are you saying that women can't invent anything?"

"No, I'm saying that most women don't invent anything. The ability is there, but mostly women have more patience than men do and are not so easily distracted. It's the distraction, I think, that drives men to invent. If a chore becomes boring, an intelligent man's mind will wander and sometimes that leads to an insight from which a great invention is born. Other men are just tinkerers. They aren't satisfied with a device if they can't take it apart and rebuild it five times between each use. Women, in general, have the sounder attitude that if it's not broken, don't fix it. There are exceptions on both sides, of course."

Gaenor let the matter drop, although she wasn't convinced. She had always been the sort to ask why and to take things apart to see how they worked and was often so absorbed by these investigations that she didn't notice that others found these traits unusual.

"Here's what I've been looking for," Artur told her almost an hour later. "Sir Manford recently bought several kegs of sulfur."

"That accounts for the odd smell at the site of the warehouse," Gaenor concluded.

"Perhaps. But why so much sulfur?"

"Aren't there medicinal uses?" Gaenor asked.

"Some, but not many in its pure form, and there aren't enough adepts in Mishanda to use up that amount of sulphur in the next three years." He was silent for a few minutes and then suddenly chuckled. "I have the answer now."

"What is it?"

"Sir Manford's journal reports that he recently learned the secret of a Sorvohn temple mystery, an explosive powder that they use for special dramatic effects during certain religious festivals. I suppose we could announce it at dinner tonight, but I like to give value for the money I collect, and my bill to the Lord Mayor is going to be pretty steep. Tomorrow afternoon should be soon enough.

"Right now I'd like to pop down to the apothecary's and pick up a few items before dinner."

Artur and Gaenor worked diligently that night, carefully weighing and mixing the three basic ingredients - Sulfur, saltpeter, and charcoal - using the recipe most recently noted in the late Sir Manford's journal. Finally, they poured water into the finely ground mass and made a thick dough, which they shaped into several small pellets before retiring for the evening.

The black dough was still moist the next morning so Artur carefully placed them in a sunny window so they would dry by Noon and then they paid a brief visit to Lord Mayor Wullace's office to let him know that they would announce the results of their investigation that afternoon.

They spent the rest of the morning wandering around town, looking in various shops, walking through the beautiful public park and admiring the fall foliage. After lunch they returned to find that the little black pellets were dry.

While Gaenor patiently ground the pellets back into dust, Artur prepared a long piece of string by dipping it in a jar of dissolved saltpeter and then rolling it in some of the black powder. He let the string dry on the window sill, while he made a thick paper tube, and glued the bottom securely shut. Then, when everything was ready, he packed the remaining powder into the tube as tightly as he could, inserted the treated string in the end, and then closed off that end of the tube as well.

"We're ready," he told Gaenor confidently and together they walked to the public park where they agreed to meet the mayor, the town council, and any other interested parties.

"You're late," Wullace admonished them as they arrived. He was just tapping the ashes out of a long-stemmed pipe.

"My apologies, my lord," Artur replied, "but it took some time to prepare for this demonstration."

"What demonstration?"

"My lord, I see you smoke," Artur replied without answering the mayor's question

"Yes, I do. What does that have to do with anything?" Wullace demanded.

"Well, if you would honor me by using your tinder box to set fire to this string, I'll be most happy to show you."

The mayor snorted, but pulled out his tinderbox and did as Artur requested. The string suddenly caught fire and rapidly burned down toward the tightly packed cylinder, sputtering loudly and throwing off sparks. Artur waited until the fuse was barely an inch long and then hurled the cylinder away as hard as he could. The makeshift firecracker sailed through the air and then exploded with a satisfyingly loud bang just before it hit the ground a couple of dozen yards away.

The reaction from the assembled gentles was equally satisfying to Artur. Several threw themselves violently to the ground and started praying. At least half of them started screaming and two fainted dead away. The gentle breeze caused the smoke from the small explosion to drift toward them and several men, who had managed to keep their composure, started praying to be delivered from what they thought was the very breath of Tasan.

Artur waited patiently for the panic to die down before he began his explanation. "What you have just seen is a small demonstration of what I surmise happened in Sir Manford's warehouse last week. Sir Manford, as you know, was highly successful in the import/export business. I'm sure that over the years he has discovered many unusual things that are considered commonplace in other parts of the world. Certainly the way he has kept his home shows his wide range of interests and appreciation for quality foreign trade goods.

"Sir Manford, I also learned from his journals, was an amateur scientist. He loved to experiment and tinker with the devices and unusual substances that his business brought him into contact with, and most of that experimentation took place in the warehouse where he kept a laboratory. His journals speak of the various projects he had taken up over the years, including a compact engine he invented that was driven by the pressure built up by boiling water. That device might have been the crux of a technological revolution for us all had he been successful in its development.

"Perhaps he might have done so one day, but he turned to another project recently, when one of his agents managed to secure the key to the secret of an explosive substance used in Sorvohn during religious festivals. The substance was a mixture of three fairly common materials, one of which is the sulfur you smelled that so startled some of you a few minutes ago.

"The rest of it is fairly simple. Sir Manford learned the composition of the explosive, but not the actual recipe, so he experimented, gradually refining the substance to make it more efficient and powerful. I followed the formula in his next-to-last journal entry and produced the results you just saw.

"Gentlemen, it is clear to me, that Sir Manford mixed up a large amount of the black explosive powder and stored it in his laboratory in the warehouse. Then there was an accident. His final journal entry talks of returning to his work with the steam-driven engine. Possibly he was working on that engine when a stray spark from the fire in the boiler found its way to a nearby container of explosive, or maybe he was still working with the powder while smoking his pipe. Tobacco is still very rare in Mishanda, although I've noticed a fair number of smokers here in Nistor. No doubt being closer to the source..." Artur caught himself on a tangent and dragged himself back to the first subject. So, regardless how it happened, somehow there was a fire burning in close proximity to a large keg of the explosive. A moment later, well, I'm sure you've already worked that out for yourselves.

"As you can see, there was no magic involved in this tragedy, and therefore there was, thankfully, no curse. I'm sure we can all rest more comfortably now. Thank you for your time."

Wullace walked up to Artur as the others started leaving the park. "What was the formula for that explosive?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, my lord," Artur replied, "but that knowledge is the property of Sir Manford's estate. I had to promise on my honor not to reveal what I found in his journals."

"I see," the mayor replied. "When Sir Manford's children arrive I will have to talk to them. I think that perhaps we should destroy the pages from his journal that relate to this disaster. Such a substance is far too dangerous, don't you think?"

"I agree," Artur replied with a tight smile, "and I'll include that recommendation in my written report."

Gaenor was strangely silent for the rest of the day and spoke only when necessary until Nistor was well behind them the next day.

"Master Artur," she asked quietly, "was there truly no magic involved in that explosion?"

"What makes you think there was?" Artur asked in return.

"It's just that the explosive agent has always been used as a part of religious observances up until now. Wouldn't that suggest that perhaps the accident might have been caused by a displeased god? I mean, if the explosive was the god's own gift to his people, wouldn't he be upset if that gift was stolen and used by someone else?"

"The gods move in mysterious ways, Gaenor. I suppose that what you say is possible, but somehow I doubt it. It seems just a bit too direct. Besides, there are many people who openly engage in blasphemy almost everyday and if the gods don't feel it necessary to punish them directly, then why punish one man who happens to innocently make use of a natural property of an obscure mixture of substances?"

Gaenor nodded. What Artur said made sense on the intellectual level, but deep down she still wondered. Then she changed the subject. "You promised to teach me the Old Tongue," she told him. "Can we start now?"

"I suppose I could. Why?"

"Several reasons. First, it's something I don't know and my mom always says that there's no such thing as useless knowledge. Also, someday I want to be initiated as an adept and this will be an excellent training device in the meantime. Besides, just because I can't cast spells doesn't mean I can't invent them."

"Inventing a spell is more than just working up a reasonable incantation," Artur warned her. "There's the ritual to consider as well."

"You already told me that, and you'll have to teach me how to construct a ritual as well, but I've got to start somewhere."

"But what would you do with a spell you can't even cast yourself?"

"Give it to you, I guess, and by the time we find enough adepts to do the job properly, I'll be the best prepared initiate there ever was. Just wait and see!"

Artur never doubted it for a moment.

Part II Misha

One

"Strike up, you lusty gallants," Artur sang off-key as he worked, "with music and sound of drum. For I have seen a rover, upon the sea has come." He looked up toward Gaenor who was working patiently a few feet away. "Not bad hey? How about some harmony?"

"How about some melody?" she retorted lightly. Artur's inability to carry a tune was a long-standing joke between them. In the almost six years since she had come to work for the adept they had both changed.

Gaenor, in spite of the audaciousness she had needed to secure this job in the first place, had been very shy around the adept at first. Artur had a tendency to be a bit formal toward his female assistant, especially in public. However, as time passed Gaenor became more comfortable with Artur and found that she shared his easy sense of humor. Artur's formality had been a pose brought on by concern over how the townsfolk of Narmouth would view his arrangement with Gaenor. Much to his surprise, the consensus was overwhelmingly positive. Gaenor was obviously unusual, just short of the point of being odd, and they were relieved to see that she finally had found a place where she would be happy.

Artur and Gaenor found themselves verbally sparring lightly on a regular basis. It was a way of dealing with each other. Artur discovered that he enjoyed working with this young woman who could hold her own intelligently in any argument or mildly joking banter and Gaenor enjoyed being treated as an equal. Gradually, their mutual respect had evolved into an odd form of love to which neither of them would admit.

True to her word, Gaenor had learned everything Artur knew about the theory and practice of magic, and even though she still was unable to cast a spell, Artur had come to rely on her ability to design magic for specific applications.

"How is it going over there?" he asked a few minutes later. They were installing a new locking mechanism on the safe of a local bank. The bank had been closed for an hour now, but the owner and his two most trusted employees were waiting impatiently in the next room for Artur and Gaenor to finish so the lock could be magically fitted to them. The three men were used to leaving at two and a half hours past Noon and were now beginning to despair of making it to their favorite tavern before dinner. Neither Artur nor Gaenor had much sympathy for them.

"Just about finished. Don't you think we ought to add an audible alarm, so they'll know someone tried to open the vault without authorization?"

"It would be an excellent idea," Artur agreed with his beautiful assistant. The once clumsy, young girl had

gained the grace and confidence that comes with maturity and experience. "However," he continued, "Sir Thonas doesn't want anyone to know if there is an attempt to rob his bank. The customer is always right, I suppose."

"No he isn't," Gaenor disagreed, "but he is always the customer and we can't afford to turn down too many job offers. Here you go." She handed him a sheet of paper filled with arcane symbols about half of which were the phonetic transliteration of the Old Tongue and the other half were her own system of notation of magic ritual. Of all the things she had done to date, her spell notation had impressed Artur the most. She had found a way to quantitatively classify all magical tools and ingredients and then found symbols for them that, at a glance, would tell the reader what their properties were and how they reacted together. As far as he knew, nobody had ever done that before. The concept was revolutionary and he sent a copy of her system to the University at Misha. The Faculty of the School for Adepts had agreed instantly that Gaenor should be initiated into the craft whenever the opportunity next presented itself. Since then, however, Artur and Gaenor had been too busy to leave the Narmouth area and only once did they meet another adept. The ritual would just have to wait.

"Tricky," Artur commented, looking at the piece of paper.

"You knew it would be," Gaenor told him, "but you've done tougher stuff than this. It's that damned compulsion spell they want on the lock." When set, only the hand print of Sir Thonas or the combined prints of his two trustees would be able to open the vault. Anyone else who tried would be compelled to stay until the local constable could arrive to arrest him. "Frankly, a sleep spell would have been simpler and more effective."

"Maybe. This is the most powerful compulsion spell I've ever encountered though. It looks like it will almost make the victim actually want to stay and be caught."

"That was my intention. Otherwise any half-trained adept could stroll in and help himself."

"You countered that on the fifth line as well," Artur commented, "where you set the same trap on any magical attempt to open the safe. That's not too likely to happen, you know. There are very few adepts to begin with and plenty of work to go around, so there's not much need to turn to crime."

"It does happen though, doesn't it?" Gaenor countered, "and ever since I saw how easily you broke into Sir Manford's safe, I've had this twist in mind."

"It looks very good. Ah! Here's what I've been looking for. The backdoor to the spell."

"Of course, there is always the chance that something could happen to the men authorized to open the vault or Sir Thonas might want to promote somebody, or change the combination for that matter."

"The lock has no tumblers. How would he change the combination?"

"Use his left hand instead of his right," Gaenor shrugged.

"It's probably going to take me half an hour to cast this entire spell," Artur told her, "so I'd better get started. You may get Sir Thonas and his men now. I'll need them in a few minutes." He turned to the door of the safe, where he had just mounted the physical section of the new lock and began to read the incantation off the sheet of paper.

When he was finished, he turned to Sir Thonas and handed him the paper. "You'll want to keep this

under lock and key in another location," he told the banker. "It contains the instructions for modifying or removing the lock." Sir Thonas thanked him and promptly transferred Artur's and Gaenor's fee into their personal accounts. Business concluded, Artur and Gaenor walked out into the late afternoon sun.

"Dinner?" Artur asked.

"Are you suggesting that we eat out or asking what I plan to make when we get home?" She countered.

"My dear lady, you wound me."

"Don't 'dear lady' me, Master Artur. I know you too well."

Artur grinned. She did, indeed. "Well, what are you planning for dinner?"

"If we dine out, I plan on having a steak, very rare, a fine red wine, and a large garden salad," she told him calmly.

"And if we eat in?"

"Gruel."

Artur flinched at that and then remembered that Gaenor detested gruel only slightly less than he did and decided to call her bluff. "You wouldn't," he laughed.

"Try me," she challenged. He knew that expression on her face too well. She might have been bluffing before, but if he tried calling it now, he'd be eating bean and barley chowder by dusk. It didn't sound all that bad when he put it that way, but then he remembered that the taste was not entirely unlike the daily rations he had forced himself to endure many years earlier during his military career. In many ways his experiences of that time seemed to have been during a previous life, but some things are never forgotten.

"The Pig and Lion?" he suggested a nearby pub.

"Three Snakes and a Mongoose," she replied with the name of a slightly more refined establishment. Artur considered that for a moment. The Pig and Lion was cheaper, but Three Snakes and a Mongoose served better food. He nodded and they started off. They hadn't taken a dozen steps when a man came running breathlessly up to them.

"Master Artur, Miss Gaenor!" he panted. "His Excellency would like to see you."

Artur and Gaenor glanced at each other. The current lord mayor of Narmouth wasn't quite enough of a nuisance for them to consider him a pest, but his timing was, as ever, impeccably poor.

"What does Sir Briscard want now, Willar?" Artur asked the man, "and can it wait until after dinner?"

"A royal herald arrived just an hour ago. He may not be kept waiting. It's the law, you know that as well as I."

"Is it?" Artur asked Gaenor unnecessarily.

"I'm afraid so," she replied with a shrug.

"Let's go then. Maybe we can talk his Majesty's voice into buying us dinner."

"It's worth a try," Gaenor returned his grin.

Willar stared at the two of them in horror. "You would use this as an excuse to extort a free meal out of his Majesty's representative?"

Artur cocked his head to the side as if lost in thought. "Why yes," he replied. "Now that you mention it, I believe I would." Gaenor allowed herself a light giggle. "After all, the man is a herald to the royal court. It's about time he proved he was good for something," Artur concluded irreverently. Willar, a boot-licker by temperament and training, blanched at Artur's near heresy.

The Narmouth civic offices were in a two-story building just around the corner from the bank. It was the end of the workday for most of the people there and they were flowing out the front door as Artur and Gaenor followed Willar up the short flight of stone steps.

"Hi, Gae!" a young woman called out.

"Marlie!" Gaenor greeted her younger sister with an affectionate hug. "What are you doing here?"

"I work here," Marlie replied, smiling. "Joram needed an administrative assistant and I pointed out that I was qualified and it would give us more time together." Joram was Marlie's husband and the councillor in charge of public works.

"And he agreed?" Gaenor asked, surprised.

"No," Marlie replied, then dropped her voice to its lowest register in imitation of her husband's voice. "No wife of mine will ever have to work!"

"So what happened?"

"I told him that if that was the case he could hire a maid so I wouldn't have to work. He said we couldn't afford it and I told him that we could if I had a job. It took a while, but he finally agreed." She laughed.

"Where is he?" Gaenor asked. "Don't you work the same hours?"

"Usually, yes, but a royal herald showed up today and Lord Mayor Tollisan is busy showing off all his department heads. He should be along in a few minutes. What are you doing here, by the way?"

"A royal herald showed up today," Gaenor repeated dryly.

Marlie showed her surprise, then looked at Artur. "Master Artur," she nodded politely.

"Mistress Marlie," he returned the formal greeting. "Would you care to join us? We're going to trick the lord herald into buying us dinner," he added with a wink.

Marlie smiled with a wicked little sparkle in her eyes and Willar protested, "Master Artur! Really!"

"Perhaps another time," Marlie replied. "Joram and I are having company over tonight." She hugged her sister again and was off.

"If you are done wasting my time," Willar told Artur and Gaenor coolly, "perhaps we may proceed."

"Are you done wasting his time?" Artur asked Gaenor dryly, showing no sign of preparing to move on.

"Oh, I suppose so," Gaenor replied reluctantly. "How about you?"

"I think I'd like to drag my feet a little more first," Artur told her.

"Well, I never!" Willar sniffed, stomping on into the building.

"He lies," Artur confided. "Everyone treats him that way." Gaenor laughed and they finally entered the city hall.

"Trouble, do you think?" Gaenor asked as they headed for the mayor's office.

"I doubt it," Artur replied. "You heard your sister. Tollisan's probably just showing us off to the visiting dignitary."

Sir Briscard Tollisan, kept his mayoral office on the second floor in the southwest corner of the building. He had expanded the windows on both outside walls to afford himself an excellent view of the harbor area that was the heart of his city. He especially enjoyed watching the sun set over the hills to the west of town across the Nar. He also filled in those enlarged windows with expensive clear glass panes. Most of the other offices in the buildings had panes of light yellow oil cloth and heavy shutters on their windows.

The furnishings in the office matched the extravagance of the glass windows. The desk was made of carved walnut and the heavy wooden chairs were upholstered with fine-grained leather.

Artur and Gaenor entered the office through the open door just in time to see Willar trying to explain why it had taken so long to find them and why they would not accompany him. A third man, tall, about twenty-five years of age with dark brown hair, and wearing a formal green tabard emblazoned with a golden yellow hawk within the outline of a diamond of the same color, was standing to one side with a wry expression on his face. The mayor, too, was showing little patience with his aide. He looked up as Artur and Gaenor entered and silently pointed them out to the hapless Willar.

Willar immediately stopped trying to explain and ran to the door in front of the adept and his assistant and announced, "I have the honor of presenting Master Artur the Southlander, Wizard of Narmouth." When he seemed to stop there, Gaenor poked him in the ribs. Willar grunted his pain and continued, after giving her a nasty glare, "and Miss Gaenor of Narmouth, his assistant."

"Thank you for coming so promptly," the lord mayor said enthusiastically, coming forward to shake their hands. "Master, Miss. This is Chasur Falso, Torse Herald to the Court of His Royal Majesty Pawlen III. You may go now, Willar," Sir Briscard added pointedly while the others were exchanging polite greetings.

"So, Chasur Falso," Artur asked politely, "what brings a herald of the court to sleepy, little Narmouth?"

"You do, sir," the colorfully clad herald replied.

"Pardon?"

"Well, I thought we'd engage in a bit of small talk, but let's take care of business first." He took a deep

breath and formally announced, "His Royal Majesty, Pawlen III summons his most loyal subject, Master Artur of Narmouth, the Adept, to stand before him in the Royal court at Misha!"

"What was that you once told me about not hobnobbing with the nobility?" Gaenor asked Artur in the silence that followed Chasur's announcement.

"I said it wouldn't happen very often," Artur reminded her. "Once every five or six years is not what I would call frequent. Master Chasur, is there any particular reason the king wants to take a look at me or is he just generally curious about adepts?"

"Master Artur, do you recall a young man whose horse broke its leg near your home last autumn?" Chasur asked him.

"Mahk of Palernos I believe he called himself," Artur confirmed.

"Lord Mahk Kallan, heir to the County of Palernos to be exact," Chasur informed the adept.

"Funny, he didn't act like the average lordling. He even had a sense of humor, or he did once I healed the horse's leg and Gaenor put a warm meal in his belly."

"He was better educated than most," Gaenor reminded Artur. "You said so yourself at the time."

"So I did," Artur agreed. "What's that got to do with his Majesty?"

"Lord Mahk has been rather lavish in his praises of you, sir, especially since you didn't charge him for your services."

"That was because I felt partially to blame," Artur admitted. "I'd been meaning to fill in the pothole his horse stepped in. It was on my land just in front of my house so it was technically my responsibility."

"Regardless, he has been mentioning you to every noble between here and the capitol. Word of your generosity eventually reached the ears of the king. Naturally his Majesty wants to reward such a notable adept."

"He couldn't just send a bank draft?"

"That isn't the way of kings, Master Artur," Chasur replied with a smile.

"So I've noticed," Artur commented dryly. "Please give the king my apologies, but I won't be able to break away from my busy schedule for the foreseeable future."

"Master Artur," Sir Briscard protested, "this is a royal summons! You can't refuse a royal summons. That's treason."

"Besides," Gaenor told him, "we really don't have anything on our schedule that can't be put off and this is my chance to get to the University for my initiation."

"Who said you're going?" Artur countered. "Travel is expensive enough for one. I can't really afford this trip for myself, never mind for two of us. I doubt the king is in the habit of paying the expenses of those he summons." Gaenor's enthusiasm was crushed.

"I will pay all expenses," the mayor told them magnanimously.

"You will?" Artur asked incredulously.

"Of course," Tollisan assured him. "It's wonderful that our town wizard has gained the attention of the king and it would be my honor to pay your way to the court."

"What about me?" Gaenor asked hopefully.

"You too, Miss Gaenor," the mayor assured her. "What town our size has two resident adepts? I'll consider it an investment well-made."

"Well, there go all my excuses," Artur sighed. "I suppose we should go hire some horses and then start packing. I suppose we're expected to leave in the morning?"

"If it's at all convenient," Chasur replied.

"Actually it's not convenient at all," Artur grumbled, "but nothing good will come from stalling. If this trip is inevitable, I suppose we should start at first light."

"Master Artur," Lord Mayor Tollisan told him. "I said I would pay your expenses and I shall. I insist, however, on also providing you with a pair of horses from my private stable. You will be representing Narmouth at the Court, so only the very best will do. I will send a man out to your home this evening with your mounts and the money to pay your way."

"Thank you, mayor," Artur replied with as much sincerity as he could muster. "My lord herald, may I offer you the hospitality of my humble cottage for the night."

"I would be honored, sir," Chasur replied.

"Good. It will speed up our departure in the morning too. We're on the road out of town, you see. By the way, have you had dinner yet?"

"No, not yet."

"Miss Gaenor and I were on our way to one of the local pubs when we got summoned here. Why don't you join us?"

"I'd be delighted, sir."

"Call me Artur," the adept told the herald. "We're going to be traveling companions and the sirs will get a bit monotonous after a while."

"My pleasure, Artur. Call me Chas." They shook hands again.

"Shall we, Gae?" he held out his arm to his assistant.

"Of course," she replied sweetly. "It's about time we got something to eat," she added under her breath."

"Been on the road long, Chas?" Artur asked lightly as they left the office.

"A fortnight," Chas replied. "The roads are in fairly good condition, considering the season and all."

"By the time we get to Misha you'll have been traveling for over a month," Gaenor commented. "That's a long time to be away from home."

"I've enjoyed it so far," Chas admitted. "A day away from the politics of the Court is a day well spent in my book." While they walked, Artur wondered idly whether he'd be able to stick Chas and his royal expense account with their tab that evening.

Two

Chasur Felso woke up a half-hour past dawn to the aroma of fresh-baked muffins. He tried to stretch, but the couch he had been sleeping on wasn't quite long enough to afford his long frame that particular luxury. Sitting up, he became all too aware of the dozen assorted aches he had collected overnight. Funny, he thought about his erstwhile bed, it seemed comfortable enough when I went to sleep.

Some soft noises followed the aroma of the muffins from the kitchen. Curious, Chas slipped into his clothes and went to see who was up. Not surprisingly, it was Gaenor who was quietly putting breakfast together.

"Good morning," Chas said softly. As soft as that greeting was, it still startled her and she did a half jump with a white-knuckle grip on a large frying pan she had just taken out of one of the cupboards.

Gaenor caught her breath and turned to the herald. "Good morning yourself, Master Chasur," she replied.

"Chas," he corrected her. "Sorry if I frightened you."

"You didn't frighten me," she retorted a little too quickly. "Do you always go sneaking up on defenseless women?"

"Defenseless?" Chas laughed. "Hardly. I'd rather wrestle a mad lion for a scrap of meat than get into a fair fight with a woman."

"Chivalry!" Gaenor sniffed.

"Whatever," Chas shrugged. "It's still a potent weapon. Besides, I lied. There is no such thing as a fair fight with a woman, not from a man's point of view. Just look at the Amazon Legion of Baria; even the Cilben Empire hesitates to take them on."

"You're making that up," Gaenor accused.

"Not at all. They really exist. I met the Barian ambassador once a few years ago. Now, may I help you in some way."

"You know how to cook bacon and eggs, highborn?"

Chas ignored the slight. "I have managed to prepare my own breakfast from time to time," he admitted with a disarming smile. "One of the little necessary survival traits for being a herald. In spite of the fancy tabard, I've slept on the ground more often than I can count in the last few years."

"I thought heralds stayed mostly around the Court," Gaenor told him as he started heating the frying pan.

"Many do, but I am the Torse Herald. That job entails a lot of running around with official messages and summons and that sort of thing. In theory I have three pursuivants working under me, but his Majesty's business keeps all four of us hopping, especially during the summer months. I usually only have a day or two in Misha to sort through the paperwork that builds up in my absence and to leave instructions for my pursuivants. Winter, of course, is for catching up."

"Looks like we're starting this trip with a heavy breakfast," Artur commented from the doorway.

"Do you have any idea of how much perishable food we have?" Gaenor countered.

"About three days worth," Artur told her accurately. "Are you cooking all of it up?"

"Everything that won't keep. The chicken and the roast beef should be done in an hour. I've already packed the bread and some pieces of cheese."

"What's with the muffins?" Artur inquired, spying the two tin trays she had just placed on cooling racks. "The flour would have kept in the pantry."

"I felt like it," Gaenor responded.

While they were talking, Chas found a wide copper bowl and began scrambling the eggs in it. "If you care to join in," he told Artur, "I could use someone to chop those mushrooms and one onion. Miss Gaenor, did you say you had some cheese? It should go nicely with the eggs."

"I'll get you some," she replied, slightly puzzled. She rushed out the back door.

"Making an omelet?" Artur asked interestedly.

"Right," Chas admitted. "It's a simple little recipe I've picked up in my travels."

"It will be a new experience for Gaenor, I think. In Narmouth eggs are normally served straight up whether boiled or fried. Where did you learn about omelets?"

"In the Thimdra States. I travel a lot in my job. Foreign foods are one of the few pluses. I'm just glad I wasn't appointed to the Lymphad office. As Torse Herald I'm responsible for the delivery of royal messages within Mishanda and her nearby neighbors. Lymphad travels with legations all over the world."

"You don't like traveling?" Gaenor asked from the doorway. "Here's your cheese," she said putting a large chunk down on the counter where Chas and Artur were working.

"Thank you," Chas replied. "I like to travel well enough, but every so often it's nice just to stay home for a while. I didn't get much chance to rest this winter. It's been a busy time and I've been out on business almost as much as during the summer. Still it's not a bad job and my time is mostly my own when I'm on the road as long as I get the king's word through."

After breakfast Gaenor packed up the leftover muffins and put them in one of the saddle bags while they waited for the chicken and the beef to finish cooking. Chasur took care of feeding and watering the horses.

Artur spent the time in the barn workshop making sure the vials, bottles and packets in his travel case of magical supplies were full. He checked the tools for signs of damage or wear. Most everything was in order, but since he still had some room in the bag, he tossed in a few well-marked items relating to his most recent researches. Finally satisfied, he lashed the heavy leather bag on to his saddle.

The golden sun was high in the light blue sky when they finally closed up the house and barn. Artur paused to cast two quick spells before mounting up.

"What's he doing?" Chas asked Gaenor while they waited.

"Protecting our home," she replied. "He does this whenever we leave for extended periods. It's just a mild aversion spell, causing anyone who doesn't belong here to leave."

"How long will it last?"

"Until one or both of us returns. That's part of the spell. It will automatically disarm on our return."

"That's rather impressive," Chas admitted.

"Thank you," Gaenor replied warmly. "I've always thought it was one of my more elegant spells."

"You developed this spell? How?"

"Anyone can learn magic theory, Master Chasur," Gaenor told him seriously. "And if you can learn how magic works you can learn how to construct a spell. I'll admit that unless one is an adept, it isn't particularly useful knowledge, but I do intend to be initiated at the University while we're in Misha." Chas nodded, remembering that she and Artur had said something about that the previous evening at dinner.

"Ready?" Artur asked when he had finished. Chas and Gaenor both nodded. "Let's go then."

"I don't recall ever making the trip directly to Misha overland, Chas," Artur commented. "How long will this take us?"

"Depending on the weather, which is always uncertain this time of year," Chas replied thoughtfully, "I'd say anything from ten days to a fortnight."

"That long?" Gaenor asked.

"Maybe longer," Chas told her, "If the weather turns really rotten we could be stuck for days somewhere. We could have gone faster by water, but since Narmouth is primarily a fishing port, there's no telling when the next ship with passenger space might come in."

"I've never been more than three days away from home," she said more to herself than to the two men she was traveling with.

"Three days, two weeks, two years," Artur told her, "It's all the same. Either you're home or you aren't. That's where the difference lies, quality not quantity."

Gaenor looked back over her shoulder. "It seems strange that we won't be back for at least a month. That's a very long time."

"Could be a lot worse," Chas told her. "I often go two months or more without coming within twenty leagues of home."

Artur was silent for a while as they rode. He was far too busy trying to figure out how long it had been for him.

Three

Artur was first to wake two days later. He crawled out of the small lean-to in the cool light of false dawn. The sky was a nearly uniform gray except for the pink glow on the eastern horizon. He walked over to the hastily laid fireplace and noted with some disgust that the ashes from last night's fire hadn't been banked.

We're getting too dependent on magic, he thought to himself repeatedly as he put some more wood into the shallow pit. He built a small nest of dry grass and put some of the charred remains of the fire inside. After a few minutes of trying to start the fire manually with flint and steel, he tossed the nest away and added the more familiar incantation as he brought his steel striker forcefully together with the piece of flint. The wood in the fire pit simultaneously burst into flame.

As the fire started to burn down to a bed of hot coals suitable for cooking, Artur watched the brightening sky, deeply disturbed by the dominant shades of red that under-lit the heavy, black clouds approaching the horizon. The sun, a blindingly brilliant ruby, barely had a chance to peak out over the Mishandan countryside before the clouds seemed to slap it back down again.

"Nice cooking fire." Gaenor's voice startled him out of his study of the sky.

"I thought so," he replied, nodding his head in acknowledgement of her complement. "I thought it might be nice to have a hot breakfast this morning."

"Good idea," she replied sweetly before dropping the other shoe. "Of course you have a way to cook the food we brought without utensils. All we have is the tin tea-pot."

"I'd forgotten about that," he admitted. "I guess I'll just make the tea. Cold beef and muffins again to go with it?"

"We could spit the meat on green branches," she pointed out. "We'll need to pick up some more supplies today, though. We only have enough for breakfast."

"We'll be going through Omath this morning. We can buy what we need then. Good morning, Chas," he greeted the herald. "You slept later than usual this morning."

"It happens," he shrugged, then looked around and took a deep breath of air. "Smells like rain," he told them.

"I agree," Artur told him. "I saw the most gorgeous red sunset this morning."

"You mean a sunrise," Chas corrected him.

"Well, I prefer to take a more optimistic view. If I watched a sunrise then we're in for a storm, probably by mid-morning I'd say."

"Maybe we should skip breakfast and get as far as we can," Chas suggested. Artur looked at him sourly.

Gaenor laughed when she saw Chas flinch. "You don't know our adept very well," she commented dryly. "I guarantee you we aren't going anywhere until he's had his first cup of tea."

Chas looked at Artur again and remembered every story he had ever heard concerning people foolish enough to cross adepts. Chas had never been particularly fond of fairy tales and did not particularly care to become one. Instead, he changed the subject. "So, what's for breakfast?"

They ate quickly, repacked their horses and were soon back on the road. Artur kept a watchful eye on the sky, which made Gaenor nervous. In response she kept trying to pick up the speed of their travel.

"It's better for the horses if we keep an even pace," Chas told her for the third time. Gaenor glared at him, but he didn't take the hint. "We can ride them hard for a day or two, but then we would only have to stop and let them rest anyway. In the long run we wouldn't make any better time."

"So you've already said," she snapped at him and then immediately regretted her harsh tone. Embarrassed by her outburst, she didn't know what to say, so she said nothing to Chas and instead turned to Artur. "Just what are you looking for anyway?" she was still using harsh tones, but at least now she was turning them on the object of her irritation.

"Rain, lightning, hailstones," Artur replied lightly, ignoring her anger, "the usual."

"Why?"

"Weather's always been a hobby of mine, you know that."

"I ought to," she retorted. "I've been writing in your weather journal more often than you have."

"Weather journal, Artur?" Chas asked.

"Yes, I've been keeping a record of all the weather we have had in the last ten years in Narmouth, at least while I've been at home."

"What ever for?"

"If we can learn enough about the causes and effects of weather systems, we'll be able to predict approaching storms, droughts, and other natural disasters."

"You can do the same thing with less effort through divination, can't you?"

"That's true," Artur replied, "but such spells are complex and expensive to cast, and the average person

doesn't have a local adept at his beck and call to forecast the weather for him. I have been looking into non-magical means to predict the weather. Gaenor and I have noted the temperature, humidity, wind speed and direction, and changes in pressure."

"What kind of pressure?"

"Air pressure. I've noted that pressure tends to become less during stormy weather and higher during fair weather. Changes in pressure often occur before changes in weather."

"How do you measure that?"

"I made a large oval-shaped bottle with a long spout curving sharply upward from the bottom. Then I filled the bottle up with colored water and hung it up on one wall of my workshop. The height of the water rises and falls with fluctuations in air pressure."

"It's not particularly accurate though," Gaenor put in.

"She's right," Artur admitted. "My storm glass is capable of showing large changes in pressure, but minor changes are difficult to measure."

"I've told you what to do," Gaenor reminded him.

"You have," Artur agreed, "but I estimate that a straight glass tube like you suggest would have to be at least two rods long, maybe longer. She is right, though," he told Chas. "A straight tube would be easier to calibrate and to measure changes in, but I have yet to find a glassblower who can make such a tube, nor do I believe I could transport it safely back home. For that matter, I'd have to cut a hole into the loft of my barn in order to mount it."

"Does it have to use water?" Chas asked.

"It has to be liquid," Artur replied. "Considering that it is being used to predict the weather, water seems singularly appropriate. Why?"

"I was wondering if another liquid might be better suited to such a device. Alcohol maybe."

"Alcohol is too volatile. It evaporates too quickly and would be a fire risk as well. Besides, any alternative fluid would need to be denser, heavier if you'd prefer, than water or there would be no benefit."

"What about quicksilver?" Gaenor suggested. "It evaporates far slower than water and it's a lot heavier too. You wouldn't need as long a tube."

"Maybe," Artur considered. "Quicksilver is very expensive, though, and hard to come by. On the other hand, the tube wouldn't have to be nearly so long, maybe one tenth the length needed for water. I'll look into it while we're in Misha. Somebody there must know where we could find that much quicksilver in a single place."

The dark clouds, which had been sharply defined, suddenly grew lighter and less distinct.

"You'll want to put your cloaks on now," Artur told Gaenor and Chas, reaching into a saddle bag for his own.

Gaenor did likewise, but Chas looked puzzled. "Why? It seems warm enough."

"Yes, but it's about to start raining," Artur told him, "very hard."

Chas was about to ask how Artur knew that, but the sudden deluge drowned that thought and replaced it with several all related to his own personal relative humidity. "This is getting pretty nasty," he shouted to Artur over the roar of the rain coupled with a distant rumble of thunder.

"It'll probably get a lot worse," Artur shouted back. "I expect the wind to start picking up very soon and we may well be in for hail and a tornado before this is over."

"Are you certain?" Chas asked, worriedly looking upward. "Mishanda doesn't have all that many tornados, not like they do in Gostrina."

"That's true, but this is fairly severe weather, and if there's lightning then there's at least the possibility of tornadic winds. It might be best if we pick up as much speed as we dare until we reach Omath."

"And then what?" Chas asked.

"We'll hole up until the storm passes. We might as well find a friendly inn where we can dry off, unless you want to camp out in this."

"No, thank you," Chas replied firmly. "Right now I'd like a warm fire and a cool ale."

"Good man," Artur laughed. "Let's ride. If we push we ought to find that inn in an hour or less."

Four

They were all quite soggy by the time they reached the inn. Omath was a village in the middle of the rich farmland that so typified southeastern Mishanda. The small town, only a little more than a pair of crossed roads, grew up where it did because the local farmers needed a place to buy supplies and sell their crops and, sometime in the past, an enterprising man chose to establish a general store at that location. Little by little other merchants set up shop there until the village became a small but self-sufficient community.

There was only one inn in Omath, and because it stood one day's ride from Merahk's Landing it prospered especially during the warmer months when traveling merchants and carters filled the roads of the kingdom. Omath's prosperity could be seen in the slate roofs on all its buildings. Most rural buildings still used thatch, a far more economical material, even in regions where adequate slate was available.

The inn was situated on the south edge of the village where farmers' fields began to dominate the landscape. They rode across a half-submerged ford over a wide stream and headed up-slope to the inn and Omath Village.

"Will we be staying the night, or moving on as soon as the skies clear?" Chas asked as they neared the inn.

"The storm was slow approaching," Artur replied. "It will probably be equally slow to leave. We'll be here for the day at least."

"Then we'll go directly to the inn's stables and take care of the horses first." Artur nodded and Chas led the way to a large, rough building behind the inn's main hall.

"Welcome back, me lord herald!" the older of two stable hands recognized Chas. "Just passin' through this time or are ye stayin' the night?"

"We're here as long as it rains, Thom," Chas replied, "and 'til morning at least. Please take care of the beasts."

"O' course, Master Chasur," Thom replied with a clumsy, unschooled attempt at a bow. "Ye all just go on inside now and young Tip here will bring yer bags in to yer rooms." Chasur nodded his thanks.

"You stop here often?" Artur asked the herald as they walked to the main hall.

"Three or four times a year. Old Thom remembers me 'cause I'm a herald. For him that's a remarkable thing, I suppose. Even more remarkable because I've taken the time to talk to him beyond simply giving him orders on occasion."

"It's a rare courtier that takes the time to talk to a commoner," Gaenor commented as they entered the main hall.

"Nobles aren't a particularly interesting bunch," Chas replied casually. "They've seen very little of the world beyond their own political circles. Most commoners haven't seen much of the world either, I'll admit, but they've seen sides of the world I didn't grow up in."

"Master Chas!" the innkeeper, a well-built man with a few hints of steel-gray in his otherwise black hair, called out from across the room. "Back so soon?"

"Old Thom's not the only one who remembers you here," Artur commented dryly. Chas chuckled his reply.

"This must be my day for playing host to the College of Arms," the innkeeper continued, pointing at a table in the far corner.

"Really?" Chas asked. "Oh I see. Sir Winniam!" Chas walked swiftly over to greet his fellow herald, leaving Artur and Gaenor with the innkeeper.

"Widlow of Omath at your service, gentles," the man introduced himself, "and welcome to my inn. Are you with Master Chas?" Artur introduced himself and Gaenor, then attempted to hire three rooms for the party. "Oh I'm sorry, Master Artur, I have but one room left - the storm, don't you know - so few of last night's guest left this morning and many of them have already returned. It's my biggest room, however. I can put in some additional cots and place a screen up to afford Miss Gaenor some small amount of privacy."

"That will be fine, Master Widlow," Artur told him politely. "Could you bring us a pot of hot tea and let us know when the room is ready?"

"Of course, sir." Artur and Gaenor thanked him and went to join Chas.

"Does Master Widlow seem odd to you?" Gaenor asked Artur.

"In what way?"

"Well, he sort of looks like an old army man, and he speaks very well. Not at all like other innkeepers I've met."

"He does speak better than you did when we first met," Artur admitted, "although you too were relatively well-educated, considering how much of that was self-taught. He may have been an officer at one time or another, or maybe he was the second son of a second son of a country squire. That might have afforded him a good education but little in the way of inheritance. Well, Chas," he asked when they reached the far table, "are you going to introduce us?"

Chas looked momentarily embarrassed at his breach of etiquette, and the other man spoke up first. "Sir Winniam Mates, Lymphad Herald," he introduced himself in a clear baritone that could fill the room even in conversational tones. Artur introduced himself and his assistant once more. "Oh, you're that Master Artur," Sir Winniam replied. Winniam was a large man with a belly to match. His hair was silver around the temples and nearly missing altogether on top. "If your ears have been itching lately, it's only because the young lord of Palernos has been constantly buzzing your name about the court. Please join us," he said eyeing the puddles that were still forming beneath them. "The fire is warm and the ale is cool."

"I fear it's a bit early in the day for ale, Sir Winniam," Gaenor demurred. "The sun's not yet over the mountain top."

"Nonsense, girl!" he replied with mock gruffness. "The sun's always over the mountain top somewhere. It's not going to be seen around here today, however, that's for certain, and call me Win. We're not among those useless toadies that infest the court, right, Chas?"

"Do all heralds have this irreverent attitude toward the nobility?" Gaenor asked in spite of herself, but Win merely laughed.

"Not at all," Chas told her, "but it is fairly common among the dozen or so of us whose job entails going out and seeing the world."

"Travel is broadening, don't you know," Win added, patting his own paunch. "It gives you a perspective on the world you wouldn't ordinarily see. But in Chas' case it's a part of his heritage, it runs in the family you might say. Right, nephew?" Chas nodded ambiguously.

"So, uncle," he asked, "are you coming or going at the moment?"

"Going, thank the gods!" Win replied fervently. "Misha is no place for a rational man at the moment."

"Is it ever?" Chas asked pointedly.

"Some times are worse than others," Win replied. "The Cilbens have finally deigned to recognize us, may Tasan feast on their eyes."

"I never knew you had a grudge against the Cilben Empire, uncle."

"Neither did I until those arrogant bastards arrived. You'd think Mishanda personally belonged to each

of them. They have absolutely no regard for the law. Well, why should they? They have ambassadorial immunity and they're doing their best to get their money's worth out of that. Most of them just roam through the city like a gang of thugs.

"Oh, they're polite enough in court," Win continued, "a bit condescending and patronizing. You'd think we were some wayward child of theirs, but let them go out in public and it's a whole other story. They bully the merchants and when the constables come to arrest them, well, you know how that goes. A group of merchants tried to hire a company of mercenaries to patrol the streets, but the King's Guard had to break that up; illegal, even if it was an excellent idea."

"I'm surprised King Pawlen puts up with it," Chas commented.

"He doesn't see most of it. And whenever he does get upset, Lord Morres steps right in to smooth things over."

"The seneschal? Why would he want to cover up for the Cilbens?" Chas asked. Win made a gesture universally understood to mean the subject in question was on the take. "So what else is new?"

"Marnoric II of Firdan died last week," Win replied with no particular emphasis.

"I'm not surprised," Chas remarked. "How old was he?"

"Ninety-eight. Out-lived both his sons and they didn't die young either. His great-grandson stands to inherit the crown, poor fellow."

"Why do you say that?" Gaenor asked.

"He's only twenty-six, in the prime of life. It's a shame to waste that time of life by having to be king, but he's the only choice. The old king's sons had only daughters and women can't rule in Firdan - not officially - so the succession skips down to the eldest male in the direct line. The boy's all right, though. I've met him a few times. Has a good head on his shoulders."

"Excuse me, sirs and miss," the innkeeper told them politely. "Your room is ready."

"Gae, why don't you get changed first," Artur suggested.

She nodded and rose from the table, asking the innkeeper, "Would it be possible to have a hot bath prepared?"

"Haven't you gotten wet enough for one day?" Widlow countered with a puzzled expression on his face. Gaenor said something in reply, but by then she was too far away from the table to be heard.

"Who did the Cilbens send as ambassador, Win?" Artur asked, filling the pause in the conversation that followed Gaenor's departure.

"A weasel-faced snake who calls himself Sinius Girdecus Ralba," Win informed him.

"Girdecus? Tall, thin as a rail, with flaming red hair?" Artur asked, leaning forward across the rough wooden table top, "and a thin white scar across his left cheek?"

"You know him?"

"Years ago," Artur replied.

"Well his hair isn't very red anymore and he's put on a little weight, but the rest of the description holds. Where'd you meet old Girdecus?" Win sounded extremely interested.

Artur took a sip of his tea to cover the hesitation he felt at answering the question. The tea was a bitter brew that was not to his taste at all and he considered moving on to the same ale that Win was drinking. "I've been around," he finally replied evasively.

Win raised his eyebrows. "Nice try," he said dryly, grinning, "but I'm sure you can side-step me less obviously than that." Artur returned Win's grin and called for a round of drinks. Win continued to grin, but shook his head slightly. "That's better," he drawled, "but I don't bribe that easily."

"You're a tough man, Win," Artur observed. Winniam just continued to grin. "All right. Like I said, I've been around. Last time I ran into Girdecus, some of his men chased me out of Wahton.

"Out of Wahton?" Win asked. "What's outside of Wahton? The Minue and the Parch."

"I eventually made my way north to the Thimdra States," Artur admitted.

"Something about that sounds familiar," Sir Winniam commented thoughtfully. "No, that was too long ago. If that one were still alive he'd be at least sixty and you don't look a day over thirty. The stretch between Wahton and the Thimdras is pretty heavily patrolled by the Ninth Legion," he pointed out. "How'd you get past them?"

The rain outside, which had slacked off to an annoying dribble, suddenly picked up again with a vengeance. Large drops plummeted out of the rolling black clouds to hammer on the roof of the inn. Conversation came to a halt for several minutes until the din abated once more.

"Well?" Win pressed Artur for an answer.

"You don't give up, do you?" Artur countered. "How'd they ever let you into the diplomatic corps?"

"It was an accident of birth," Win told him confidentially. "I was born rich. Your turn."

"Me too. Anyway, that was sometime ago and the Ninth Legion wasn't on duty there at the time. I forget which legion was, but they didn't patrol quite so enthusiastically."

"Who would?" Winniam agreed. "Cilbe has managed to populate her Ninth Legion completely with fanatics. They'd conquer the Parch if their general so ordered. What they'd do with it when they had it, mind you, is another thing."

"Actually," Artur disagreed, "I doubt they could conquer the Parch. I doubt any conventional army could. Have you ever been there?"

"I've seen it," Win told him.

"Have you ever stepped across the boundary and actually stood in the Parch?" Artur pressed.

"No," the old herald admitted. "Closest I've been was a dozen rods away. How about you, Chas?"

You've been mighty quiet since Art and I started talking."

"Hmm? Oh, just thinking. It seems odd that here we are in some of the heaviest rain I've seen, and we're discussing a desert." Both older men exchanged glances and then turned back to Chas. "No, I've never been within fifty leagues of the place. I'm not quite the world traveler you are, uncle. Torse doesn't go as far afield as Lymphad. So where are you headed now?"

"Tindi," Win replied sourly. "I hate the Tinds. They're almost as bad in their religious fanaticism as the Cilbens are in their arrogance, but his Majesty wants more ivory, and they've got a beast down there that grows a new set of tusks every year. They're only three feet long at best, but that's big enough for most uses."

"Is that why Tindi ivory isn't as valuable as Barian?" Chas asked.

"That's one reason," Winniam told him. "Another is the distance. Baria might be closer than Tindi, but the Parch is in the way, so the best way to transport it is by sea, but the voyage to Baria is half again as long as that to Tindi. There's ivory in Nider, Maxforn and Drombra too, but it's not of the same high quality as the Tindi or Barian product. Softer, discolors too quickly, and the Niderian ivory is too small and has a tendency to curl up when it gets wet."

"When did you learn so much about ivory, Uncle?"

"A week ago, before I left Misha. Lord Fawltur rammed a whole library full of otherwise useless knowledge down my throat in preparation. I don't care if he is the Minister of Commerce. If he wants that ivory so bad he should go to Tindi himself. I told him that."

"That must have been exciting," Chas commented with a scarcely hidden grin. "What was his reaction?"

Sir Winniam raised his voice until it was a high squeak in imitation of the Minister of Commerce, "On your horse, Lymphad! Really," Win dropped his voice back to its normal register, "you would think they'd at least send me by ship and cut the time in half."

"I think you brought it on yourself this time, uncle. You should have known better than hit Lord Faulty with something as devastating as the truth."

"I never liked the bastard anyway," Win griped. "Come to think about it, there aren't a whole lot of people that I have to deal with professionally that I do like. That's sad. It must be the politics, because I seem to like most of the people I meet in my travels."

"That's also why you didn't accept the promotion to Mishanda King of Arms two years back," Chas pointed out.

"Too right! Sure, the job pays better, but I'd be stuck in Misha for the rest of my life. I'm sure I haven't been bad enough to merit that sort of punishment. How about another drink?" he suggested. "This round's on me."

"I'm still working on my last one, uncle."

"How about you, Artur. Up for one more?"

Artur looked out the half shuttered window. The rain appeared to have settled in for the day at least. It

was no longer coming down hard enough to impede conversation, but the unceasing stream from the skies was showing no signs of abatement. Worse, the wind was starting to pick up. Artur began to think they would be here longer than merely overnight.

"Why not?" Artur shrugged. "I ought to find the outhouse first, though."

When he returned a few minutes later, Gaenor had returned to the table and Chas had left presumably to change into dry clothing as well. Gaenor was wearing her spare everyday outfit. It consisted of a brown skirt of simple lines and a light green blouse with a leaf-dagged collar. Her long, dark brown curls were still damp and she wore them loose while they dried. Around her neck she wore a string of amber beads Artur had bought for her last birthday.

Sir Winniam studied the young woman appreciatively. She returned his stare with a no-nonsense attitude that caused him to avert his eyes and mumble a string of unintelligible syllables that might have been an apology.

"Where did you go?" Win asked Artur when he returned. "You're leaving a trail of water behind you again."

"The outhouse," Artur replied, wondering just how much ale Sir Winniam had been guzzling this morning. "Remember?"

"Oh ho! You used the one out by the stables. No wonder you're all wet. Next time follow the covered walkway that goes to the left when you leave by the back door. At least you won't get soaked."

Five

Master Chasur Felso opened the shuttered window next to the corner table. It was still raining outside on the second day after he arrived at the inn with Artur and Gaenor. The roof overhung the outside wall so the window could be left open except when the wind was strong. The wind had roared and howled that first afternoon, but sometime that night the energy drained out of the storm, the winds had died down, and all that was left was the constant drumming of raindrops on the roof. The downpour would become lighter for an hour or two and then, just as everyone thought the storm was coming to an end, large, heavy drops would fall thunderously on the slate-tiled roof of the inn.

Outside the window, Chas could see the road that ran through the small village. Water filled the furrows in the field across the road where the young grain, barely a foot tall, struggled to find the sunlight that had been denied them for the past few days. To the south he saw that the stream they had forded just a few days earlier was now uncrossable except by boat. The water level had risen about fifteen feet and halfway up the slope to the inn. And there was still no end of the rain in sight. Chas let a deep breath escape slowly between his lips as he observed the waterscape.

"Why so great a sigh, Master Chas?" Gaenor asked from the other side of the table. She was sitting serenely near the large fireplace, writing something in one of her notebooks.

There were only a few others in the room that soon after dawn. Most were servants, cleaning up the main hall and preparing breakfast. As the storm had dragged on, many guests had taken to staying up late

and drinking at night, and then trying to sleep their hangovers off the next morning.

Chas turned from the window and faced Gaenor across the table. "Boredom," he told her simply. "I am a man of action and have trouble just sitting still and waiting."

"You really should take up a hobby; something you can do in those spare moments while on the road. It will help you build up a healthy amount of patience or at least the semblance of it. Knitting, perhaps?"

"Knitting?" he replied indignantly.

"Embroidery then."

"Embroidery? Do you propose that I sit around like an old woman pushing a needle through a piece of cloth in order to form pretty flowers out of thread?"

"Then I suppose you'll eventually do like Artur and your uncle and take up competitive drinking during these quiet times." Chas gave her a sour look and then turned back to the window.

There had been no traffic on the road since the first day of the storm. Travelers that spring were taking refuge where they could and waiting. Chas paused to thank his household gods that he, at least, had been able to reach the comfortable inn in Omath. Had the storm struck a day earlier, they would have been caught out in the open, requesting shelter in some farmer's barn and working for their meals.

Gaenor took pity on Chas, put down the quill she was writing with, and asked, "Would you care for a game of Stones while waiting for breakfast?" The Cilben game had gained an instant following at the inn around Noon the previous day when Artur and Win discovered that they both knew the game. They hastily scratched out a board with a nodule of chalk on a spare roofing slate while a score of bored merchants watched on interestedly. Within the hour, half a dozen such game boards had been manufactured. It was a novelty to most of the people in the inn and it helped to pass the time.

"No thanks," Chas sighed, continuing to study the weather.

One of the serving maids that Gaenor had befriended since her arrival came to the table with a large pot of tea and a pair of cups. "Thank you, Sarie," Gaenor said warmly. Then she nodded at Chas, who hadn't noticed the tea yet. "Is breakfast far off?"

"Just a few minutes, Miss Gaenor," Sarie replied. "Oh! I nearly forgot. Mistress Marbora would like to consult you about seasoning the dinner roast after breakfast. She hopes you'll have a new recipe or two for her." Gaenor and innkeeper's wife had been swapping recipes. Cooking in Mishanda varied drastically from one village to the next so Gaenor's ordinary Narmouth fare was new and exotic in Omath, while it was the novelty of the food Mistress Marbora served that led Gaenor to the kitchen to request the first of several exchanged recipes.

"Of course," Gaenor smiled. Sarie returned the smile before hurrying back to the kitchen. "Tea, Chas?" Gaenor asked, already pouring for him.

"Hmm? All right. Why doesn't this rain stop? We have places to go and important things to do!"

"I'll explain that to Pleusa," the Mishandan goddess of weather, "next time I get the chance," Gaenor told him calmly. "I'm sure she'll be more than willing to change what ever plans she has for the next few weeks to accommodate you."

Chas narrowed his eyes. "That's blasphemy," he accused flatly.

"It's sarcasm," Gaenor countered, secretly wondering just when she had picked up Artur's irreverent habits. "I wouldn't worry much about the gods' feelings. They're a forgiving lot for the most part and don't involve themselves with us all that often. It's your fellow humans you ought to keep in mind. We're not quite so divine."

"I was being childish," Chas admitted apologetically. "Would you like me to pour for you?"

Gaenor looked down at her full cup and politely shook her head, only partially subduing the smile that threatened to break out across her face. Breakfast arrived, as promised, a few minutes later, personally delivered by the landlord's wife. Chas couldn't remember that happening in all his visits to the inn.

"Good morning, Miss Gaenor, Master Chasur," she greeted them warmly. Then her conversation involved Gaenor only, asking whether she had prepared one of the items on the plate just right. Chas noted that having an early breakfast with Master Artur's assistant had several benefits, one of which was the additional variety and portions on his plate. Now that he thought about it, it had been like that since dinner on their first day here. Chas thought he was well liked here, but it was a respect that he had gained after many visits. Gaenor, on the other hand, had seemed to step directly into the hearts of the entire staff.

"You make friends easily," Chas told her after breakfast.

"I do?" Gaenor seemed genuinely puzzled. "I never noticed. It wasn't like that at home. The only other girls who would talk to me were my sisters and I think I tended to make the boys feel uncomfortable around me, especially after I apprenticed to Artur."

Chas thought about that and was about to comment when Sir Winniam stumbled down to the table with Artur, in considerably better spirits, close behind.

"Oh!" Win moaned, letting himself down into the chair. "I think I had too much to drink last night."

"You finally noticed?" Gaenor chided him. "You know I do believe I mentioned something along those lines just last night, but then my memory might be a bit faulty. After all I haven't been 'augmenting my creative juices', I think you put it, the way you have, have I?"

"Please, Gae. It's too early," he begged, "and if I'd wanted that sort of conversation I'd have brought my wife along." Gaenor managed to look apologetic.

"You really are going to take pity on him aren't you, girl?" Artur asked. Gaenor slipped her open notebook to him and signaled a waiting serving maid. Artur's eyes widened and a smile grew across his face. "Thank you, Gae. I knew you wouldn't be so thoughtless."

"Try to moderate your drinking in the future," she told Win gently but firmly. Artur, however, was already busy preparing the hangover cure spell Gaenor had given him. Sarie brought a half-pint glass of ale and placed it on the table in front of the adept.

"I don't believe I've ever seen a spell that uses ale as the only ingredient," Artur commented as he worked. "In fact, I've never encountered one that uses it at all. Are you sure this won't just make it worse?"

"Trust me," she told him sweetly.

He looked at her closely for a moment or two. "You know how I hate it when you say that."

"You do it all the time."

"That's different." He studied the spell again and then looked his assistant straight in the eye, wondering just how angry she was at his previous night's behavior. Then he shrugged and recited the incantation as he picked up the glass of ale and gave it to Win who took a sip. The pain subsided but did not go completely away.

"Finish the glass," she told him.

The pain drained out of him as he drained the glass. "That's much better," Win proclaimed at last, "but won't the ale I drank just get me started again?"

"Next time don't drink the ale," she smirked, "just spill it. The spell works as you empty the glass. How you do it is your concern."

"Terrific," Win grumbled. Then he noticed that Chas was staring out the window again. "Any signs of change, Chas?"

"None," the herald replied sourly.

"Cheer up," Artur told him. "The sun should be out by Noon."

"How can you tell?"

"The wind direction has changed. That means the heart of the storm has passed now. All this," the adept waved at the water outside, "is just the tail end. The roads should be passable tomorrow morning."

"Good!" Chas replied, still staring out the window for a glimpse of the promised sun.

Six

Artur's predictions proved accurate and, after a hearty breakfast the next morning, they bid farewell to Sir Winniam and the innkeeper. Gaenor held Chas and Artur up with her farewells in the kitchen, but she left that room with a large bundle of foodstuffs for their lunch along with long-keeping travel rations just in case the road should prove less passable than they hoped.

The air was cool and dry in the wake of the storm, but the sun quickly warmed the land as the trio continued on their way. They could hear the creak of wagon wheels behind them for the first hour as they road away from Omath. Looking behind her, Gaenor saw the merchants who had been staying at the inn, but the horses that she, Artur and Chas rode were faster and less encumbered than those that pulled the wagons, so they soon had the road once more to themselves.

The roads in Mishanda had been well made and, while constructed of packed earth and clay, drainage

had been taken into consideration. They were not just wide tracks worn into the landscape by generations of travelers as was said of the roads in those rude lands to the south of the Parch. With the warm sun overhead the road had dried by noon time and there were only a few places where the storm had washed out patches of the road. The merchants, in their wagons, might have difficulty traversing those sections, but for the party, entirely on horseback, these places were minor inconveniences.

"Notice something odd?" Artur asked his companions an hour or two after Noon.

"Not particularly," Chas replied. "It's a comfortably warm day and the air has the same freshness it usually does after a storm."

"We haven't met anyone coming the other way since we left Omath," Gaenor noted in the next breath.

"Exactly," Artur agreed. "Chas, that isn't particularly normal at this time of year, is it?"

"No, it isn't." Chas frowned. "It could be that the storm hit harder to the north and they're still cleaning up."

"There are more shattered and fallen trees here than there were in Omath," Gaenor added.

"I noticed that as well," Artur told them. "Merahk's Landing, where we plan to board the ferry across the Finder River, is fairly close to the water as I remember."

"I hope you're wrong," Chas said with a shudder, suddenly seeing where the adept was heading. "Merahk's Landing has a population of five thousand or more."

"Oh, I doubt the whole town was swept into the sea," Artur replied. "It wasn't that sort of storm and it's far enough down stream that flash flooding is unlikely to be a problem. The Finder is an estuary at that point."

"A what?" Chas asked.

"Estuary. It's where a river meets the ocean. The water is brackish at Merahk's and subject to tides as well as the river flow. But as for what sort of damage to expect, well, we'll just have to see when we get there."

The sun was just setting, flooding the Finder Valley with golden light as they crested the hill above Merahk's Landing. Many roofs had some of their black slate tiles missing and one building, Gaenor noted, was missing its roof altogether. They rode into the heart of town where the normally clean streets were still littered with tons of wind-blown debris. Clean-up crews, who were just quitting for the day, had managed to clear the main streets so carts could transport the rubble away.

Artur, Gaenor, and Chasur rode quietly through the town, unable to face the stares of the haggard-looking people who watched them pass.

"There are two inns a bit further on," Chas told them, "and another along the river front. I usually stay at that last one, but judging from the level of the river, I'm not certain it's still there."

"Why don't we go and see?" Artur suggested. "We'll be able to check on the ferry as well from there."

The Riverside Inn was not actually on the banks of the Finder, but instead on top of the embankment,

some thirty feet above the normal high tide mark. Now, however, the river was almost lapping at the foundation of the sturdy, little inn.

The Riverside was much smaller than the inn in Omath. The main hall was about the same size, but there were fewer guest rooms and stables. This inn, Chasur explained, dealt mainly with the river traffic. Most land-bound travelers stayed at one of the other two.

"There ought to be a dock right about there," Chas pointed at a spot on the swollen river, "but it looks like it might have been washed away."

"The pylons are probably still in place," Artur speculated.

"If the other inns cater more to land traffic, why do you usually stop here?" Gaenor asked.

"Variety mostly," Chas shrugged. "The third or fourth time I passed through here the other two inns were full up, so I had to stay here. The river men who stay at this inn have different stories to tell than merchants. I've been stopping here ever since."

The landlord didn't know Chas by name, but recognized him as one of his semi-regulars.

"Welcome back, sir," the innkeeper, a short, fat man with the annoying habit of speaking of his establishment in the plural, greeted Chas unenthusiastically as they led the horses into the small yard. "I fear our hospitality is not up to our usual standards. So much storm damage, you understand."

"I understand. Do you have rooms available for us?" Chas asked.

"Aye, sir. We have two rooms left. I hope that will be adequate?"

"It'll suffice," Artur commented.

They saw to their horses and carried their bags to the rooms before adjourning to the main hall. The floor of the hall was wet and muddy from all the foot traffic since the rain had begun. However Gaenor noticed that the corners were still fairly clean; a testimony to the fact that it was cleaned regularly when storms and floods were not threatening.

"Just getting into town, mates?" a stout, grizzle-bearded man asked them. He was wearing a red and white striped tunic and a pair of dark, tight-fitting trousers. Together with his tarred, rope-soled shoes, this garb marked him as a river man. He introduced himself simply as Benger.

"Just coming in from down south," Chas admitted.

"Didn't think you came in from the north, mate. Ferry's out. Probably be weeks before she's running again."

"How did that happen?"

"Old Patch, the ferryman lashed his boat up firmly to the dock when the storm broke," Benger replied. "If he's lucky she's still down there, but e'en when the river goes down again she'll be filled to the scuppers with mud and debris. Just glad I didn't own a boat. Bad enough the Starlight - that's the boat I worked on - is on her way down to the sea."

"Maybe not," Artur told him. "The way the wind was blowing, I would say there's a fair chance she'll be found along the south shore of the bay."

"You really think so?" Bengier asked hopefully. "She's salvage now - free to the finder. Not that I want to be a boat owner, mind, but I could sell her back to Captain Wellin and have a little nest egg for me family to live on."

Artur was about to assure the river man of the likelihood of such a case, if not of the Starlight, then any one of the other boats that must have been swept down the river, when there was a commotion just outside the front door of the inn.

Artur and Chas ran to the door with Gaenor and Bengier right behind. The man causing the disturbance was thin and had a ruddy complexion. He held a broken tree branch in his hands and swung it fiercely at anyone who dared to come near him. All the while he was shouting deliriously about being surrounded by demons. Two men and a woman lay on the ground at his feet. One man was obviously dead, having suffered a blow to the head from the crazed man's club. The other two were still alive but unable to move without attracting their attacker's attention.

The man with the club managed to hold everyone off with his wild swings that spun him around repeatedly. After a few more minutes, however, dizziness and exhaustion took their toll and he collapsed to the ground.

"Always said Mok was a little strange," one man in the crowd commented, "but I never expected him to go crazy like this."

Artur examined the two surviving victims of Mok's madness. The woman was badly bruised and frightened, but seemed otherwise all right. The man, however, had suffered a broken collarbone and Artur was certain that one of his legs was broken as well.

"Is there a physician in town?" Artur asked the people around him.

"There's a healer just up the street, sir," the innkeeper replied.

"Better get him. I'm no expert, but I think these two will live." The innkeeper gave some orders to one of the men.

"Artur," Gaenor said from where she was kneeling by Mok's side, "this man is very sick. His forehead feels like it's on fire."

"I was afraid of that," Artur told her. "Illness this soon after the storm. It doesn't bode well. Master Innkeeper, was there a lot of food spoiled by the storm?"

"Aye, sir. There was. The rain came down so hard that water got into some of the driest cellars. A lot of animals drowned as well and we haven't been able to properly take care of them either."

"That might be it then," Artur replied. "No! Don't move them. Wait until your healer arrives and stay away from Mok. He may not be contagious, but I wouldn't want to take the chance."

The healer, a brown-haired woman about thirty-five years old, showed up a few minutes later and directed everyone in sight to help her. Artur's prognosis about Mok's victims was correct. The woman, still badly shaken was allowed to go on her way after a cup of medicinal tea to calm her nerves and ease

the pain. The man, however, had to be carried home on a stretcher after the healer set his bones.

"I'm not sure what to do about Mok," she admitted privately to Artur and Gaenor in the barn where her patients had been brought for treatment. "I don't know the disease."

"I understand that there has been a lot of food spoilage here," Artur told her. "Is it possible that this is some form of food poisoning?"

"I suppose," the healer shrugged, "but it's a form I've never encountered. We can only hope it isn't something contagious." Mok groaned then. They turned to see him try to sit up. Suddenly he stiffened with pain and then collapsed back into the makeshift bed they had laid him in. "He's dead," the healer reported a minute later. "We'd better wash up carefully just in case."

"I have a general health spell that may help us as well," Artur volunteered.

"Spell?" the healer asked, confused.

"Master Artur is an adept," Gaenor supplied.

The healer nodded distantly. "I've never had much faith in magic, not as medicine anyway."

"You have good cause," Artur agreed. "We don't really know much about how diseases attack the body and without specific knowledge, medicinal magic is hit or miss at best, but the spell I have in mind has always proved effective in the past. To tell the truth, I'm not too sure how it works myself, but I learned it from someone who knows far more about medicine than I ever will."

After they had cleaned up, Artur got his black leather bag and cast his health spell on himself, Gaenor and the healer, the three who had been in closest contact with the sick man.

"It may not do any good and it may not have been necessary," Artur said when he was finished, "but it won't have done any harm."

"Will you be here in town for a few days?" the healer asked.

"I hadn't thought about it," Artur replied. "We're due in Misha and I suppose that with the damage to the ferry, we'll have to ride up stream until we can ford the river."

"I'd like you to stay for at least three days," the healer told both Artur and Gaenor. "We obviously have grave need of an adept just now and if your spell was not effective, you won't want to get caught miles away from help."

"A good point," Artur admitted. "We'll stick around."

Chas wanted to move on, but saw the wisdom and compassion of staying. Merahk's Landing did not have an elected mayor but it did have a town council, and the next morning Artur and Gaenor went to find the Council chairman, a Master Vond, by name, to see where their talents were needed most.

"Our biggest problem," Vond told them, "is the food spoilage. Most of the cellars in town were flooded during the storm and many of them haven't drained out even now. There are a lot of desperate people in town and without a safe way to store food, they're taking too many foolish chances."

"Master Vond, if I can supply you with a safe storage place, can you bring fresh supplies in for your people?"

"There are plenty of farmers with large, dry cellars in the area," Vond replied. "We can always buy more food, but without safe storage we'll run out well before the next harvest. What do you have in mind, Master Artur?"

"Frigidation spells are fairly simple to cast, but the preparations may take a day or two. I will need a large room and it needs to be air-tight or nearly so."

"How large a room?"

"You tell me. How much space will you need and do you have such a space available?"

Vond wanted a very large room indeed, but after discussing it a while he agreed that only those items that were immediately perishable needed to be stored. The rest of the day was spent looking for a suitable space.

"I'm afraid," Artur concluded several hours later, "that we're going to have to do this the hard way. None of the places you've shown us, Master Vond, are adequate to our needs without extensive work."

"What do we have to do?" Vond asked hesitantly.

"Pick the site of your choice. You might as well choose the one with the best location. Then call in as many carpenters as you can get hold of and have them plug up all the leaks. It'll probably be easier to just cover the whole space with barn board and caulk the gaps between board. Have them board-over any windows and caulk them as well. After that they can start on the door."

"We have only one carpenter in town, but he has two apprentices. Do you want them to go to work right away or can they start in the morning?"

"Can you get them to work all night?" Artur sounded surprised.

"Dack owes me a few favors," Vond replied. "If I ask him to work at night, he will."

Dack and his apprentices worked fast and had the walls and windows finished by breakfast time. "The work isn't pretty," he admitted to Artur, "but I guarantee that there are no leaks. Did you want it painted?"

"That won't be necessary," Artur told him. "I realize you've been here all night, but when will the door be ready?"

"Any time now, sir. When Vond told me how important this was I asked my father to work on the door. He taught me everything I know about carpentry, but when it comes to precision building he still surpasses anything I can do."

"He's building an entirely new door?"

"And a new frame to go with it. We looked into changing this one, but it's really quite hopeless. My father has a design that he based on the door of the local bank vault."

"That sounds like a lot of work," Gaenor commented. She had been standing by, quietly double-checking the necessary modifications to Artur's refrigeration spell.

"Not really, miss," Dack replied. "We have several doors back at the shop. He planned to attach two of them together. I sent my boys to get the new doorframe. We should have it all installed by noon."

"Thank you, Master Dack, we'll be back then." Artur and Gaenor walked back outside where men continued to load fallen trees and other debris onto carts.

Seven

"There was a lot of damage," Gaenor said sadly as they walked back toward the Riverside Inn. "I'm surprised we found any place suitable for a cooling chamber. You know, I think I could reduce the resulting temperature on this spell so that it would be well below freezing."

"We don't know for certain what the people will be storing here. I suppose it will be mostly meats and dairy products, but who knows what they'll decide needs keeping. We'd better keep it just above freezing. How long will the spell last?"

"Until the next full moon," Gaenor replied, "about three weeks."

"Master Artur!" they heard Chas call from up the street. "Mistress Ellor wants to see you." Chas continued when he caught up to them.

"Who?"

"The healer," Gaenor supplied. "You never did have a head for names. Now that I come to think about it, you read most of your spells off the crib sheets I give you."

"Why clutter up my memory with a library full of spells I may only use once," Artur replied as they headed for the healer's cottage.

"You've been getting mighty dependant on my inventions lately. You once told me that you invented your own spells. When was the last time you did that?"

"About two years ago when you spent a week helping your older sister with her new daughter," he replied thoughtfully.

"Oh? You never told me about that. What sort of spell was it?"

"Nothing important. I couldn't find my tinder box and got the idea that I could gently warm my breakfast up - tea, cakes, and all - with a single spell."

"Oh," Gaenor nodded. "what a minute! Was that why you had the counters redone and why I had to make a new set of curtains for the kitchen windows?"

"The spell was a little more powerful than I expected," Artur admitted sheepishly. "I never thought that

the combination of powdered charcoal and iron filings would be so potent."

"Artur!" Gaenor gasped. "You're lucky to be alive. Iron is a fire intensifier and powdering the ingredients only amplifies the power released. You told me that yourself."

"When?" Artur prompted his assistant.

Gaenor thought back. "About two years ago?" she guessed. Artur nodded.

Mistress Ellor looked as though she hadn't slept at all in the past two days. "That's not far from the truth," she admitted when Gaenor said as much.

"More fever?" Artur asked.

"Nothing as virulent as the case the other day," Ellor admitted, "but enough to keep me running. I can handle that, however, but there's a rumor going about that the town is under a curse."

"Nonsense!" Artur and Gaenor scoffed in unison. "Why is it," Gaenor went on, "that every time something goes wrong, people start crying 'curse'?"

"It wasn't the people who started it this time," Ellor told her.

"Who then? The Vieri?" Gaenor laughed. The Vieri were a race of magical beings that supposedly lived in the Parch. Most scholars agreed that they were purely mythical in nature and Gaenor had never heard any educated person claim that the Vieri were real.

Mistress Ellor smiled tiredly at Gaenor's joke. "I meant," Ellor replied, clarifying herself, "that the one who started all this talk of curses was the town priest of Nua." Nua was the principal deity of Mishanda - the king of the Mishandan pantheon.

"Perhaps I should have a talk with this priest," Artur commented sternly.

"I'd appreciate it," Ellor replied. "Things are hard enough without the clergy making folks believe they're suffering the wrath of the gods. It tends to make them give up except for some heavy praying. I can't treat patients who won't let me."

"Prayer does a lot for the soul," Gaenor allowed, "but I haven't heard of many instances when it cured the body."

"Not by itself, but you have the crux of my problem. We have some very sick people and the illness can be contained through proper treatment. We may have a plague here if we aren't careful." Artur and Gaenor promised to do what they could before leaving to find the priest.

A larger settlement might have had several small temples, each one dedicated to one of the patron gods of the town. Merahk's Landing, however, had to make do with a single temple which housed each god's altar side by side in a single large chapel. There were three clerics in residence; the priest of Nua and two priestesses of the town's chief patron goddess, Rannor.

"I'm unacquainted with the cult of Rannor," Gaenor told the older of the two priestesses as she and Artur sat in a comfortable room waiting for the priest to join them. "Is there a religious reason for there being two priestesses in residence?"

"Goodness, no!" the priestess replied. "We serve the goddess for thirty-five years and my term of service will be up next year, so I am training the younger Rannora."

"We're both called Rannora," the younger priestess told them. "We give up our worldly names when we take our vows."

"Doesn't that get confusing?" Gaenor asked.

"Not especially," the elder Rannora replied. "Most of our congregation calls me 'Mother'."

"While they just call me 'Rannora'," the younger one finished. "It's really only confusing for my husband."

"Husband?"

"Yes. Rannor doesn't require celibacy of her priestesses. I found my calling after marriage and dear Dornur keeps slipping and calling me by my worldly name." She smiled at the thought.

"Holy Priestesses," Artur changed the subject, "do you have any idea why Father Tolf is telling the people that they are cursed?"

Both Rannoras looked puzzled, but an answer came from the doorway. "Nua, himself has revealed it to me," a tall muscular man with jet black hair and beard told them in ringing tones. The two Rannoras had a serene, almost saintly manner, but Father Tolf was a dynamic force that coursed through whatever room he entered. Artur estimated his age to be somewhere in his late twenties; young for a priest, but Merahk's Landing was a small town. This was probably the first parish he had been assigned to. His performance here would determine the rest of his career.

"Father Tolf, I presume," Artur said dryly, rising to greet the priest.

"And you are the adept from Narmouth," Tolf replied with certainty.

"That's correct." Artur introduced himself and Gaenor, then got down to the business of the supposed curse. Gaenor opened a small notebook and started writing.

"You may doubt it if you wish, but I know what my god told me is true," Tolf insisted.

"And did he tell you what to do about it?"

"Well, not as such," Told admitted reluctantly.

"Father Tolf," Gaenor tried in reasonable tones, "exactly what was the nature of this revelation?"

Tolf's eyes softened a bit at the memory. "It came while I was performing the morning observances the day the storm broke. I generally conduct the morning services with the Rannoras. We rarely have a congregation, of course. The townsfolk are religious, but even the gods admit that gainful employment has to come first. That morning, however, the chapel was about half full. Adversity makes us all a little more religious and the storm idled much of the town.

"Most of the observances usually consist of placing the appropriate offerings to the various gods. I'm dedicated to Nua so it wouldn't be proper to pray to another god, likewise with the Rannoras, but when

there are others present we help them pray to their personal patrons. We attend to the personal gods first and then pray to Rannor and, then finish by asking for Nua's blessing.

"It took longer than usual that morning because most of the gods had followers among those present, and as I passed from one altar to the next I became increasingly light-headed. I was more than a little worried that I might be coming down with a fever. I was very sick for a couple weeks last winter so every little sneeze worries me now, but I figured I could hold on until services were over.

"When I knelt before the altar of Nua it was all I could do to concentrate on the usual prayers. Then, just as I finished, a bright golden light burst forth from the ceiling." Artur looked up involuntarily, then remembered they weren't in the chapel with its high-domed ceiling. "Its golden rays enveloped me and in that instant I knew that our hardships were due to a great curse."

"Nobody else saw the light," Mother Rannora added. "To the rest of us, Father Tolf appeared to stand motionless for several minutes."

"Nua in his inexplicable way," Tolf explained, "saw fit to reveal his message to me alone. After the light faded, my head cleared and I was normal once more."

Artur nodded while checking to see if Gaenor had written that down in her notes. "And what was the nature of the curse?" Artur asked the young priest.

"What?" Father Tolf appeared startled at the question.

"Did Holy Nua explain why the people of Merahk's Landing were cursed? Have they displeased the god in some way? Or is the curse from some outside source?"

"I don't know," Tolf replied, shaking his head perplexedly. "Until now it never occurred to me to even ask those questions, and they're good questions. I don't think it is merely the people of Merahk's Landing who are under the curse, however. At least that's the impression I get now that you force me to think about it. The curse is more general than that."

"Does it affect all Mishanda?" Artur asked.

"Yes, and more. I think it may effect the whole world, but I'm not sure." Tolf paused as though receiving another divine message. "No," he said a moment later. "That's all there is."

"So the nature of the revelation is that Nua has told you that Mishanda and possibly many others are under some form of curse, but He did not explain the nature of the curse nor how it might be mitigated or even avoided."

Tolf considered that. "Correct," he admitted at last.

"Then this is probably something that should be brought to the attention of your superiors," Artur suggested.

"I don't know," Tolf replied hesitantly.

"What's the problem?"

"Nua gave the message to me. If he wanted my superiors to know why didn't he tell them directly?"

"Who are we to know the minds of the gods?" Rannora countered. Tolf was too full of doubt to debate the issue.

"Perhaps a divination spell?" Gaenor suggested.

"Gae," Artur replied, "maybe I'm wrong and you have something truly revolutionary in mind, but to the best of my knowledge no mere adept's spell is capable of compelling a god to account for himself."

"That wasn't precisely what I had in mind," Gaenor said in return. "The way I see it, Father Tolf has been given a message. However the message seems to us poor mortals to be hopelessly vague. With me so far?" There were nods all around. She turned a page in her notebook and started writing while she spoke. "Good. Now what if part of the message is being blocked in some way?"

"Blocked?" Tolf asked. "Who would have the power to block a sending from Holy Nua?"

"Anyone that Holy Nua allowed," Gaenor replied, although she privately wondered if there was some force that even Nua could not control.

"Why would he allow that?"

"Who are we to know the minds of the gods?" Gaenor countered in a perfect imitation of Rannora. "The point is, that if the message is being blocked, perhaps we can unblock it. Here." She handed her open notebook to Artur.

He studied the open page and frowned. "Now, where are we supposed to find a star sapphire?"

"Father Tolf has one mounted in his ring," Gaenor replied. "All priests of Nua do. Didn't you know that?"

"Actually, no. I didn't," Artur admitted.

"That's why the spell requires the sapphire. Actually, it specifically requires the use of Father Tolf's ring. No other stone would suffice, but I didn't think it was worth mentioning that in the notations."

"Oh, that makes a little more sense then. So it's actually a use of Contagion rather than the innate properties of the stone."

"Sympathy too," Gaenor corrected him. "The first part of the spell establishes the stone as a symbol representing Father Tolf, so any subsequent actions upon the stone will affect him."

"I see. The stone is therefore doubly bound to the subject."

"Exactly," Gaenor agreed, smiling.

"It should be a strong spell," Artur commented. "Father, do you agree to this magical investigation into the divine message you carry?"

"I'm not sure that Nua meant for you to know the details of his message," Tolf replied, visibly shaking as though locked in a mighty battle with himself.

"Father!" Mother Rannora said sharply, "do you propose to hide a divine message of warning from the

world?"

Tolf suddenly stopped shaking and fixed her with a steel-reinforced glare. The elder priestess met his eyes with a ferocious stare of her own. The battle of wills lasted only a few seconds before Tolf slumped in his chair and averted his eyes.

"Let's get on with it," he grated.

"Your ring please?" Artur requested. Tolf twisted the band off his finger and held it out to the adept. Artur accepted it and placed it on a small table where Gaenor had already started placing various other tools and ingredients prescribed by the spell.

Artur paused briefly, mentally preparing himself and then followed the detailed instructions Gaenor had written down. As soon as he began, a golden light much the same as Tolf had described shone down through the ceiling and engulfed the priest in a glowing nimbus. As the incantation and ritual of the spell continued, the golden aura that encircled the priest brightened. When Artur finished casting the spell, the golden glow became infused with tendrils of a violet hue so dark they were almost black. These tendrils spread out as though they were seeping out from Tolf's skin. The violet and golden light mixed violently until Tolf was all but obscured within a murky brown aura.

Artur, Gaenor, and the priestesses were startled a moment later when Father Tolf jumped to his feet, opened his mouth, and screamed in sheer terror or pain as the forces of two great powers warred around and within him for control. Finally the muddy brown light cleared and turned golden again. Tolf collapsed to the floor unconscious.

"Oh dear!" Mother Rannora exclaimed. "Perhaps we'd better put him to bed. His room is just down the corridor."

Tolf groaned and tried to sit up.

"How do you feel?" the younger Rannora asked.

"Like a battlefield. The gods themselves struggled within me," Tolf replied. "May I have something to drink?"

"Tea?" Mother Rannora suggested helpfully.

"Something stronger," Tolf replied, forcing himself, with Artur's help, back into his seat. Mother Rannora looked disapprovingly, but nodded to the younger priestess who left the room and quickly returned with two large tankards of dark brown ale. The elder priestess raised an eyebrow, but nodded understandingly when one of the tankards was given to Artur. The younger Rannora was right; it was only proper to make sure the priest wouldn't be drinking alone.

"Can you tell us more now?" Artur asked after Tolf had drained half his tankard.

"A little more. The message was distorted before. It's clear now."

"Good."

"It's much the way I told you before. There is a great evil on the land and we must prepare ourselves for a terrible struggle. The emphasis is different now, however. While the evil is upon us, the time to fight is

not yet here, nor will that battle be fought in Merahk's Landing. My job is to send Nua's warning to the High Priest in Misha. He will know what to do."

"Why didn't Nua just tell him directly?" Gaenor asked. Tolf looked at her with a slight smile that tacitly repeated the same old sentiment both she and Mother Rannora had already vocalized. "Never mind," Gaenor told him.

"Actually, this once, perhaps, I can answer your question," Father Tolf told her. "I got the impression that it was against the rules."

"What rules? The gods make their own rules," Gaenor retorted.

"Do they?" Artur asked. "I wonder."

"Father," Rannora asked, "do you mean to say that the gods are playing some sort of game?"

"Not a game," Tolf replied sternly, "but there are rules to it nonetheless. Holy Nua did not see fit to enlighten me fully, but evidently he was constrained to send his message through an intermediary - me."

"Father Tolf," Mother Rannora said quickly, "the dire condition of Merahk's Landing requires that you stay here. It will take quite some time to correct the damage done by your own false statements alone."

"Uh, yes," Tolf agreed embarrassedly. "What I had in mind, however, was that Master Artur would carry the message to the High Priest at Misha, since he's going that way in any case."

Eight

"If they were so grateful," Gaenor remarked several days later as they rode out of Merahk's Landing, "they could have at least offered us a ride across the river."

"The ferry was still filled with mud and water," Chasur informed her, "and none of the other boats available were large enough to carry the horses."

"I suppose," Gaenor admitted reluctantly, "but they could have offered anyway."

"The ferry master did promise us a free ride on our way home," Artur pointed out reasonably. "What's with you anyway? You've been snapping at both of us since yesterday."

"I just want to get to Misha," Gaenor replied irritably. "I have a long overdue appointment at the University, you know."

Artur looked at his assistant briefly. "We'll get there soon enough. You've been waiting for years. A few more days won't make much difference."

"I don't know. Things keep getting in the way."

"One storm and the flood it caused? That's not a very long list of 'things', Gae."

"We're not there yet, are we?" Gaenor pointed out.

"No, but what difference does that make. Your initiation will only take twenty-four hours, and then another day to recuperate. I'm sure that Narmouth will wait for us. Chas, how far to the next ferry?"

"Merahk's Landing has the only ferry on the Finder," came the reply. "We'll have to go about thirty leagues upstream before we can ford. At least that's what the ferry master told me. I've never been on this particular road before."

"Amazing," Gaenor said dryly. "We've finally found a place he won't be known. Why haven't you had any business out here?"

"I've only been Torse for a little over two years," Chas replied defensively. "Besides both of the roads that lead to the Barony of Ander end there, so I've never had the opportunity to pass through."

The road followed the river in only the roughest terms as it traced its crooked way through the farm country of eastern Mishanda. Fields of early grain alternated with root crops and dairy farms. Every five leagues or so, they passed through a small village similar in size and nature to Omath where they had weathered the storm several days earlier.

They were deep into the foothills of Ander before they found a natural ford in the river where they could cross. According to the locals, there had been at least five other likely spots over the last several leagues, but when the travelers had investigated, they decided that the water was still too deep and the current too violent to cross with safety.

"At last!" Gaenor sighed. "I was beginning to think the local hobby in Ander was giving bad directions to passing strangers."

"No," Chas corrected her. "That's the national sport in Medra. They don't see enough strangers in Ander to have developed a taste for misdirection."

"River's still pretty wide here," Gaenor noted.

"Yes," Artur agreed, "but it's shallow. We can cross here, unless you care to find the head waters. They can't be more than another ten or fifteen leagues away."

"I'll pass," Gaenor replied.

Suddenly, a loud, low-pitched moaning sound rolled over them, echoing back and forth across the river valley. The horses started and were near to panic.

"What was that?" Gaenor worriedly asked.

"Sounded like a lomorg," Artur opined.

"Lomorg?" Chas argued. "That's impossible. They hardly ever come down out of the mountains."

"It's pretty hilly here," Artur told him.

"Not for a lomorg."

"What's a lomorg?" Gaenor asked concernedly.

"Some folks call them trolls," Artur replied as they started down the riverbank. "That's not a very accurate description, since there are no less than five different creatures all commonly called trolls, but you can trust me when I tell you that you wouldn't want to meet a lomorg."

"Is there any sort of troll I would want to meet?"

"No," Artur replied calmly. "They're all pretty nasty and they make horrendous dinner companions."

"What do they eat?" Another low moan washed over them and down the valley. Whatever was making the sound was much closer now.

"Anything that doesn't finish eating them first," Artur replied. Behind them the low moan changed pitch and volume, becoming a high scream. "They've got our scent."

"What makes you think they're after us?" Chas asked as he urged his horse to hurry across the river. They were half way across now but still hadn't found the main channel where the water would be deeper.

"Look behind you," Artur replied.

Just cresting the edge of the valley were a dozen or more thick-limbed, brown-furred brutes. Their mouths were open, exposing their long, yellow, fang-like teeth and dark red tongues. They were only five feet tall and seemed to be lumbering along, but when they caught sight of the horses, they dropped to all fours, using their long arms to propel them at a deceptively high speed.

"Can't you fend them off with your magic?" Chas asked.

"From horseback?" Artur replied as their mounts suddenly found the deep part of the river. "Not hardly. We'd better hurry. This channel might slow them down. Lomorgs aren't very good swimmers and will hesitate before trying to cross."

"Do you think the river might stop them?" Gaenor asked hopefully.

"Not as long as they can see us, Gae."

The terrified horses made their way back up out of the channel and needed no urging to rush toward the far shore. In fact the riders had to keep a tight grip on the reins to slow the horses down, preventing them from injuring themselves on a submerged rock or pit.

Looking back over his shoulder, Chas saw that the lomorgs were loping easily toward them through the water. "You sure they don't like the water?" he shouted to Artur.

Artur glanced back and replied, "No."

"Terrific!" Chas commented dryly to himself.

The lomorgs reached the deep channel and fell in. Now it was their turn to panic. They let out a terrified shriek as they tried to scramble back up to the shallower water.

"There's our chance," Artur shouted. "Keep moving."

The horses were well on to dry ground before the lomorgs could overcome their fear of the deep water. The riders urged their mounts into a full gallop when they reached the firm higher ground of the valley. The lomorg hunting calls abruptly fell silent and Gaenor turned in her saddle to see why.

"They're swimming!" she reported.

"I knew they would eventually," Artur replied, "but it will take them a few minutes to cross and they won't move on until they're all across."

"Really?" Chas asked as they galloped. "Why not?"

Artur didn't reply immediately. Talking was hard enough under these conditions without trying to make himself heard and their immediate concern was in escaping the lomorgs. Talking would only slow them down.

Soon the moans and screams of the pursuing lomorgs echoed across the hillsides again, indicating they were once more onto the scent of the horses and riders. Artur, Chas, and Gaenor continued to drive their mounts onward away from the deadly carnivores, but the lomorgs were faster and their endurance was easily equal to that of the horses.

The leading lomorg was less than fifty yards behind when the riders and their tiring horses heard the clear, bubbling tones of a hunting horn from somewhere to their right. Then the horn sounded a second time and a score of armored men on horseback came over the nearest hill and charged the lomorgs enthusiastically with their lances.

The lomorgs were not so brave as to fight against superior numbers and the few survivors of the initial attack were in complete rout, running for their lives back toward the river. Artur, Chas and Gaenor reined their horses to a halt and turned to watch the horsemen finish their work.

"How did you know the lomorgs would wait until they all had crossed the channel before coming after us again?" Chas repeated his question.

"Lomorgs hunt in packs," Artur replied. "They go only where the leader leads them, but when they come across an obstruction, like a steep cliff or a river, the leader stays back until his pack has safely crossed. Only then when all have safely passed whatever danger they've encountered will the leader attempt it himself. However, the rest of the pack won't take up their hunt again until the leader is once more out in front. They're not particularly brave beasts."

One of the mounted lancers rode up to where Artur and his party watched the ensuing slaughter. As he drew closer, it became apparent to Gaenor that both his and his horse's armor were not made of browned steel as it had first seemed, but instead were constructed of plates of heavy boiled leather.

The approaching man wore no helm and his long, steel-gray hair was whipped back behind him by the wind. He had a full salt and pepper beard that he kept neatly cropped.

"Ho, strangers!" he greeted them. "I owe you a debt for leading the trolls right to us."

"You were looking for them?" Gaenor asked incredulously.

"Of course, lass. Why else would we burden ourselves and horses down with armor? Lomorg bites and scratches tend to fester. They're disease-ridden creatures, I tell you." That made sense to Gaenor. No one in Mishanda had worn full suits of plate armor in over a century, not even in battle. "But I'm forgetting my manners," he continued. "I am Rolder, Baron of Ander." Chas introduced Artur and Gaenor and finally himself. "Welcome to Ander. We don't get many visitors here. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"The recent storm, my lord baron," Artur replied. The ferries at Merahk's Landing and the other crossings of the Finder are out. We had to come this far upstream before we could ford the river."

Baron Rolder nodded. "That was some storm," he agreed. "We're still cleaning up from it ourselves. That's part of what we're doing out here today. The storm forced the trolls out of the mountains. From the reports, this was just one of several packs that have been roving across the countryside."

"The damage was far greater at Merahk's Landing," Chas informed the baron. "I haven't seen any uprooted trees in over ten leagues."

"Perhaps," Rolder allowed, "but many of my people are still putting new thatching on their roofs to make up for what was blown away."

"You still use thatch here?" Gaenor asked.

"Most of my subjects do. Slate or wooden shingles are expensive, but we always have enough materials for thatching so the greatest expense is the time it takes to weave in place. The biggest problem is usually the danger of fire during the dry summer months."

"That's the last of them, father," a young man called and he rode up on his dark brown charger. His brown eyes were the only sign of resemblance between him and his father. He kept his brown hair long, although he was already showing signs of incipient baldness and while the baron's nose was small and thin, his son's was a shark knife that cut the air ahead of him and was accentuated by the full, bushy mustache that sprouted beneath it.

"Gentles, my son," Rolder introduced proudly, "Sir Tander, heir to the barony." Everyone introduced themselves once again.

"Father," Tander continued, "it is still two hours before sunset. Do you want to continue the hunt?"

"No. Let us call it a day. We've already found three packs of those brutes today. There can't be many of them left."

The Baron of Ander was basically a friendly, gregarious man who had the misfortune to hold lands that were largely isolated from the mainstream of the kingdom's activity. Visitors, even accidental ones, who were on their way to the Royal Court were an excellent excuse for an afternoon off and he intended to make the best of it and after their rescue from the lomorgs, Artur and company were in no position to refuse Rolder's hospitality.

Baron Rolder's home was not, as Gaenor had expected, a castle. The Barons of Ander had never needed to defend their borders and so had never built defensive walls around their home. Instead they built a large and sprawling manor house with generous proportions of wood and fieldstone. It was, by far, the largest house Gaenor had ever seen - fully three stories tall and covering nearly seven acres if one included the extensive gardens.

"Nice shack," Gaenor commented to Artur a few hours later as she joined him in a small garden predominated by white flowers. "I could get used to a place like this real easy."

Artur laughed. "I can't afford one and it's unlikely that the baron is looking for an apprentice. Still, it's a comfortable lifestyle, I'm not sure I'd care for the work and the responsibility that goes with it though."

"Work?" asked Gaenor. "What work? He's a nobleman."

"And responsible for the well-being of all those who live in Ander. He wasn't out hunting for the sheer joy of it today. Nobody hunts lomorgs out of preference. They're lousy sport, even worse eating and you can die from the infected wounds they inflict."

"You may have noticed the encampment on the hill just to the south. I asked about all those tents. Rolder's been supplying them from his armory to all the people whose homes were damaged. They'll be camping out until their cottages are liveable again, and the baron's feeding them all the while."

"Gae, I'll be the first to admit that there are some nobles who live up to the image you seem to have of them - lazy, pampered and self-indulgent - but they are the exception, not the rule. There's only so long a noble can neglect his fief before it starts to fall apart. Sure, the nobles are rich and privileged, but their wealth and prerogatives come with great responsibility. They are the guardians, the protectors of the people, and if for their troubles they get the best food and the finest goods, well then, most of them do deserve it."

"Artur, I've never heard you talk about noblemen in such glowing terms. In fact, you usually use terms that come close to treason."

"Sure I laugh at the nobility," Artur admitted easily. "There's a lot to laugh at. They have a tendency to take themselves too seriously at times and that leads to all sorts of comic traits, but I've never denied the necessary part they play in Mishandan society."

"Necessary?" Gaenor questioned. "We don't see much of Lord Marles in Narmouth, except for his tax collectors. We seem to get by without him."

"Times change, Gae. Two hundred years ago, the nobility had a more direct effect on the every day life of the common folk."

"Us," Gaenor corrected him.

Artur nodded and smiled slightly. "I wasn't around back then myself, were you? Well, since then the rise of the merchant class has changed things a bit. There has been an increased need for tradesmen and many commoners have moved to the towns and cities to seek their fortunes. Those who have stayed in the country as farmers and herders have done so with less competition and so have fared better too."

"All that has caused most people, especially the city dwellers to have a lessened dependence on the nobility. In Narmouth that means that the taxes collected by Lord Marles have gone down."

"Really?" Gaenor was skeptical. "Not from the way you'd hear my brother-in-law tell it."

"I didn't say that people were paying less taxes, Gae," Artur explained, patience obviously wearing thin in places. "I said that Lord Marles is collecting less taxes from the people of Narmouth. These days the majority of your taxes go to the city. After that to the County and then to the Crown."

"Really? I've never had to pay taxes."

"Of course not, Gae, you don't own land. Just be thankful you don't live in the Cilben Empire. They tax personal income there."

"What? You mean that if you make money, they figure some of it belongs to the state?"

"Exactly."

"That's horrible!" Gaenor protested. "At least our taxes are in terms of the land's produce. What right does the king..."

"Emperor," Artur corrected her quietly.

"Whatever. What right does he have to his subjects' hard earned money? Why don't they throw him off his throne for such presumption?"

"The Cilbens are used to it. Tax moneys are supposed to go toward public works and there are a lot of public works in Cilbe. They figure it is fairer if everyone donates through their taxes rather than just the land owners."

"Does everyone have the right to vote in Cilbe?" Gaenor countered.

"No, just the male land owners," Artur replied.

"Cilbens are crazy!" Gaenor exclaimed disgustedly, causing Artur to raise his eyebrows slightly at that. He decided not to tell her about the rest of the complex system of Cilben taxes. She was obviously not ready for the concept of a surtax.

On the other hand, Artur thought to himself, maybe she's right and the Cilbens are crazy.

"There you are!" Chas said as he joined them in the garden with a green-clad young lady of approximately Gaenor's age. She wore her long light brown hair in a pair of intricate braids that incorporated beads and ribbons and must have taken over an hour to construct. The effect was quite becoming, Gaenor decided, but quite impractical for anyone but a noblewoman. Nobody else would have the time to waste. "May I introduce Ibbet of Ander?" Chas continued. "She is Baron Rolder's eldest daughter. Ibbet, this is Master Artur and Miss Gaenor."

Ibbet nodded her head politely to Artur and then turned to lock her gentle eyes with Gaenor's. The two women spent several seconds sizing each other up looking for a common ground and finding only differences.

Very pretty, Ibbet thought to herself while she formally greeted Gaenor, but far too understated. And that dress - it seems well made enough and the color suits her perfectly, but it's so plain. Not a bead. Not a stitch of embroidery in sight.

Too bad she has her brother's nose, Gaenor kept the thought to herself as she returned Ibbet's greeting, although she uses her make-up and those braids to attract attention away from it. I wonder who did all the beadwork on that dress and is that the way she walks around all the time?

The two kept talking about inconsequential matters while constantly appraising each other. Chas and Artur excused themselves from the garden and left without either of the two women noticing their exit. Gaenor and Ibbet finally found common ground when they happened upon the subject of men.

Both women were single and at the age of twenty-three both were considered old to not be married. Gaenor was still waiting for Artur to notice her as more than just his assistant. Ibbet nodded knowingly and confided that she was envious of Gaenor's right to choose. Ibbet's betrothal had been arranged for her twice already. Her first fiancé had died in a hunting accident before they had even met and her second was a lout, given to drink, who happened to live in Misha. The alliance, she told Gaenor, would be good for the barony, but even her father was having second thoughts about it as it became apparent that the young man was as likely to waste the fortune of both their families as not.

Without realizing it, Gaenor and Ibbet quickly became close friends in spite of the fact that they came from such different worlds. It was nearly time for the dinner at which Gaenor and her companions were to be the guests of honor when Ibbet finally got up the courage to ask Gaenor about her clothing and didn't she have something fancier for when she went before King Pawlen?

"Well," Gaenor replied, somewhat flustered, "I do have my festival dress with me. I planned to wear it tonight, but it's getting a bit late now."

"Nonsense!" Ibbet told her. "You're our guest here, they won't start without you. Besides I think the men expect us to be a few minutes late. I'll help you get dressed." A few minutes later they were in Gaenor's rooms, an uncomfortably large suite with individual rooms for sleeping, dressing, and sitting. The suite also had its own privy, certainly an unheard of luxury to Gaenor.

Ibbet looked at Gaenor's dress closely. "It's excellent workmanship," she told her new friend uncertainly, "but it's so simple." Gaenor's festival garb was a golden yellow gown of simple lines to which she had attached a thin line of embroidery along the neck line, sleeves and hem. The embroidery, Ibbet noted - some of the finest she had ever seen - depicted a simple vine, mostly green and brown with an occasional violet flower. Clematis, Ibbet decided, admiring the exquisite detail of each blossom.

"I haven't really had the time to do much else," Gaenor told her. "It wouldn't have been considered proper in Narmouth if I had spent as much time as went into yours."

"Really?"

"Indeed. People would think I was putting on airs or had been wasting Master Artur's time. Oh, it would be all right for you. You're noble. It's expected, but I'm a commoner - just one of several children of a carpenter."

"Well that might be the way it is in Narmouth, but I will not let any friend of mine attend the court in anything less than the latest in high fashion!" Ibbet told her assertively.

"It's unlikely I'll be in court," Gaenor pointed out. "Artur's the one who was summoned. The only reason he brought me along, rather than leave me to take care of his house, was that he's promised to get me initiated as an adept and Misha is the best place to do that."

"An adept?" Ibbet was utterly surprised. "Really?"

"Yes, I have a standing invitation from the University," Gaenor told her serenely without a trace of boastfulness.

"Really?" Ibbet repeated. "I didn't think they would even allow a woman to practice magic."

"Well, I've been inventing new spells for Artur," Gaenor explained, trying to sound modest, "and he's sent some of them to the Department of Magical Studies. They said that some of them represented new classes of spells and I guess that was enough to get them to agree to my initiation."

"Wow!" Ibbet was visibly impressed. "Well that settles it then! As an adept you'll no longer be a commoner. You'll be gentle at least. All adepts are."

"But neither I nor my family owns land," Gaenor protested. "You have to own land to be gentry."

"Didn't you know? All adepts are considered to be of at least gentle blood despite their actual heritage or social position. It's a sort of courtesy title. You get no revenues from it, but the rank will still be yours. Didn't you know that?"

"I guess I did," Gaenor admitted after a moment, "but it just didn't occur to me in my own case. No wonder some of the old women in town think I'm presumptuous!" Gaenor giggled a bit at that.

"Well then, we're about the same size. Right after dinner we'll go to my rooms and find something for you to wear in court. We'll also see what we can do about your hair," Ibbet added as they started out the door toward the great hall.

"What's wrong with my hair?" Gaenor protested. Ibbet merely laughed gently as she tried to decide which of her ribbons would look best in Gaenor's rich, dark hair.

Nine

At Baron Rolder's insistence, Artur, Gaenor, and Chas remained as his guests for one more day. Artur was just as glad for a day off in the luxury of the baronial estate. He was certainly in no hurry, in spite of Chas's reminders that he was answering a royal summons.

"True," Artur agreed easily, "but if I recall properly, I was to appear before his Majesty at my earliest convenience and I think it would be inconvenient to act against the wishes of our host."

"The phrase, 'earliest convenience'," Chas retorted, "is just an expression and you know it as well as I do."

"Yes, yes. It means 'Get on up here as fast as you can'. Right? Well the storm got in our way for several days and then we stopped to help out in Merahk's Landing for several more. Surely one more day won't make a difference to the king."

"He's a very busy man, Master Artur."

"Then he won't notice that I haven't shown up yet, if he even knows I'm coming."

"Of course he knows you're coming," Chas told him. "He gave me your summons personally."

"Well one day still won't make a difference and we would be lacking in courtesy if we didn't wait for Sir Tander to accompany us."

"Is that why we're waiting a day?" Chas asked.

"Didn't I mention that? Sorry. Rolder is sending Tander to Misha to petition for tax relief. I expect His Majesty will be receiving quite a few such requests."

"And they will probably be granted," Chas shrugged. "That was one hell of a storm. I'm surprised he isn't asking for additional funds."

"Rolder is an honest man and a wise one," Artur replied. "He's been putting money and supplies aside for emergencies just like this. He's only asking for relief for the people under his protection."

Gaenor was delighted by the additional day as well. She and Ibbet had been up two hours past midnight and she was not looking forward toward leaving on only four hours of sleep. Instead, on learning that they would be staying another day, she did something she had never ever done before in her life; she went back to sleep.

She woke up again at mid-morning feeling positively decadent. She stretched languorously, still not rising from the bed. She looked out a nearby window and saw the tops of several tall oak trees and a cloudlessly blue sky above them. She briefly considered going back to sleep, but instead sat up on the edge of the bed with the notion that she was missing something. A moment later she heard a soft knocking at the bedroom door.

"Rise and shine, Gae!" Ibbet said brightly, sticking her head through the door. "Ready for breakfast yet? Do you always sleep this late? Those must be some really terrific spells you make up for Master Artur to keep paying you," Ibbet teased her gently.

"Just pretending I'm a baron's daughter," Gaenor replied calmly.

"Oh, then you should have been up hours ago. I was."

"So was I, but I corrected that problem soon enough. Did you say breakfast?" Gaenor asked as she started to dress.

"Unless you want to call it lunch. The time's not too far off."

"No. Breakfast is fine. I knew there was something missing. Where's the kitchen?"

"Downstairs, fifth door on the right, but don't bother. I brought a tray up for you. It's in the sitting room. How do you take your tea?"

Ibbet and Gaenor spent most of the day in the pink garden - a small plot of land that the baronial gardener had planned as an intricate maze of paths between roses, impatiens, and other pink flowers. At this time of the year none of those flowers were yet in bloom although the very earliest of the roses were starting to bud. The two young women sat on a small wood and iron bench that had been placed at the center of the maze. Part of the time they played a simple board game and part of the time Gaenor showed Ibbet how she had embroidered the elegant vine on her festival dress - there were several techniques with which Ibbet was unfamiliar - but most of the long afternoon they just talked. For Ibbet,

Gaenor was the friend and confidant of her own age that she had never had. Gaenor had never had many friends and, in spite of their short acquaintance, Ibbet was the only close friend aside from her sister Marlie in years.

Chas, on the other hand, spent a good part of the afternoon in the manor's Map Room, discussing the route they would be traveling with Sir Tander.

The Map Room was so named for the brightly colored maps and charts that served as wallpaper. The large, arched windows had been placed to illuminate the room and show off the walls in their best light for most of the day. Sir Tander and his father had customarily used the room whenever planning a journey.

Chas and Tander were standing near the detailed map of Mishanda while Artur sat nearby, drinking a large tankard of dark ale, greatly amused by the argument.

"You want to go back down stream until we're across the river from Merahk's Landing?" Chas asked.

"That's the way the road goes," Tander replied, shrugging.

"Why don't we just ride cross-country?"

"Well, I can think of several farmers who might object. They tend to shoot their crossbows first and worry about covering up the evidence later."

"We don't have to ride across their fields," Chas objected.

"If we keep changing direction in order to go around them it will take two days longer to get to Misha than by the road."

"Why don't we take this road?" Chas pointed at a line on the map that went straight north to the Rinet River and then followed it into Misha.

"This is an old map, Master Chasur. The Rinet has meandered a bit since it was drawn and several parts of that old road to Gostrina have been washed out. We would have to travel almost thirty leagues out of our way to get to the new Gostrina Road."

"Oh. It's that road," Chas said, disappointed. "I've been on it several times. I never realized it was a replacement."

"Not all of it," Tander informed him, "just the sixty-odd leagues that run to the north of the Rinet. Most of the old road that survives connects a few minor villages before coming to a dead end. Face it. Our fastest route is to follow the Finder until we reach the South Road and head north into Misha." Chas continued to argue, but in the end Sir Tander got his way.

They were up, as planned, at first light. Much to Gaenor's surprise, the entire population of the manor was up as well and the send-off breakfast that Ibbet dragged her to looked even more grandiose than the banquet that had greeted them on their arrival.

Just before they left, Ibbet cornered Gaenor for a private farewell.

"Here," she said thrusting a small box with a ribbon wrapped around it into Gaenor's hands. "I want you

to have this. Open it."

Gaenor slipped the ribbon off and raised the lid to reveal a transparent smoke-colored gemstone that had been faceted in imitation of a natural crystal, attached to a slender gold chain necklace.

"It's too beautiful," she protested. "You've already given me that lovely gown to wear at court. This is just too much, and I haven't given you anything."

"You've given me your friendship," Ibbet told her firmly. "That's worth far more than these few trinkets. Besides this is nothing special, just smokey quartz, but it's the closest thing we have to a native Anderan gemstone. This way you'll always have a bit of Ander with you." Ibbet took the necklace from her and put it around her neck. "See, a perfect fit."

Gaenor tried to protest that even if the stone was common, the gold chain and setting were not, but Ibbet would hear nothing of it and Gaenor left a few minutes later wondering what she could ever do to pay her friend back for the wealth of gifts she had given.

"Nice necklace," Artur commented an hour later as they made their way out of Ander. "It suits you. When did you pick that up?"

Gaenor explained, adding, "When could I ever have afforded gold?"

"I had wondered if I was overpaying you," he admitted with a grin. "Still, I suppose you deserve a nice piece of jewelry or two."

"What do you mean overpaying me?" Gaenor demanded indignantly. "Without me you'd still be selling phony love charms to the peasants in the Thimdras. I deserve twice what you pay me."

"Yes. You do, but if I doubled your salary, there'd be nothing left for me. I already give you half of everything we earn."

"Half? Wouldn't that make me an equal partner?"

"Why I do believe you're right. Hadn't you noticed that before? You do keep the books."

"It never occurred to me," Gaenor admitted. "Then why do you keep calling me your assistant?"

"Well, I thought to save that for a surprise after your initiation. Surprise," he added blandly.

The rest of the journey proceeded smoothly and a few days later they found themselves just across the river from the royal city of Misha. Spanning the half mile-wide river was an incredible structure. A pair of matched brick buildings, one hundred feet tall, stood on either side of the road that curved up to and through them. Between them a series of arches gracefully crossed the distance between them on all but the first two floors. The buildings were faced with common red brick, but the royal arms of Mishanda - "Vert, within a mascle a hawk rising or," the same device Chas wore on his herald's tabbard - were emblazoned on the fronts of both buildings in carefully placed green and gold glazed bricks that reflected the late afternoon light in blazing glory.

From the angle of their approach, the approaching travelers could see that a high, wide bridge stretched out behind the twin buildings over two tiers of arches and columns and a thirty-foot high wall faced with red brick.

"What in the world is that?" Gaenor gasped.

"That," Sir Tander told her, "is the Great Bridge of Misha, the greatest feat of engineering in all Mishanda."

"I've never seen anything like it. Have you?" she asked Artur.

"I've never been here before either," Artur admitted. "It is impressive, though. It's at least as magnificent as the Jube Cathedral in Cilbe and definitely larger."

"What about the Pyramid to Nauo in Es?" Chas asked. "It's at least as large as the bridge and the fifteen level maze is said to be hopelessly complex."

"That too is a great achievement," Artur agreed, "as are the Royal Gardens of Maxforn in Teliodena and the Mountain City of Vohn. Of course no man-made wonder can equal the natural ones like the Parch or the thousand-league long Minue Estuary."

"You've seen all those places?" Gaenor asked in wonder.

"I traveled a lot when I was younger, before I settled down in Narmouth."

"But Narmouth is so," she paused a moment before finishing, "ordinary."

"I think that's why I like the place. I've had enough adventures for two lifetimes, Gae. There's comfort and security in the ordinary. That by itself makes the place worthwhile."

"What goes on in these tremendous buildings?" Gaenor asked Chas.

"Business," he answered simply. "The bridge towers on both sides are the most prestigious office buildings in town. Any merchant who fancies he is anybody wants an office on the Bridge."

"Why?"

"I imagine it started out because offices here could catch incoming traders before the businesses in town could, but these days it's just a matter of prestige. If you have an office on the Bridge, you're considered a success."

"I prefer dealing with the merchants in town," Sir Tander commented. "They work harder and charge less."

They rode on between the tall buildings and onto the Great Bridge. Once on the bridge it became obvious that what had appeared to be thirty-foot walls above the supporting arches of the structure were actually the backsides of a half-mile long string of buildings that lined either side of the wide, cobblestoned stretch of pavement. Hundreds of vendors sold every imaginable sort of wares from inside the shops in the building or from their mobile pushcarts.

"It looks like a city street," Gaenor marveled as they moved through the noisy, crowded passage, "or a very long market. You'd never know you were on a bridge here."

"There are a dozen taverns on the Bridge," Chas informed her, shouting over the crowd. "Also, in

addition to all the shops, there are three banks, half a dozen hostels, and a local newspaper. Many visitors to Misha are able to complete their entire business in the city without ever leaving the Bridge."

"Where do those stairs lead?" Artur asked, pointing at a flight that led upward between two of the shops.

"There's a walkway on top of the shops on both sides," Chas told him. "There are more merchants up there, but they are required to remove all their goods each evening so things aren't quite so crowded up there and there are several beautiful gardens along the way. Most people who are in a hurry to get from one side of the bridge to the other use the walkway, but we'll have to stay down here since the horses would never make it up the stairs."

"What?" Gaenor asked with mock incredulity. "Are there no stables on the Bridge?"

"Of course there are, but we have several miles yet to ride, unless you care to walk."

"I am tired of riding," Gaenor replied, "but not quite that tired."

The sun was just barely above the city buildings as the travelers completed their trek across the Great Bridge. Misha was not nearly as impressive as the bridge. Very few buildings were taller than two or three stories, but the city did have girth. From their slightly raised viewpoint as they left the Bridge, the party could see the city stretching out for miles.

"Is that the royal castle?" Gaenor asked, indicating an imposing gray stone building with many graceful spires and towers that stood on a hill overlooking the city.

"No," Chas corrected her. "That is the City of the Gods. The largest temple, which is most of that mess, is the Temple to Nua. The palace is to the south. You can't see it from here."

"Master Chasur," Sir Tander asked with concern, "am I correct in assuming that it is too late to present yourselves to the Court?"

"The official offices are probably closed for the day. Yes."

"Well, then did you have plans about where you all would be staying while in town?"

"I have a place in the King of Arms' office building. I had planned to get rooms for Artur and Gaenor at a nearby inn. Why?"

"Well, my cousin, Earl Mnoster of Ulren, has a house here in Misha, that might be more comfortable than any inn, and then we can all present ourselves to his Majesty in the morning."

Chas considered that. "I know that house. Your cousin has quite a reputation as a host. I've been to several of his parties. Yes. I believe Master Artur and Miss Gaenor would be most comfortable there." He turned to Artur. "I'll deliver Father Tolf's message to the High Priest for you then meet you in the morning right after breakfast."

"Welcome back, me lord," the stablehand greeted Sir Tander as he led the way into the large carriage house behind the sprawling mansion that belonged to Earl Mnoster. "Haven't see you in months."

"My thanks," Tander replied perfunctorily. "Is my cousin in?"

"Aye, me lord. That's why the house is so quiet. Here now, me lady," he stopped Gaenor from unloading her horse, "I'll take care of your mount and bring your things on up to the house as is me job."

"What did he mean," Artur asked Tander as they left the carriage house, "when he said that the house was so quiet because the Earl was in? I thought that he had a reputation for his parties."

"I do," a deep voice replied from within the house in front of them. "It's just that I don't attend most of them. Cousin! What brings you back to Misha? I didn't expect you until after the harvest." Earl Mnoster was an elderly man. His light gray beard and hair were kept neatly trimmed, but his loose-fitting clothes did nothing to hide his immense paunch.

"The recent storm brings me, cousin," Tander replied after introducing Artur and Gaenor.

"Storm? Oh yes, the rain was pretty heavy a couple weeks ago. Seems to have done wonders for my garden."

"It was a little more destructive elsewhere," Tander informed him. "We lost most of the early planting and I doubt there's a thatched roof anywhere in Ander older than a fortnight. The damage was even greater to the southeast."

"It was? I'm afraid I've been out of touch for most of the past fortnight," Mnoster admitted, "I haven't been well."

"Cousin?" Sir Tander asked with concern.

"Oh nothing all that serious," Mnoster replied. "A small fever is all. My physician says I was never in danger. Of course that leech'd say that even if I was dying, but he was right this time. Until yesterday I was just sick enough not to really care what was happening in the world."

"Cousin, I'm here to petition for tax relief and was hoping you could give me some advice."

"I'll see what I can do. Please make yourselves at home. I'll be right back." Mnoster ran off with a speed and agility Gaenor found surprising in a man his size.

Tander led the way through the estate to a large corner room with immense, arched windows that let the late afternoon light illuminate the chamber. Along one interior wall was a fireplace large enough to roast a whole ox in although it showed no sign of ever having been used for that and on the other was a fully stocked bar. There were chairs and small tables all around, but the center of the room was dominated by a large, deep red felt-covered game table. It was nine feet long and four and a half feet wide and there were four holes - one at each corner. Deep pocket-like nets made of leather straps had been attached underneath each hole. Fifteen bright green balls were racked in a triangle near one end of the table and six other colored balls were positioned over small white dots at various locations on the table. There were several cue sticks in a rack next to the fireplace.

"What's this?" Gaenor asked after Sir Tander had dispensed drinks for the three of them.

"Caroms," Tander replied. "It's my cousin's favorite game."

"How do you play?"

Tander explained how one used the stick to propel the solid black cue ball, which in turn was used to knock the other balls in by a complex system of rules. Gaenor decided that in spite of the difficulty of the game she rather enjoyed it.

"Is this a foreign game?" she asked.

"No, I believe it was invented right here in Misha," Sir Tander informed her, "but the tables are so expensive that only a few can afford to own one. I'm not particularly partial to the game, but many others are."

"Artur," Gaenor asked, "how about you?"

"It's new to me," Artur remarked with a shrug, "but I suppose it will give me something to do while drinking the earl's beer."

Mnoster didn't reappear for almost two hours during which time a servant appeared to inform the guests that their rooms had been prepared. They took the opportunity to wash up after their journey and to get into clean clothing before returning to the game room where Gaenor continued to play at the Caroms table by herself after Artur lost interest in the game.

"Ah!" Mnoster exclaimed delightedly on his return. "A new opponent. My dear, if I had known you played Caroms I'd not have stayed away so long. Tell me, do you play with the Required Bank-shot Rule?"

"I've only just learned the game, my lord," Gaenor replied. "What's that rule?"

"The cue ball must touch one of the cushions before touching the intended target ball," Mnoster explained.

"Oh. I don't think I'm up to that just yet, my lord."

"Call me Mnoster," he corrected her, choosing an ebony cue inlaid with mother-of-pearl from the rack. "It's a courtesy of the game, players are always on a first name basis. You know, cousin," he turned toward Tander, "you really should take up the game. His Majesty plays and after a game or two he may be more amenable to your petition."

"What are you trying to say, Mnoster?" Tander asked as Gaenor racked up the fifteen green balls.

"I'm saying that there are a long line of petitioners for storm relief. That's part of what took me so long. I tried to get you an appointment for anytime this week, but when I found out how much Morres was charging for appointments for any time in under a month, I decided to hold off until I found out how much you cared to spend."

"How much?" Tander asked warily. Mnoster told him. "That's ridiculous! How does he justify such absurd rates?"

"I rather doubt he's found the need to justify them. As it happens there are an unprecedented number of petitioners to his Majesty's court at the moment."

"The storm?" Artur asked.

"That and our dear friends from Cilbe. They were making pests of themselves even before I took ill, but they don't even have the common decency to stand back while we handle the damage from that storm. Instead they've been pressing even harder for a trade agreement, offering to throw in a legion or two to help us rebuild."

"Now that would be a mistake," Artur commented.

"You're telling me? I saw how they moved in on the Thimdras fifteen years ago to make them client states. I'm surprised they haven't officially annexed them. They totally control their governments anyway. It would only be a matter of recognizing the truth."

"Annexing the Thimdras is the last thing Imperial Cilbe wants," Artur replied off-handedly. "The way things stand, they can extract tribute for the Imperial coffers without having to put any money back in and the Legions keep it that way. Looking at it in retrospect, I'm rather surprised they didn't think of it earlier."

"Master Artur, you have an amazingly clear grasp of the situation. Tell me, have you ever considered going into politics?"

"Never," Artur laughed around a swig of beer. "In fact, I've spent most of my life avoiding such a fate."

Mnoster returned Artur's laugh. "It's good to find wisdom in one so young, but most of our best politicians don't start until their mid-thirties. We may corrupt you yet." Artur looked as though he was about to say something and then changed his mind. "Go ahead, my dear," Mnoster said to Gaenor, "I always let the ladies break. So cousin, how badly do you need to see the king?"

"Pretty badly," Tander replied, "but I doubt the barony can afford to pay for an appointment in time for it to do any good."

"Why not try slipping in with me," Artur suggested. "I was summoned, after all. How long could this Lord Morres keep me waiting?"

Eleven

"How long?" Artur asked the officious toady who stopped them at the main gate to the palace the next afternoon. Artur and Gaenor had been ready to leave after breakfast, but Chas hadn't arrived until well past lunch. He apologized, claiming that he'd been immediately assaulted with outstanding business as soon as he had entered his office. Artur privately suspected the man hadn't managed to catch much sleep since they had last seen him at the foot of the Great Bridge.

"Four weeks," the toady replied. "Ordinarily it would be longer, but his Majesty did summon you after

all." His manner of speaking made it obvious that he felt King Pawlen III had obviously been ill-advised in doing so.

"Terrific," Sir Tander muttered flatly.

"I want to see Morres immediately!" Chasur demanded.

"Lord Seneschal Morres," the toady corrected him, "is busy today, but perhaps he will be able to see you within the week."

"Sir Rojur," Chas retorted frostily, "do you know who I am?"

"You are Master Chasur Felso, his Majesty's Torse Herald," Rojur replied.

"Very good. Now do you know the penalty for keeping an officer of the court from his appointed duty?"

"Such is considered to be treason, punishable by a fine to death, depending on the severity of the infraction," Tander supplied when Rojur failed to answer.

"Right. Now as it happens I have a matter of royal business with Lord Morres. A matter that cannot be delayed."

"What business is that?" Rojur demanded.

"Ordinarily I would tell you that it was none of your business, but since it's a matter of your own treason, I suppose you have the right to know." Rojur stiffened and his face blanched. "That is," Chas continued, "unless you care to allow us to complete our business with his Majesty immediately."

"Of course," Rojur agreed instantly. "There will be the matter of my fee..." he trailed off as Chas shook his head exaggeratedly. "Never mind. Uh, you'll have to talk to Lord Morres first in any case, you know."

"That's okay," Chas replied as he led the party on into the palace. "I intended to have words with him anyway."

"Chas," Gaenor asked, "that man out-ranks you. How can you get away with pushing him around that way?"

"Two reasons," Chas replied. "First and foremost, a herald on the king's business speaks for the king. In a very limited way, when it comes to conducting you and Master Artur into Pawlen's court, I am equal in rank to the king. Second, Rojur's a coward. Even you could have pushed him around if you sounded sure enough of yourself."

"Really," Gaenor said as much to herself as in reply. "I'll have to keep that in mind."

Chas stopped to look at her closely to see if she was joking. Unable to tell, he shrugged and continued on. They arrived at the outer office of Lord Morres a few minutes later. The young man sitting at the desk there knew Chas on sight and waved him and the others on into the seneschal's inner office without question.

They open the door to find Lord Morres throwing darts at a drawing of a clean-shaven man with short, cropped, gray hair, a large, hooked nose, and a single, gray eyebrow that covered both eyes.

"I dare say," Chas remarked, "that His Excellency might not be amused."

Morres started, then turned to face the party and laughed. "What Girdecus doesn't know won't hurt him," he replied. "More's the pity. So what can I do for you today, Chas."

"Two things actually. This is Master Artur, who the king had me summon to the court."

"Pleased to meet you, Master Artur," Morres shook hands with Artur.

"And I'd like to know why you want to charge him for answering that summons," Chas continued.

"What?" Morres turned to Chas. "That's illegal."

"I know," Chas remarked quietly.

"Who told you I was charging Master Artur for an appointment?"

Chas raised an eyebrow, but in the silence that ensued, Gaenor spoke up. "Sir Rojur," she told the seneschal. Chas nodded his agreement.

"Master Chasur," Morres told him formally, "Please believe me. I never told Rojur to charge Master Artur or anyone else summoned to the court and I guarantee that Sir Rojur will answer for this."

Chas nodded. He wasn't sure whether to believe the man, but it was clear that the practice would stop for a while at least. "Then," Chas pressed on, "there's the outrageous rates you're charging the victims of that recent storm just for the right to petition Pawlen for relief. They arrive here knowing that they have to give you a reasonable bribe just to see the king, but then you go and quadruple the rates. That, my lord, leaves a slime trail."

"I have upped the rates," Morres admitted, "but I specifically told Rojur not to charge petitioners seeking relief. I'm a businessman after all, not a monster. The rate change was to discourage less important petitions, especially that fine nobleman." Morres threw his last dart at the portrait of the Cilben Ambassador and struck it squarely on Girdecus' prominent nose. "You know, since his arrival, he and his delegation have taken up more than half of Pawlen's time, forcing us all to work several hours later than usual just to serve our own people."

"Then you won't mind if I present Sir Tander, heir to the Barony of Ander, to his Majesty as soon as he is free?"

"Why wait? Let's go on in right now. He isn't doing anything very important at the moment." Lord Morres led the way out of the office stopping only at the desk of his personal secretary. "Have Sir Rojur waiting for me when I return," he told the man before continuing on.

They were only a few steps from Morres' office when they encountered an old Cilben soldier who had been swapping lies with a Mishandan palace guard of similar age. The Cilben caught one glance of Artur and jumped to his feet and saluted.

"My general!" he said crisply, holding the saluting right arm across his chest.

Artur was taken aback by this action. "You must be mistaken, decurion," he demurred.

"No, General Arturus, save for your beard you haven't changed since I last saw you. Surely Jube smiles upon you and your house."

"Decurion," Artur replied, leading the old soldier away from the rest of the party until they were beyond hearing. "General Arturus would be well over sixty if he was still alive."

"Jube has granted you your youth, General, but I know who you are. I served under you in the Twelfth Legion when we conquered Colch and later when we subdued the Barbarian Kingdoms after they decimated the Fifth Legion. I've seen you unshaven before, General. Please," the decurion continued, "allowed me to reaffirm my fealty to you."

Artur glanced back at the waiting party and quickly decided. Turning his body so that it blocked their view of what happened he nodded slightly to the old warrior. The decurion saluted once more and spoke the ritual words of fealty that a Cilben Legionary gave to his commander. Artur returned the salute tightly and the decurion relaxed.

"Tell no one that you saw me here," Artur instructed the man quietly. "Is there anyone else in Misha who might recognize me?"

"No one from the Twelfth," the old man replied uncertainly. "Maybe the ambassador, you and he knew each other in Cilbe, or his deputy."

"Who is his deputy?"

"Locius Armenius Flacco."

"I'll try to be careful," Artur replied. "Neither of them have ever seen me bearded." Artur turned to rejoin his party.

"Orders, general?" the decurion asked.

"You must be near the end of your hitch," Artur commented.

"I'm near the end of my second hitch," the man laughed. A Cilben soldier served for thirty years on his first hitch and then could re-up for an additional fifteen.

"Then take your accumulated bonuses," Artur told the man gently, "buy yourself a little farm somewhere and enjoy the rest of your life."

"Yes, sir!" the man replied, smiling. "My wife has been after me to do that anyway." Artur clapped the man on the shoulder and then rejoined Gaenor and the rest.

"What was that all about?" Gaenor asked as they started walking again.

"Hmm?" Artur grunted. "Oh, just a case of mistaken identity. I thought it would be easier to humor the man rather than try to correct him, especially since he seemed so sure he knew me." Gaenor accepted the answer without comment, but privately doubted its veracity.

The party proceeded down the long corridors of the castle. Several nobles, dressed in ornate, lace-trimmed clothing got a glimpse of the amusement on Morres' face and promptly joined the

procession out of curiosity, so that by the time they arrived in Pawlen III's throne room, their number had swollen to over a score.

The king, a man in his early twenties with light brown hair and beard, while seated comfortably in a large padded chair was looking terminally bored. Behind him were two men-at-arms wearing the green livery of Mishanda and a herald who wore a tabard similar to Chas', and in front of him were five men wearing the long white caftans, trimmed with a vivid indigo blue, that were reserved in Cilbe to government functionaries. The one doing the talking was obviously the same man whose portrait Lord Morres had been throwing darts at, Sinius Girdecus Ralba, Cilben Legate to his Majesty King Pawlen III of Mishanda.

Pawlen looked up hopefully as the party entered the high-ceilinged room and Chas took that as a cue.

"Your Royal Majesty," he called out in ringing tones that filled the room and interrupted whatever Girdecus had been saying, "by your command, I present Master Artur the Southlander, Adept of Narmouth, his assistant Miss Gaenor of Narmouth, and the heir to your most loyal Barony of Ander, Sir Tander Roldersson!

Tander smiled tightly to himself. He wasn't there by royal command, but now having been announced as such it was as good as if he had been. Maybe Mnoster was right, he thought silently, and if I play Caroms with the king, I won't have to worry about letting him win. He'll beat me soundly even if I play my best.

Gaenor and Artur had been well-coached as to court etiquette and what to expect. They were to advance to within one rod of the throne and then bow or curtsy and wait for his Majesty to wave them forward, but what actually happened surprised them both.

"Artur, my old friend!" the young king shouted, enthusiastically leaping from the velvet-covered chair and all but running toward them. He embraced Artur in a rough hug. The courtiers who had followed their party into the throne room gasped in shock at Pawlen's behavior, but Morres was smiling demonically. "How good to see you again! And Gaenor," he continued, taking her hand with a wink the Cilben delegation couldn't see, "my heart has been positively empty in your absence." He bowed and kissed her hand.

Flustered, Gaenor could only stammer out, "Your Majesty is too kind."

"Not at all," Pawlen replied smoothly. "Tander, it's been weeks! How about a game of Caroms at Tea?"

Only Tander had managed to totally recover before being addressed by this most unconventional behavior by the king. He had, of course met the young man before and had played with him on those rare occasions when his father had visited Ander, but while they had always been friendly, they'd never had the chance to be close. Pawlen was obviously up to something.

"My pleasure, Majesty," Tander told him with a warm smile.

"Good! Better yet, let's all spend the day together. Your Excellency," he turned to Girdecus and his men, "We're sure you'll forgive Us if We take this opportunity to renew Our acquaintance with these dear old friends. Let us continue this discussion another time, tomorrow morning after breakfast, perhaps. We should have time before the afternoon tide."

Girdecus who was staring at Artur as if he was seeing a ghost, shook his head and replied, "Of course,

Your Majesty. After breakfast then." He took another look at Artur and then shrugged. Another man in the delegation had also been examining Artur and cocked an eyebrow in his general direction before following the rest of the delegation out of court.

"Master Chasur," Pawlen remarked after the Cilbens had all left, "We thank you for your timely arrival. Lord Morres, did you have something to do with this as well?"

"Just a little," Morres replied, smiling.

"Thank you too, then. Gods! If I had to listen to the man just another few minutes, I swear I'd have throttled him right here in the throne room."

"Nice thought, Your Majesty," Morres replied. "I could have him called back, if you like."

"I'll forego the pleasure," Pawlen feined reluctance. "Now, Master Chasur, what business do you bring before me? Did I really summon these people?"

"Master Artur and Miss Gaenor. Yes, Sire. Sir Tander has serious business with you as well concerning the damage from the recent storm."

"Of course," Pawlen sighed. "Was there much damage in Ander, Sir Tander?"

"Not as much as in some other areas," Tander replied. "As this letter from my father states, we're only requesting a fifty percent reduction in taxes."

"No money from the Treasury for relief? That's refreshing."

"The barony's reserves were fairly well prepared for such an eventuality. We're only requesting enough so that we do not burden our people unduly."

"Granted," Pawlen said with an easy wave of his hand. "You're the first who hasn't asked for half my treasury to repair a bridge or two. Master Chasur, could you refresh my memory regarding Master Artur and Miss Gaenor?" Chas reminded his king of the reason for Artur's summons. "Oh yes," the king said, remembering. "Good! I like this sort of business, but let's make it official." He led the party back toward the throne where he sat down and gave instructions to his court herald. The man hurried out through a door behind the throne and soon returned with an ornately calligraphed and illuminated document and a ring.

"Let all here assembled bear witness," the herald read from the vellum, "that We, Paulen III, King of Fair Mishanda, recognize the service and generosity of our subject, Artur the Southlander, Adept of Narmouth and do hereby induct him into Our Order of the Hawk and grant unto him and his heirs these arms, 'Gules, three dolphins in bend embowed or.' Signed this sixty-ninth day of spring in the third year of our reign." There was a large drawing of the coat of arms on the document which depicted three ferocious-looking, bright yellow fish placed on the bold red field in a line from the upper left to the lower right side of the drawn shield.

"I am told that it was once traditional to bestow a shield bearing one's arms to a new knight and armiger," Pawlen said taking the ring and the vellum sheet from the herald. "Our royal historian also informs Us that a knight was also invested with a golden chain and a set of spurs. However, in this modern age, since Our chivalric orders are no longer required to defend their kingdom on horseback with broadsword and shield, it has become customary to gift the recipient with a signet ring bearing his

arms. If you like you may commission a gold knight's chain to wear on formal occasions; some do. As I recall, Lord Mahk was so extravagant with his praises, Sir Artur, that I am now surprised that I didn't immediately remember who you were."

Pawlen handed the ring and scroll to Artur, who bowed as Chas had coached him and gave his promise of fealty and support to the Crown of Mishanda.

"It was no great deal, Your Majesty," Artur replied urbane after giving his oath. "It was just a simple matter of hospitality to a visitor on my land.

"To you, perhaps, but Mahk is very fond of that horse and says that if it weren't for you he would have had to destroy it. By the time he arrived in Misha he described you as a miracle worker, just short of a demigod, who could probably bring the dead back to life if it suited you."

"Hardly, Your Majesty," Artur laughed, glancing briefly at Gaenor, who shook her head almost subliminally. "That would take an act of the gods."

"Yes," Pawlen agreed. "Well I think that concludes the business for today. Morres?"

"I'll need to consult Sir Rojur," Morres replied, showing none of the anger he felt for his assistant, "I believe there may be some more outstanding petitions regarding storm relief."

"Well, let's try to clear them up tonight or by noon tomorrow," Pawlen replied. "For now, however, I'd like a little time off. We'll reconvene if and when more of our subjects turn up with business for Us." He turned back to Artur, who was busy being congratulated by Gaenor, Chas, and Tander. "Now, I do believe it's time for tea. Care to join me? Sir Tander, I believe we have a Caroms table waiting for us."

"Certainly, Your Majesty, but I believe you'll find that Miss Gaenor is the real enthusiast here."

"Really?" Pawlen looked appraisingly at Gaenor. "All right. And it's Pawlen, at least while we're not stuck in court, courtesy of the table, don't you know. Say isn't that the Anderian baronial gem? I thought you were from Narmouth?"

"It was a gift from my sister Ibbet, Pawlen," Tander informed his king.

"Must be very close friends," Pawlen noted. "Tell me, Tander. How is Ibbet? I haven't seen her in years since I ascended the throne. Perhaps I should attend your harvest festival this autumn. I always enjoyed the festival when I came with father."

Twelve

"I could get very used to living in the palace," Gaenor sighed as she strolled back toward Earl Mnoster's home with Artur.

"We can't afford it," Artur reminded her.

"Even with your shiny new knighthood?"

"Gae, all that grant does is lengthen my name a bit. It adds absolutely nothing to our income. Titles only bring in money when they come equipped with a fief from which the holder can collect taxes. No land, no taxes."

"Nobles always charge more for their services," Gaenor pointed out.

"Think carefully about our regular customers, Gae. How many of them can afford to pay more than they do already?"

"Uh, Sir Briscard, Lord Marles, and Master Willar, I suppose."

"Not a very long list is it?"

"Hardly worth worrying about," Gaenor agreed. "At least we'll get to dine with his Majesty again for breakfast. So what good is a title, anyway?"

"Not a lot," Artur remarked. "Now you know why I've always laughed at the nobility."

"And now you are one."

"Only very loosely speaking," Artur disagreed. "I was gentry before, strictly speaking, because I owned a small plot of land. Now I have a minor title to go with it, nothing's changed. I doubt most of the townsfolk will even call me Sir Artur."

"Why wouldn't they?"

"Because we're not going to tell them."

"We aren't?"

"Well, maybe a few close friends, but frankly it would probably cut into our business."

"I don't follow you," Gaenor admitted, confused.

"Well, think it through. How does the average man or woman treat us, me especially?"

"With respect," Gaenor answered quickly.

"Respect from a distance," Artur corrected her. "There are only a few people who will come up to me on the street just to pass the time of day, and most of them are your relatives."

"There's Sir Briscard," Gaenor told him.

"Maybe, but then he is the mayor. It's his job to keep me in town and he acquires a cheap reputation for bravery by associating with me. Face it, most people are frightened to death of magic. In most parts of the world it's illegal and those found guilty of the practice can be killed."

"But you wouldn't hurt anyone without cause."

"I know that, but the fact that an adept is capable of wielding a power that most don't understand makes

people nervous around one. They fear what I might do if I were to lose my temper, so they tend to stay away unless they need my services."

"Will that happen to me after I'm initiated?" Gaenor asked.

"Maybe, but I doubt it. Remember the people of Narmouth know you. Those who have always thought of you as a strange girl will probably continue to think of you as a strange woman, and your close friends will probably remain close. I didn't grow up in Narmouth like you did, I came to town as a mysterious stranger and to many there I still am."

As they were talking they failed to notice a pair of Cilben Legionaries come up behind them. But they did notice the couple who suddenly walked up in front of them blocking their path.

"Artur of Narmouth?" one of them asked, not really uncertain of his identity. Artur nodded. "Come with us, please."

"Why?" Artur asked with a shrug and half a laugh.

"The Vice Legate would like a word with you, sir," came the reply. It was phrased as a request, but Artur knew better.

"Gae, you go ahead," he told her. "I'll catch up with you later."

"No," she refused, nervously moving her hands in and out of her purse and pockets. "I'll stay with you."

"Sorry, miss, but the Vice Legate said nothing about you, just him."

"It's all right," Artur reassured her. "I'll be fine." He looked around at the surrounding men. The one who had spoken held the rank of centurion, but Artur noticed that one of the men behind him was the old decurion who had once served in the Twelfth Legion. The other two were private soldiers. The decurion looked at Artur apologetically. "Centurion, will you at least provide an escort for my companion?"

"I'll do it," the decurion volunteered as Artur knew he would. The centurion nodded tightly and the decurion approached Gaenor. "This way, miss."

"Take care," Gaenor told Artur, taking his hand in hers. It looked like the gesture of a worried friend, but as she took his hand, she slipped a pair of small items into his palm.

"I will." Artur broke the gesture, continuing to hide whatever she had given him in his hand. When he was certain none of the Cilbens would notice he slipped them into a pocket in his trousers. Gaenor looked back, worried, several times as she moved away from Artur.

"This way," the centurion said gruffly as Gaenor finally passed out of sight into the shadows of the Mishandan streets.

Artur allowed his escort to lead him to the Cilben embassy a quarter of a mile away. As they approached the two-story, half-timbered building, he wondered why the legate hadn't insisted on one of the prestigious offices on the Great Bridge, but decided that they had probably chosen this building for its proximity to the palace.

Artur was kept waiting almost an hour in a large, second-floor office with only a pair of silent soldiers for

company. The room was well furnished with several well-padded chairs and an ornately carved wooden desk. Artur had seen the Vice Legate's office in Cilbe and it had been as sparse of luxury items as this was filled. The one decidedly Cilben touch was a large box full of tobacco and a small rack of unused clay pipes on top of the desk. The pipes, intended for guests, were intentionally disposable, being useful only once or twice. While waiting he helped himself to one of the Vice Legate's guest pipes, filled it up, and checked out Gaenor's parting gift. In his pouch he found an almond-size piece of flint and a short steel rod. That should be useful, he thought. He knew several fire spells of varying intensities and uses that could be cast with these two tools.

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that neither of his two guards were watching him overly intently. He put the flint back into his pocket and toyed with the steel rod for a few minutes before replacing it back into his pocket as well. There, he thought, even if they were watching, that should make them seem trivial. Magic was highly illegal in Cilbe, Artur knew, so they could hardly be expected to recognize the spell tools for what they were. Artur was just filling a second pipe when the Vice Legate, Locius Armenius Flacco, finally appeared.

"Getting your money's worth?" the tall, thin, bald man asked, waving the two guards out of the room.

"It's been a while since I've had Barian tobacco," Artur admitted casually as the door closed behind the departing guards. "Tobacco of any sort, for that matter."

"You look well, Arturus. Not showing your years at all. I could almost think you were a man of thirty rather than, what? Seventy?."

"Has it occurred to you that you're mistaking me for somebody else, Flacco?"

"I considered it," Flacco admitted sitting down behind his desk, lighting Artur's pipe, "and then quickly discounted the theory as soon as I saw you sitting here." As he continued, he reached into his desk and drew out his own personal pipe, a slightly larger wooden one with a bowl of stone. "You've changed your appearance, Arturus, but not your mannerisms."

"At my age, and I'm only sixty-seven," Artur corrected him, "habits tend to run rather deep."

"Sixty-seven? Really. I should only look so good when I'm that old," Flacco marveled. "Are you dyeing your hair?"

"It's a long story, Flacco, and one I doubt you'd believe. I know I wouldn't if it hadn't happened to me. I'll just say that it wasn't something I'd go through willingly again and let it go at that."

"Oh, come on, Arturus. You can tell me."

Can I? Artur thought. Not bloody likely. Aloud, he said, "Jube works in mysterious ways," and shrugged.

Flacco looked at him sourly, but realized that Artur wasn't likely to tell him any more. "How did you ever end up in Mishanda?"

"It's a place to be," Artur shrugged. "After I left Cilbe, I had to find some place to live. After wandering around, this seemed as good a home as any. It's a nice place to live, I'm not sure I'd care to visit it though." The remark was lost on Flacco.

"It's been a long time," Flacco remarked, changing the subject. "I could intercede with the Emperor on your behalf."

Yeah, right! Artur kept the thought to himself, Flacco may not have been an enemy, but he had never been a friend either. If you really believe that, I have some swamp land in Karkominia to bury you on. "Life is good in Mishanda," he told Flacco, "and King Pawlen doesn't make a habit out of ordering his subjects to commit suicide."

"You left family behind in Cilbe," Flacco continued. "Family members who could stand to have the blot of your conviction removed. I'll do what I can for you."

"Thank you," Artur said simply. He knew full well that he made sure that all his immediate family had been married or adopted out before his trial. He made sure of that. Legally speaking, there were no Cornellians left in Cilbe, but there was no need to make their lives difficult by making Flacco angry. "What do you want from me? I'm not the powerful senator I once was."

"I suppose not. Congratulations on your knighthood, though. Now you've made it back to at least the Equestrian ranks. Blood will tell, I guess."

"News travels fast," Artur commented dryly.

"Tell me, why did you choose to call yourself the 'Southlander'?"

"I didn't," Artur laughed. "That soubriquet was given to me when I first settled in Mishanda. The locals decided that I must have originally come from Sorvohn or Pahn and I saw no reason to correct them. However you still haven't answered my question. If you redeem my good name, what's in it for you?"

"The chance for promotion," Flacco responded.

"How? I doubt I'll ever return to Cilbe."

"Did you notice who the Ambassador is here?" Flacco countered

"Girdecus. Hardly big news, I've known it for weeks."

"Yes, Sinius Girdecus Ralba. Your old arch-enemy."

"Hardly. It was a matter of politics that I didn't care to play."

"But wasn't he the one who accused you?"

"Yes," Artur admitted, "and it was his personal regiment who chased me out of the Empire."

"They were trying to kill you," Flacco pointed out.

"They weren't very good at it," Artur shrugged.

"Do you feel no personal animosity toward the man?"

"Not really. No. That was a lifetime ago and as long as he's unable to touch my children, then there's nothing he can do to me. If you care to discredit him by returning me to the emperor's favor, have fun,

just don't expect me to come marching back to Cilbe."

"Alright," Flacco agreed. "I'll try to have your estates returned to your children."

"I don't know what they'll do with them, by now they've more than enough of their own, don't they?"

"They prosper," Flacco admitted. "You really did set them up well, but it was at your own expense."

"I'm doing all right."

"I suppose you are."

Thirteen

Artur walked away from the Cilben embassy a hour later equipped with one last pipe filled with Flacco's tobacco and wondering what Flacco was really up to. It was true that Girdecus was the man who had hounded him to retire from the Cilben Senate and then used him as a scapegoat once he was gone, but Flacco had always been Girdecus' loyal toady. It didn't seem in character for him to plot against his long-time superior.

Lost in thought, Artur almost didn't notice the two men who were following him. They moved silently, gliding from one night-darkened shadow to the next, waiting for him to leave the well-illuminated main street or to pause in some place that would give them the opportunity to accost him where there would be no witnesses. It was only when Artur paused to relight the pipe, using the flint and steel that Gaenor had thoughtfully provided him, that he happened to notice them.

After that, he would try to catch a glance of them in the windows of the shops he passed, or when turning a corner suddenly. They were both well built, and while dressed in dark clothing of the style favored by the common folk of Mishanda, their clothing seemed a little too new and they seemed a little too healthy to be common footpads.

Still Artur did nothing. If they were spies, they would merely follow him until he reached his destination. Then the Earl's men could handle them. If, however, they chose to attack him, he would be prepared.

Shifting the pipe's clay stem in his mouth, he reached into his pocket and drew out the flint and steel. Placing the flint nodule in one hand and the steel rod in the other, he whispered a short incantation. Now he was ready. The spell would be activated the moment he brought the two objects together.

It was several minutes before the two men made their move. Artur was beginning to think he had prepared the spell needlessly when he heard soft running footsteps come up behind him.

Spinning, Artur brought the flint and steel together and pointed them at his attackers, who were only a few feet away, their thick, short swords drawn and ready to spill his blood. There was an amazingly intense burst of light and heat and the two dropped their swords in surprise and started running away in panic at the discovery that their hair and clothes were on fire.

Artur didn't pause to watch them run, but their screams continued to assault him for a few minutes even after the loud splash of water that indicated they had found a full rain barrel with which to quench their flames. Instead, he picked up one of the swords and continued on his way.

"Cilben?" Gaenor asked when Artur showed her the sword.

"You got it," he agreed. "It's a common weapon. the sort issued to every private soldier in the Legions. The question is, why? If Flacco wanted me dead, he could have had me killed by his men when they met us."

"Radicus wouldn't have let them," Gaenor told him.

"Who?"

"The old man who escorted me here. He was very nice to me and seems to hold you in great esteem. Why is that?"

"He thinks he knows me from somewhere," Artur lied. "Maybe he does. An old legionary like him gets around a lot and so have I. Maybe we bumped into each other in one of the Thimdra States. But he wasn't with us on our way to the embassy."

"Maybe this Flacco wanted to make sure of who you were," Gaenor told him. "Who are you, Sir Artur? You seem to have both friends and enemies from an empire you claim to never have visited."

Artur briefly considered trying to avoid answering but decided against it. Gaenor was too bright and too stubborn to let him get away with it yet again. Also, he respected this young woman far too much, was too fond of her to lie any further.

"I was born Arturus Cornellian Marno to the Cornellian House in Imperial Cilbe," he told his partner. "If you like I'll give you the details of my life later, but the quick version is that I was brought up as a proper patrician's son should be. When I was sixteen I took a commission in the Imperial Army where I rapidly advanced over the next ten years to the rank of General. As the commander of the Twelfth Legion, and for the glory of the Empire, I conquered the Kingdom of Colch in what is now Southern Cilbe, suppressed rebellion among the tribes along the Minue, and established and kept the peace along the frontier with the Barbarian Kingdoms. In all it was quite a remarkable career and on the conclusion of my tenure I was granted a rare Triumph, a celebratory festival in my name, in the city of Cilbe. Then, in keeping with my rank, I entered the public service. As ambassador to Arberoa I established diplomatic links that invalidated any reason we might have had for conquest. Arberoa had some interesting trade items, but the land was hardly worth the effort of conquest.

"Finally, on my father's death, I became a member of the Senate. Well, my glory on the battlefield was never duplicated on the Senate floor. That's where I first tangled openly with Girdecus and his allies. Old Girdecus had it in for me, I suppose, because in my military career my promotions came over the heads of his own appointees.

"The endless intrigue was not to my taste and the Emperor, I'm told, had been jealous of my popularity with the Legions ever since his ascent. I could have been emperor if I'd wanted to. When old Balta died, The Twelfth Legion tried to declare me, but I'd have none of it. I had no legitimate claim to the throne, nor did I want it." Gaenor nodded. That was certainly in keeping with the man she knew.

"Anyway, I had only served in the Senate for two years before sickening of the whole deal and deciding to retire. My family had some nice, comfortable estates in Maite and I was content to settle down to the life of gentleman farmer and raise tea.

"However, Girdecus didn't want to let go. The moment I was safely out of the city, he started blaming me for everything from treason to the drought in Kenda. There wasn't much I could do in retirement and to return to the city would have meant my death. So when a friend came to me just ahead of an Imperial messenger and told me that the Emperor had ordered me to either stand trial or commit suicide, I made what few arrangements I could and then ran for the frontier.

"They nearly caught up to me in Wahton, but I managed to get away by fleeing into the Parch."

"The Parch?" Gaenor gasped. "No one can live in the Parch!"

"Not many," Artur admitted. "It takes magic. Very powerful magic. I was lucky. Nearly dead, I was found by some," he paused a moment and then continued, "people. They were adepts; they used magic, and brought me back to health through their magic. Part of what they did was to initiate me so that I could use my own latent magical powers to heal myself. The healing spell still works, that's why I stay so young-looking and healthy, but I haven't any conscious control over it. It was part of the initiation that planted that spell into my subconscious mind."

"I've never heard of a spell like that," Gaenor said, her professional curiosity taking over. "How does it work?"

"I haven't the faintest," Artur replied. "I never even learned how to cast it. Anyway, I stayed with my saviors for a year or so before moving on. I wandered around for over a dozen years making a living as an itinerant magician until the town fathers of Narmouth convinced me to stay there. A couple years later, I decided I needed an assistant and I think you know the rest."

"I guess I do," Gaenor smiled. "Wait a minute. It sounds like you lived an entire lifetime just in Cilbe. Just how old are you?"

Artur smiled, "Old enough, even if I don't look it."

"That health spell, will it make you live forever?"

"Of course not! I can be killed just like anyone else. I heal rapidly, but not fast enough to prevent a mortal wound."

"But," she persisted, "assuming you weren't wounded how long will you live?"

"I don't know," Artur replied dryly. "Check back with me in a century or two."

"That settles it then," Gaenor told him firmly.

"What's that?"

"I'm just going to have to learn that health spell of yours."

Artur laughed. "What if I told you that I just made this all up?"

"I wouldn't believe you," she replied.

"But you believe the rest?"

"Artur, I know you better than you think and I know when you're lying." Artur stared at Gaenor wondering just how true that was. "Keep that in mind over the next few decades," she added.

Part III FIRDAN

One

Breakfast at the palace was a small, intimate affair with no more than seventy or eighty notables present. Several long tables had been set up for the guests, but Artur and Gaenor were among the dozen that King Pawlen invited to the high board.

Pawlen, on being reminded of Ibbet of Ander's existence, had questioned Sir Tander about her for the better part of the previous afternoon. Gaenor was not too dazzled by the honor of sitting next to the king that morning, however, to notice that Pawlen was trying to befriend her in the hopes that she might speak favorably of him to Ibbet. She was tempted to tell him that he didn't need to try so hard, since she knew her friend would jump at the chance to marry him and not only for the obvious political reasons, but she held her tongue. Why should she spoil Ibbet's fun after all?

Girdecus and Flacco were seated at the high board and Artur found himself constantly shifting in his seat so that Girdecus couldn't get a clear view of him. Artur wasn't sure who had ordered the attack on him and it seemed likely that Girdecus might have been behind the incident. However if the ambassador was unaware of Artur's identity then Artur didn't want to alert his old enemy.

Unfortunately King Pawlen who, along with Gaenor and Tander, sat between Artur and Girdecus, kept rocking back and forth in his attempt to talk to both Gaenor and Tander, and Artur had to keep rocking with him in order to stay out of Girdecus' sight. Finally, after dropping a half-eaten roll into his lap several times in his efforts, Artur realized that if he kept this up, he'd never get to finish the meal, so instead he raised his hand slightly and wiggled his fingers tauntingly at Girdecus in the same manner as he had done so often back in the Cilben Senate.

Girdecus' eyes bugged out and all the blood drained from his face. He clutched at his chest as though in great pain and was visibly having trouble breathing. After a few moments, he collapsed face first at the table. Pawlen summoned his personal physician to see to Girdecus who was quickly removed to a nearby chamber. As the furor that had been caused by the ambassador's collapse subsided, Flacco caught Artur's eye and, almost imperceptibly, nodded toward him as though in acknowledgement of a great service.

Artur realized that maybe he had felt some residual bitterness toward his old rival, but no longer. Revenge, he now knew, was not only sweet, but also cured the hatred that he had felt toward the man who had forced him from his one-time home.

"Sir Artur?" He heard the king call him back from his reverie.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty," Artur apologized. "Just thinking. What did you say?"

"We were just wondering if you would do Us a small favor," the king replied casually.

"Of course, Your Majesty," Artur replied equally casually, but feeling a little nervous. Even on such short acquaintance, Artur had learned that when the young king of Mishanda spoke of himself in the plural, he was about to give a command. "You have but to ask and your humble subject will obey." There! he thought smugly, That ought to be courtly enough.

"Good. Well, as you may know Our royal cousin, Marnoric III will be formally crowned King of Firdan at the next full moon. Part of the ceremony requires an adept to cast a spell that will bind the king and his queen to their subjects. Here in Mishanda this ritual has always been performed by the Royal Court Wizard, but in Firdan custom requires a foreigner as they feel that no true subject would ever cast a spell that put such restrictions on his monarch. The service of a foreign adept has traditionally been one of the gifts of the Royal Family of Mishanda to our cousins in Firdan, but Our wizard seems to have been detained in one of the out-lying provinces. We were about to send a request to the University for one of the adepts in their Department of Magical Studies, when Sir Tander pointed out just how appropriate it would be for Our newest member of the Order of the Hawk, who just happens to be adept, to perform this service instead. You and Miss Gaenor will join Us when Our ship sets sail this afternoon, won't you?"

Gaenor looked at Artur with a stricken look on her face. He knew she was torn between the honor of traveling with his Majesty and the appointment she so wanted to keep at the University, and from her expression, Artur realized that her initiation as an adept was clearly winning out. Still, the king's request, as casually as it had been made, was not the sort to be refused, but Artur tried anyway for Gaenor's sake.

"Your Majesty greatly honors me," Artur replied smoothly, "but my absence from Narmouth has already been longer than we had planned. I'm sure the mayor is worried about his horses, if not about Miss Gaenor and me." He smiled then to show he wasn't completely serious about the mayor's priorities.

"We don't see any problem," Pawlen replied, smiling. "We will see to it that Narmouth is more than adequately compensated for the extended absence of its town wizard and We will also personally see to it that the mayor's horses are returned to him. All right?"

Artur knew that the king was being more than reasonable and he was forced to agree, dreading the coming argument with Gaenor which he suspected would commence directly after breakfast.

Near the end of the meal, the king's physician approached and announce to Pawlen that the Cilben Ambassador was quite sick, but would soon recover from his mysterious illness and in fact had already recovered enough to be returned to the embassy. Artur felt some slight relief. After all Girdecus may have tried to kill him in the past but had obviously never succeeded. This close call for Girdecus now was just a matter of getting even. He wouldn't have been overly concerned if the ambassador had died, but a near miss seemed far more just in Artur's eyes.

The breakfast crowd broke up soon after that, but before Artur could face his partner, Chas came over to them from the far end of one of the long tables.

"It seems we'll be traveling together some more," he informed them with a grin. "I'm to serve his Majesty as his personal herald while in Firdan."

"Which ship is the king's?" Artur asked, "and where is she docked?"

"For that matter," Gaenor added with a strange note in her voice, almost like sarcasm, "what time should we board her?"

"Shortly after noon," Chas replied. "Tell you what. I'll pick you up at Earl Mnoster's later this morning. We'll eat an early lunch together and then go aboard."

Much to Artur's surprise, Gaenor did not mention the matter of her initiation as they walked back with Sir Tander to his uncle's house. In fact she avoided the subject entirely by speaking of Ibbet's impending courtship.

"No you won't!" she told Tander emphatically.

"But if, as you say, she'd be more than amenable to a marriage to the king, why shouldn't I arrange it before Pawlen leaves?" Tander asked confused.

"You will not spoil your sister's fun!"

"Fun?" Tander repeated. "Ibbet's always known that her marriage would be arranged. It's just lucky that there are no available princesses in any of the realms with whom we are on friendly terms at the moment. Otherwise Pawlen would almost certainly have to marry one of them and we'd never consider the opportunity to make such a match."

"That's another thing," Gaenor told him. "Our king has the rare chance to actually marry for love. That sort of thing happens seldom enough to a commoner, but it's almost unheard of for a monarch. I suspect he plans to woo your sister at your harvest festival this autumn. He's certainly hinted at it enough, although I wouldn't be surprised if he showed up in Ander for some reason or other before then just to check her out."

"What do you mean?" Tander laughed. "Pawlen doesn't need to check Ibbet out. They know each other very well indeed. Why, they're almost the same age and used to play together as children."

"And they haven't seen each other in years. I suspect that his Majesty doesn't know just how beautiful his old playmate has become. Let it be a surprise for both of them," Gaenor urged him.

"But shouldn't I at least alert Ibbet to the possibility?"

"No! Definitely not," she told him. "She's a smart girl. She'll figure it out for herself as soon as he shows up anyway."

"If you say so, but I'm still going to tell my father," Tander said it as though challenging her to stop him.

"By all means do," she agreed. "It will give him the chance to cancel the agreement to that wastrel she is currently betrothed to, whoever he is."

"You mean Sir Rojur," Tander supplied.

"I might have known," said Gaenor, shaking her head. "And he wouldn't even let his future brother-in-law in to see the king?"

"Rojur is not the smartest man I've ever met," Tander conceded. "I suspect he thought he would seem more important that way."

"He's unemployed now," Artur told them.

"I'm surprised he isn't missing his head," Gaenor remarked, "considering how angry Lord Morres was. I guess he wasn't as corrupt as we thought."

"On the contrary," Tander corrected her, "Morres is one of the most corrupt politicians in Misha, but he isn't stupid. Jacking up his rates for the royal calendar to storm victims would have united his many enemies against him, but by showing compassion and letting storm victims see the king for free, he not only keeps them from attacking him but actually forces some to work with him."

Gaenor looked confused for a moment and then understanding sunk in as she remembered Artur's story. "Politics!" she laughed.

"Yes," Artur laughed along with her. "It's a game best left to somebody else."

"Now, Tander you can help me pick out a gift for your sister," Gaenor went on.

"Who's giving it?" he asked suspiciously.

"Me, of course. She gave me so much when we were in Ander and I haven't yet returned the favor."

"You'd get on fine in Arberoa," Artur laughed. When Gaenor didn't understand, he explained, "They have a custom there called potlatch. Simply put, when an Arberoan is given a gift they are put under a strong obligation to eventually give something in return that is of equal or, preferably, greater value."

"Sounds reasonable," Gaenor admitted.

"In theory," Artur agreed, "but some Arberoan tribes have been known to take the custom to fantastic extremes. The example I was given involved two villages whose headmen and their families had a long tradition of potlatch between them. One thing led to another and each headman would invite the other, his entire family, and later his entire village over for grand bouts of feasting and ritual gift-giving. Each one, of course, felt obligated to out-do the other, and after many years, when the value of the hypothetical gifts exceeded the value of what the givers owned, one bright person came up with the incredible idea of destroying valuable artifacts in honor of his guests."

"Odd notion," Tander remarked.

"Very. Actually, I'm simplifying the story a bit. The Arberoans have always considered that the act of destroying something of value was more expensive than giving it away, since if you gave it away there was always the chance you might get it back, but once destroyed it was gone forever."

"All right, I can follow the logic that far," Tander allowed, "but why intentionally destroy anything in the first place?"

"What about sacrifices to the gods?" Artur countered. Tander nodded. "It doesn't matter, it's just the way they think. Every society I've ever observed has some quirks. This is just one of theirs, along with the obligation of potlatch. Back to our two villages. After a couple of generations there was nothing left to

destroy except the villages themselves."

"They didn't!" Tander gasped.

"They did. Oh, not all at once. It started with the destruction of buildings that were due for replacement anyway, but that too escalated until one headman felt obligated to destroy his entire village, and not to be out-done, the other destroyed not only his village, but most of his slaves as well, which badly depleted the workforce. In the end both villages committed suicide in each other's honor."

"That's horrible!" Gaenor exclaimed.

"Most other Arberoans, for the most part, thought so too when the news spread and generally agree these days to limit the excesses of destructive potlatch."

"Glad to hear it," Gaenor told him dryly, "but surely those two villages weren't the only ones to get excessive. How many villages were destroyed that way?"

"Quite a few, I understand, although the stories may have improved with age. All this happened over one hundred years ago. There are several tribes in Arberoa and not all were quite so excessive in their practice of potlatch, but eventually the priests stepped in and, after some rather impressive rituals in which their gods may have played a direct part, they declared that all potlatch obligations had been cancelled. Further most Arberoan tribes now consider destructive or even escalating potlatch practices to be a sacrilege to the gods and endeavor to keep the equality of potlatch gifts as precisely equal as possible."

"That's much more reasonable," Gaenor agreed. "Now what can I get Ibbet?" she asked turning back to Tander.

"Well, when I'm looking for a gift for her, I usually find her some nice piece of jewelry."

"Ibbet has excellent taste," Gaenor commented, fingering the necklace her friend had given her, "and I doubt I could afford to buy her anything of appropriate value."

"Quartz is cheap," Tander told her.

"Gold isn't," she retorted.

"Maybe something for her pink garden," Artur suggested.

"That's a good idea," Tander agreed. "She's always asking me to look for more plants and she does most of the selection of annuals for the pink garden. The perennials were planted by our mother," he added. "But all the good nurseries in Misha are miles away - too far to get there and still be on time to leave for Firdan."

"Maybe I can find something unusual in Firdan," Gaenor considered.

"Ibbet would love something exotic," Tander agreed.

"All right," she decided, "but it will have to be something special if I'm going to put it off so long. Artur, what sort of flowers grow in Firdan?"

Artur shrugged.

Two

Gaenor was playing one last game of Caroms on Earl Mnoster's table when Chas arrived later that morning. She looked up briefly when he walked into the game room and then bent down to consider what would be her last shot for the foreseeable future. She walked around the table to study what was her only legal shot from every angle. It was a tough one. Her previous shot, which sunk one of the green balls, had left the cue ball nearly trapped behind two other green balls and she would have to make a double bank-shot just to hit one of the colored balls first or else accept a seven-point penalty. The points didn't really matter, of course; making the shot was all that counted.

Chas stood there for a minute but when Gaenor showed no sign of using the cue he announced, "Ready when you are."

"Sh!" Gaenor, Tander, and Mnoster all said in unison. Artur just chuckled and remained seated.

Finally Gaenor leaned over the table with her cue and took her shot. The black ball traveled smoothly to the first rail and bounced off at an angle toward the second. As it left the second rail, however, it became clear that she had not properly calculated the necessary angles and the cue ball missed its intended target and continued on into the far corner pocket.

"Scratch," Gaenor noted dejectedly.

"You came close, girl," Mnoster told her. "It was a tough shot for a beginner. Not sure I'd have been able to do it, and I've been playing for years. Maybe next time."

"Who knows when that might be?" Gaenor retorted.

"Who indeed?" Mnoster agreed, laughing. "It's in the hands of the gods. Just remember you'll always be welcome in my house."

"Thank you, Mnoster," she replied, hugging him and kissing his cheek. "Farewell."

"You too, girl," he smiled.

"Tander," Gaenor turned to the knight as Mnoster said good-bye to Artur, "please give my love to Ibbet."

"I will. Take care of yourself and Sir Artur."

"I'll try," she replied with a somewhat ironic look, "although he does seem to have displayed a remarkable talent for getting into trouble lately."

After the farewells had been said, Chas led the way to the courtyard where a carriage bearing the royal

arms stood waiting complete with a pair of coachmen dressed in the royal livery.

"I took the liberty of having your things sent ahead to the ship," Chas told them as they entered the carriage. As soon as they had boarded, the driver snapped his whip and the coach began to move. "One of my deputies will be heading down to Narmouth tomorrow morning. He'll return the mayor's horses when he does."

"Is he going south just to do that?" Artur asked, amazed.

"Not at all. Actually he has a mission to perform in the Duchy of Goster. Narmouth is a little out of the way, but not horribly so. I told him he could take a ship from Narmouth to Goster if there's one in port when he's there, so he was more than willing to take the risk. The voyage by sea would save him several days."

"Narmouth isn't a busy port except for the local fishing industry," Artur noted. "Your deputy is likely to be disappointed."

"I know that," Chas replied smugly, "but he doesn't. Not yet anyway."

"What's that, Chas?" Gaenor asked a few minutes later as they passed a collection of buildings all enclosed within an ivy-encrusted, red brick wall.

Chas glanced out the window to see what she was looking at so intently. "The University," he informed her quietly.

"That's what I thought," she replied. "Artur, it really takes twenty-four hours?"

"I'm afraid so," the adept replied. Gaenor sighed and continued to stare at the University compound as they passed. "It won't be much longer," Artur tried to comfort her. "When we're done in Firdan, I'll make sure we get you back here as soon as possible." Gaenor sighed again. "Or maybe," Artur continued, "We'll find two more adepts in Dana and take care of it there." He looked at Chas for confirmation but the herald merely shrugged noncommittally. "So what did you have in mind for lunch?" he asked Chas.

"Fresh fish."

Chas brought them to one of several establishments located in Misha's harbor district to take the best advantage of the fresh seafood landed there everyday.

Fresh seafood was nothing new to Gaenor. In Narmouth it was one of the staple foods - far cheaper than beef or pork. What was new to Gaenor, however, was the manner in which it was cooked here. The chefs of Misha had new and exciting ways for preparing what she had always thought of as "the same old thing." The portside inn had a limited selection, but offered a Wanlarian-style braised lemon sole in wine that was entirely new to Gaenor. Chas and Artur opted for the far more ordinary steamed lobsters.

"Artur, you can have that anytime you want back home," she berated him. "Don't you want to try something new and different?"

"No," Artur replied simply, sipping at his glass of dark ale.

After their meal they made their way through the crowded district to the wharf where their ship waited.

The vessel was the largest either Gaenor or Artur had ever seen. Chas told them that she - the HMS Dauntless - was the newest ship in the Royal Navy. The Dauntless was only the third ship built in Mishanda with two masts. The fore, or main, mast had been rigged to support three large square sails and up to two jibs. The aft mast was only half the height of the main mast and could support a large triangular spanker. There was also space provided for staysails and studding sails.

"She's just back in from her maiden voyage," Chas announced, "where she beat all previous speed records."

"With three courses of sail, I can believe that," Artur commented. "Isn't having that much canvas rather dangerous? A sudden gust of wind could uproot the mast."

"I'm no expert," Chas admitted as they approached the gangplank, "but I understand that the hull itself has been braced and reinforced to handle the new rigging. In any case Captain Trobur is our best man at sea. He knows what he can and can't get away with. It was he, in fact, who kept the designers from adding a fourth course because she couldn't take it."

"I did, indeed!" a deep voice boomed from the main deck. "Said that the rigging would snap like spider webs in a stiff breeze. When they insisted I told them to give me a set of studding sails instead." He pronounced the phrase as "stunsils". "Doubt I'll ever find a use for them unless I'm nearly becalmed, but at least it got those idiots off my back. Welcome aboard, Master Chasur! Who're your friends?" Chas handled the introductions. Captain Trobur clasped Artur's hand and kissed Gaenor's. "Always glad to have a pretty face aboard," he added.

"I thought there was a superstition against women on ships," Gaenor commented.

"On fishing boats, perhaps," Trobur scoffed, "but not on a real ship, lass. Oh, I might worry a bit if we were going to war, but that would be more for your safety than out of any superstition. After all, if women weren't suppose to go to sea then why would Maera" the Mishandan deity of the deep ocean "be a goddess instead of a god?"

"Good point," she conceded.

"Of course it is," the captain replied with a wink that made Gaenor laugh. "It's my point! All right, everyone is here except the king and doesn't that just figure? He'd better get here in a bell or less or we'll stand a chance of getting stuck in the middle of the harbor. Does he think he can command the tides as easily as he does his subjects?"

"I'm sure he'll be along presently," Chas told the gruff captain. "In fact, I believe that's his coach coming down the wharf now."

"Well he'd better hurry up. He wasn't as thoughtful as you were to send his luggage ahead and I want everything stowed properly before we cast off."

"I'll have a word with his servants as soon as they get here," the herald promised.

"See that you do. Well, I suppose I'd better put on my happy face. You, boy!" he shouted to a passing cabin boy, "Show Sir Artur and Miss Gaenor to their cabins. You'll want to change into something a bit warmer," he explained in a slightly softer voice. It's been a warm spring on land, but it's still chilly over the water." Artur thanked him and went with Gaenor to find warmer clothing.

They arrived back on deck a few minutes later to discover a Cilben legionary arguing with the Captain.

"Look, chum," Trobur said insultingly, "How many times do I have to tell you. There ain't no Cilbens on board my ship!"

"Excuse me, captain," Artur interrupted quietly, "who is this soldier looking for?"

"Some Cilben dignitary with a three-course name. Arturus something or other. Oh, would that be you, Sir Artur?"

"It might be," Artur admitted. "Arturus would be the Cilben form of my name and I did once have dealings with the Empire many years ago."

"Fine, you handle him," Trobur grumbled walking away, "but we're casting off in two minutes," he shot back over his shoulder.

"Yes, soldier?" Artur asked mildly as the first mate began shouting for "All hands on deck."

"You are Arturus Cornellian Marno, sir?" the legionary asked.

"I have gone by that name," Artur admitted.

"Package for you from the Vice Legate." the young soldier held out a wooden box that had been tied shut with a bright red ribbon.

"Prepare to cast off!" the first mate cried. Over two dozen men ran across the deck. Some ran to the starboard side and stood by all docking lines and others climbed up into the rigging.

Artur accepted the box and thanked the young Cilben for delivering it.

"Cast off all lines!" came the command.

The legionary saluted Artur using the Cilben hand-over-heart salute and turned and marched away from the dock as the heavy hempen cables were released and the large ship floated freely at the dock.

Slowly, the Dauntless began to pull away, drifting out into the harbor with the receding tide.

"What did he give you?" Gaenor asked, coming up behind Artur as he slipped the ribbon off the finely carved box.

"Something from Flacco," Artur replied. He opened the box to reveal a large pouch of tobacco and a short, but well-made briar pipe. There was also a brief hand written note. Artur glance at it and chuckled, then passed it to Gaenor.

"Nice try," the note read. "Next time, though, please finish the job. Best wishes, F."

"Rather bold of him, don't you think?" Gaenor remarked.

"Not really," Artur replied. "He doesn't really say anything and I'm sure he picked his messenger carefully, knowing he wouldn't try to open the package before delivering it. The only thing that might actually get him in trouble, if the word gets around, is the fact that he sent me a gift at all, but I'm sure that

he can explain it away as a congratulatory gift to a recently elevated knight and companion of the king."

"So you think he'll pass it off as an attempt to indirectly influence his Majesty?"

"I think so. It's the sort of thing a vice legate might do. Besides what did I really do to old Girdecus? Wave at him?"

"Didn't you tell me that magic was illegal in Cilbe?" Gaenor pointed out. "He could claim you cursed him. How would he know otherwise?"

"Maybe," Artur allowed, "but we're not in Cilbe. Any Mishandan can tell you it takes more than that to curse someone."

The Dauntless, under the helmsman's guidance, slipped quietly out into the main current of the Rinet and began gathering speed as she floated downstream.

King Pawlen came up on deck, waved cheerily to Artur and Gaenor and walked over to them. "Great day for sailing, hey?" The sun was bright and high in the sky and a warm breeze blew across the river toward them. There were only a few high clouds in sight.

"It is pleasant weather, Your Majesty," Artur allowed.

"Um, shouldn't they be setting sail," Pawlen asked, noting that while most of the crew was still up in the rigging there was no sign that they were ready to unfurl the ship's sails.

"The channel is too narrow here," Artur told him, "and the wind is coming from the wrong quarter. I imagine Captain Trobur is waiting for both conditions to change."

"I've never sailed on a real ship before," Pawlen confided. "As a matter of fact I've only been out of the kingdom once before, about five years ago when the Crown Prince of Gostrina got married. We went overland then. To tell you the truth, I'm a little worried about getting seasick."

"Don't worry, Pawlen," Gaenor said, putting a comforting hand on his arm and taking advantage of their shared interest in Caroms. "If you find you have a problem, Artur has a spell for that."

"You do?" the king asked the adept hopefully.

"Oh yes. It comes in very handy for people traveling by coach as well as by ship."

"I've never had that problem in a coach," Pawlen commented.

"Then maybe you won't at sea either."

"I hope not."

Other passengers came up on deck, one or two at a time as the Dauntless left the mouth of the river and drifted on into the long, narrow Asquamaquet Bay.

"We're going to have to set sail soon," the king commented dryly, "unless the captain proposes to drift the twenty-odd leagues to the open sea."

No sooner had he said that when the first mate shouted an order and a muffled boom could be heard as the sailors in the rigging unfurled the sails. The Dauntless shook as the wind suddenly filled the sails and propelled the ship forward at a far faster rate of speed.

"We'll be well to sea by nightfall," Artur predicted. "Now, since Your Majesty has not traveled by ship before, perhaps you are unaware of one of the more pleasant customs of a sea voyage."

"Really?" the king's eyes came alive with delight. "And what would that be, Sir Artur?"

"The first drink. Now that we're under sail, it's time we toasted our captain, his ship and ourselves."

"Sounds good to me," Pawlen nodded.

"And then," Artur continued, "we can toast the weather, the four winds, and each and every one of the gods, one at a time."

"That sounds like an awful lot of drinking," Pawlen commented.

"Yes, it should keep us occupied for the better part of the voyage."

Three

His Royal Majesty, King Pawlen III of Fair Mishanda, suspected an assassination attempt. As he leaned over the leeward rail, he vowed to seek out the miscreant who had done this to him and repay him in kind with interest. Surely what he was suffering was far worse than ordinary seasickness.

"Of course it is," Gaenor told him unsympathetically. Pawlen groaned and leaned back over the rail far enough to catch some of the chilling salt spray in his face. Together with the cold, misty air that morning, it did nothing toward making him feel any better. "It's called a hangover. You shouldn't have tried to match Artur drink for drink. He doesn't get hangovers or seasick for that matter." Pawlen looked at her sourly and then leaned back over the rail.

"He doesn't seem to get drunk either," Chas said as he stumbled toward them to join Pawlen at the rail.

"Very rarely," Gaenor agreed. She didn't tell them that it was a side effect of his perpetual healing spell. Any poison that didn't kill him outright was quickly excised from his body. It took a lot of heavy drinking of something stronger than ale to get Artur drunk.

"The man must be made of steel. I think I ought to outlaw that sort of behavior," Pawlen muttered bitterly.

"Good idea," Chas agreed.

Gaenor excused herself from their sparkling company a few moments later when more of the royal party emerged from the cabin in various states of ill health and went, instead, to Artur's cabin where the adept was busy at work.

"Which are you planning to cure first?" she asked him. "Their hangovers or the motion sickness?"

"I thought I'd handle them both at once," Artur replied.

"Oh? A new spell?" she asked interestedly.

"You aren't the only one who can invent them, Gae," he retorted.

"Don't you want me to at least check it out? You usually do."

"It's hardly necessary," Artur said casually, "it's just a simple combination of two other spells, but if it will make you happy, here." He passed her a piece of paper filled with magical notations. A moment later she giggled. "Now what?"

"Artur, how many times do I have to remind you what you taught me yourself about the compound effects of interactive ingredients?"

"Hmm? What's the problem?"

"The addition of salt from the seasick cure into the ale of the hangover cure. That's the problem!"

"So they have to drink salty beer. Not exactly to my taste, but it's better than the alternative."

"Not really," Gaenor disagreed. "The salt will take the fizz out of the beer and the potion you create will leave your victims without much will."

"Oops," Artur said sheepishly.

"To say the least. Here let me see what I can come up with." She grabbed his notebook, turned to a blank page, and started writing. "Try this," she said a few minutes later handing the notebook back.

Artur glanced at the page. "You're sure?" She nodded. "Looks like there's some unnecessary stuff in here," he commented suspiciously.

"Just a few pyrotechnics to make it a bit flashier. It'll impress the hell out of his Majesty," she winked.

Artur chuckled. "Why not! Will you help set up the show?"

"It was my idea," she agreed. "I suppose I ought to at least help out. Should I put on something skimpy and brightly colored like the traveling entertainers who come to the festivals?"

"No need to go that far," he told her. "I'm an adept, not a stage magician."

"Really? You almost did one really effective mesmerism act." He snorted and she stuck her tongue out at him in response.

It occurred to Artur as they began to prepare that he had become extremely dependant on Gaenor and her natural ability at magic. Is that why I've never found the opportunity to get her initiated? Fear of losing her? Artur shook his head. Forget it, kid. You're old enough to be her father. Or her father's father, for Jube's sake!

Together they set up a large bowl from the galley on top of the mainsail's capstan. They decided that the easiest way to perform the spell would be for Gaenor to hand Artur the tools and ingredients as he needed them. The word had gone out that they were about to work a "great spell" and most of the royal party was assembled on deck by the time Artur was ready to begin. The audience appeared to be in two groups. Directly in front of Artur and Gaenor's makeshift stage stood King Pawlen and six or seven other nobles who had been drinking with Artur the night before. Several others, mostly the ladies who accompanied their lords, stood slightly up-ship watching with barely concealed interest.

The spell showed a real flare for the dramatic. Strictly speaking there was no need for the spell to exhibit any outward manifestation, but Gaenor had designed it so that the moment Artur began the incantation he would be encased in a aura of blue sparkling light.

Even knowing that, Artur found it difficult to get the spell exactly right. The scintillating lights distracted him and they made it almost impossible to see what he was doing. It became obvious to Artur and Gaenor that he must have made a variation in the specified performance of the spell's ritual, for as he completed the spell, the aura that had encased him flowed from his hands and into the large bowl already full of mildly seasoned water.

The liquid in the bowl sparkled and shimmered with its own light as the king and the assembled nobles in his party, especially the ones who were suffering that morning, applauded.

"Is it safe, do you think?" Artur asked Gae quietly out of the side of his mouth.

"It should be. It was difficult to make out what you were doing, but I think the significant error came during the portion at the end that was supposed to turn off the light show. It won't kill them in any case." Then she announced in a much louder voice, "Drink up, boys! Each of you will need to drink a full tankard."

"We can't just spill it out?" Chas asked, remembering the hangover cure Gaenor had devised for his uncle in Omath.

"No, you'll have to drink this one. It'll restore some vital liquids to your bodies," Gaenor replied. Chas shrugged and dipped his tankard into the luminous liquid.

"Fah!" one man, a duke from somewhere in northern Mishanda, spat. "This stuff tastes filthy!"

"Then don't drink it, your Grace," Artur replied calmly, "and learn to enjoy your hangover." The duke glared at the adept for a moment, but looked as though he was about to return to the leeward rail and he soon thought better of it and drank the potion.

It took all the effort Pawlen could muster to down the foul tasting, glowing liquid, but when he finished he realized that he was no longer spinning in opposition to the rest of the world. "Sir Artur," he enthused, "this stuff is wonderful!"

"Is he drinking the same thing we are, Lord Torse?" the duke who had complained about the taste muttered. Chas merely shrugged and continued to choke down his share of the potion.

"By the gods," the king continued, "if I hadn't already knighted you, I'd do it for this alone!"

"Gaenor devised the spell," Artur replied modestly.

"Really? I'll knight her then."

"Your Majesty!" the middle-aged duke who had still not finished his potion protested. "We do not knight women in Mishanda."

"You don't," Pawlen corrected him. "Perhaps We do."

"It isn't proper!"

"It is unprecedented," Chas admitted when Pawlen turned toward him.

"Then I'll think of something else," Pawlen said resolutely. "Sir Artur, I don't suppose you can do anything about this miserable weather?"

"I can lead you all in a prayer to Pleusa," Artur suggested, "but I doubt it would make a whole lot of difference. She doesn't have much of a reputation for answering that sort of prayer."

"Even if she did," the king agreed, "it would only be to give us something worse tomorrow." Mishandan mythology was full of cautionary tales about foolish mortals who asked the gods for unnecessary favors. Even the most benevolent deity could be capricious at times and Pleusa, Goddess of Weather, was more so than most.

"Besides, Your Majesty," Artur continued, "It may be cold and wet, but the ship is sailing smoothly enough and visibility isn't too bad. Why risk bringing a hurricane down on us?"

Pawlen agreed, looking nervously over his shoulder.

The Dauntless sailed on. Once out of Asquamaquet Bay, Captain Trobur had set a southeasterly course until they were well beyond sight of land.

"Aren't we out rather far?" Gaenor asked him late that afternoon. "I always thought ships tried to hug the coast where at all possible." They stood together up on the bridge of the ship. The morning's mist had cleared up to a heavy haze that allowed them three leagues or better visibility.

"That they do, lass, and so will we for the most part," Trobur told her, "but there's a reef off the southeast coast of County Kont and we want to sail clear of that. Nobody sails too far out in these waters, I assure you. I've seen the coast of Ichtar once. We were blown there by a storm. It was just a smudge on the horizon, but it was far too close for me."

"Why?" Gaenor asked. "What's wrong with Ichtar?" she couldn't remember anyone even mentioning that large, mysterious island to the east.

"Demons live there, lass," Trobur said with a shudder.

"Demons?" Gaenor laughed. "Surely they're just some old wives' tale, meant to frighten children into being good."

"Then call me an old wife," Trobur retorted, "but there's few as goes near Ichtar on purpose and even they won't set foot on that accursed shore." That conversation bothered Gaenor and she asked Artur about it that evening.

"Ichtar?" the adept asked. "I've heard of it, but there's not a lot to tell. There's some sort of people that live there."

"Demons?" Gaenor asked.

Artur considered that. "Perhaps," he told her at last. "Although that may just be our word for them. All I know about Ichtar is what I've been told. Whatever lives out there wants nothing to do with the likes of us. Sailors say they destroy any ship that comes too close, although from the little that has been mapped, it's clear that the island has a very rough coast with many reefs and sand bars. It's just as likely that those ships that have been lost just ran aground."

"But demons? Evil incarnate with vast and arcane powers?"

"It's a possibility," Artur shrugged. "On the other hand, maybe that's where the gods live and they just like their privacy."

"I thought the gods lived on Tars and Mialla."

"Who are we to truly know?"

Gaenor nodded, but was not entirely able to put the matter out of her mind. A seed of worry had germinated in her mind.

Four

The Dauntless was halfway between Kont and Firdan when the storm hit. Large as the ship was, the storm waves knocked it back and forth like a child's toy. Captain Trobur had ordered all sails furled except for a single narrow jib and the sea anchor had been cast off to keep the wooden vessel bow first to the storm.

Below decks, the uncontrolled motion overcame even Gaenor's best spells and the king and most of his party sat together in the royal compartment, sharing their misery. Chas found himself perpetually nauseated and mildly disoriented, but still able to function. Unwilling to remain with the chorus of groaning nobles, he sought out Artur and Gaenor.

"Come on in, Chas!" Artur greeted him cheerfully as he opened the door to his small cabin. Gaenor could be seen nearby in her adjoining cabin through the open doorway that linked hers to Artur's. She was busy writing in one of the home-made notebooks that Chas had come to think of as her trademark. She looked up as Chas entered and smiled at him before making one or two last notations. Then she closed the notebook and came into Artur's cabin to greet the herald.

"You're looking a little green, Chas," she remarked after the pleasantries.

"I'll live," he replied. "Is that porthole open?"

"It is," Artur nodded. "The air was a bit stuffy in here."

"But the storm," Chas protested. "Aren't you worried about the water getting in?" As he asked a storm wave broke over the bow of the ship. The vessel rocked violently as the seawater drained off the deck. Chas turned just a bit greener under the motion and a loud collective groan from the king's cabin could be heard over the noise of the wind and sea.

"Here," Artur guided Chas toward the open porthole. "Breathe in that fresh air." Chas pushed his face toward the opening just as another spray of salt water gushed toward the small window causing him to jerk his head back in reaction. "Whoa!" Artur laughed. "Maybe you'd better keep your eyes closed. There. Is that better?"

"Slightly," Chas gasped. "Hey! There's no water getting in." He opened his eyes and studied the porthole, his nausea temporarily forgotten. Curiously, he stuck his hand through the hole until it met resistance. "Feels like a glass dome, but I can't see a thing."

"Gaenor's latest spell," Artur replied. "A selectively permeable field."

"A what?"

"It's a dome of magical energy," Gaenor explained, "that will allow light and gaseous matter to pass through unobstructed, but anything in the solid or liquid states is stopped cold. Sort of like it hit a wall of solidified air."

"If you say so," Chas replied, confused. "I could never be an adept. It's just too damned technical."

"Oh," Artur smiled, "and heraldry isn't? 'Gules, three dolphins in bend embowed or,'" he quoted the blazon of his own arms. "Now who but another herald is supposed to know what that means?"

"The heraldic language was developed so that heralds could precisely describe any device without the necessity of drawing the emblazon. A roll of arms can be very pretty, but an armorial with just the blazons takes up far less room and is just as easy to do research in."

"Jargon is jargon," Artur replied. "If you can understand an heraldic blazon, you could learn to understand magical jargon. That's beside the point, however. Most adepts know almost nothing about theory, even the one or two each year who come through the university. All you have to do to be an adept, aside from the initiation, is memorize as many spells as possible. Knowing how they work is a luxury."

"But you and Gaenor discuss theory constantly?"

"My teachers were rather unusual," Artur admitted. "They taught me a lot of theory, but very few real spells. If I wanted to make a living as an adept, I had to learn to craft my own spells. I hate to admit it where she can hear me, but Gaenor is a magical genius."

"I'd already come to that conclusion," Chas admitted. Gaenor, feeling embarrassed about being talked about in the third person, looked away modestly.

"Right," Artur continued. "So being that all I could teach her was theory and the few spells I had invented, she went on to start inventing some for herself. In the process, she's managed to learn more about magic in the last few years than most adepts learn in their entire lives, including a few things that had never been discovered before. Now all we have to do is get her initiated."

"Most of this writing you see me do," Gaenor told him, "is work on a new magical theory." Chas looked at the adept's apprentice with new respect. "I hope to have it ready to publish in a few months, but all this traveling seems to be slowing me down."

"So, Chas," Artur changed the subject. "What brings you here today?"

"A change of scenery, mostly," Chas admitted. "Sitting around a stuffy room with a bunch of seasick nobles, wasn't doing anything to make me feel better, so I decided to wander over here to see what you were doing. Now I know; nothing I could possibly understand."

"You underestimate yourself, Chas," Artur told him grandly. "Actually, my research is almost entirely unmagical."

"What is it?" Chas asked interestedly. At last, he thought, I'll finally understand something these two say.

"This is a curious little mixture from Sorvohn I happened across while investigating a death a few years ago. I've been meaning to look into it further, but I've been too busy. This voyage has given me a bit of unexpected leisure time."

"Looks like a black powder," Chas commented, moving an oil lamp closer to get a look at the substance.

"Careful!" Artur stopped him. "This stuff is extremely flammable."

"And so's the ship," Gaenor added. "Do you really think you should be playing with that stuff on board?"

"It's safe enough, as long as I take precautions. Look, Chas." He poured a small quantity of the mixture on top of a sheet of paper. Then he took a small sliver of wood and place one end into the flame of the oil lamp, turning it into a miniature firebrand. Then he touched the flaming stick to the pile of black powder. As he did so, the powder disappeared in a puff of smoke which filled the air in the room with a sulfurous stench.

"And to think I came in here because the air was clearer," Chas choked out, rushing for the porthole. A minute later, however, the air cleared and Artur picked up the sheet of paper, brushed off some residual dust and showed it to Chas.

"See? It burnt so quickly it didn't even have time to burn the paper."

"Interesting," Chas replied uncertainly, "but what use is that to anyone?"

"Well, because it burns so violently - explosively in fact - this powder has some interesting propellant capabilities. I believe that if properly directed, the energy released by such an explosion can be a powerful tool."

So much for understanding, Chas thought. "A tool?"

"Of course. Think of all the uses. Mines and quarries will exploited with increased efficiency. Why the first time we encountered this stuff was when it had reduced a large building to rubble in an instant and did a fair amount of damage to the surrounding area."

"So it could be used as a weapon?"

"I suppose so, but that's not one of the more imaginative uses," Artur told him.

"Yes, but a weapon that can destroy whole buildings would be so terrible that men wouldn't dare to fight lest they be destroyed together with their enemies. The only reasonable alternative would be peace."

"Reasonable, maybe," Artur replied, "but I've never known people to be particularly reasonable when it came to warfare. I suspect that similar sentiments were expressed about the catapult, the broad sword, and the pike. I doubt explosives will do much to curb warfare."

"So what uses have you attempted to put this powder to?" Chas asked.

"Well, weapons had been my first thought," Artur admitted. "Imagine a large iron tube with one end closed off. Into that tube you stuff a measured amount of this powder and on top of that you put something to keep the powder compressed and then some sort of projectile, a stone ball perhaps. Now it's important that as much force as possible is directed toward pushing the ball. I think an oiled cloth wadding would do a good job. Finally you light the powder off and boom! The ball is flying through the air."

"Couldn't you do the same thing with a catapult?"

"Well, yes you can, but this sort of weapon can, in theory, throw objects as heavy as a trebuchet can, but with the trajectory of a ballista and take up much less room. The Dauntless has two small trebuchets on board. Most war ships have room for only one, but you could fit dozens of these weapons - powder-driven catapults if you like - on board with room to spare."

"I'm not sure I like the idea of that," Chas replied. "dozens of catapult shot hitting another ship at once could sink her in a single volley."

"Then, I thought of scaling down the weapon to use for hunting. You could mount it on a crossbow stock so it would be as easy to aim, but it would have an amazingly long range."

"Dozens of hunters are killed every year by accidental longbow shots by their fellows," Chas pointed out. "Wouldn't this increase the odds of getting hit by friendly fire?"

"Well, as with every application of power," Artur shrugged, "there are good and bad points. I don't really know how much of this would actually work in practice."

"So how many of these uses have you actually tested out?"

"None. As I said, I've been too busy over the last few years to do more than theorize. Any idea of how much longer this voyage should last?"

"I spoke to the captain earlier," Chas replied, "at the moment we're heading directly into the wind so we're not proceeding as rapidly as we might, having to tack back and forth constantly, and every so often the wind and seas get so bad we have to use the sea anchor just to keep our bow to the wind, but he expects the wind to shift around soon and come in behind us. When that happens we'll run ahead of it and maybe reach port day after tomorrow."

"That's pretty fast," Gaenor commented.

"Storms can be like that. On the other hand if the captain's wrong we could be out here for another few days just doing our best not to get blown to Ichtar." Chas and Gaenor both shuddered at the thought.

"Is that what's happening now?" Gaenor asked, a bit of worry in her voice.

"Gae, it's just an expression. With the sea anchor holding us back, Ichtar is several days away even if the wind was blowing that way which it isn't."

"But how do we know where we are?"

"Captain Trobur knows what he's doing. We'll probably be blown off course a bit, can't help it while using a sea anchor or so I'm told, but he has a fair idea of how far the wind is pushing us and we're not just sitting tight in any case. Whenever he thinks we can get away with it, Trobur orders his men to weigh the anchor and hoist a jib or stay sail or two so they can try tacking. Dauntless is a large ship and can sail in winds that would swamp a lesser vessel. It's only when the storm is at its worst that we have to drop all sails and set the anchor."

"But even when the storm is over," Gaenor persisted, "how will the captain know how far we've been blown?"

"A century ago," Chas replied, "we'd have had to sail until we found a shore we could identify and then the pilot would have to plot a new course, but marine navigation has come a long way and there are devices that, by sighting on the sun or one of several bright stars, can provide the pilot with figures from which he can calculate our actual position. Of course we'll have to wait for a patch of clear sky to come our way, but even if we get stuck with a heavy overcast we can always do it the old-fashioned way."

"Day after tomorrow?" Artur asked calmly. Chas nodded. "Sounds good to me. I'm running out of things to keep me busy here anyway."

Five

Captain Trobur's vast knowledge of the sea was born out when the storm broke two hours later and the pilot announced after taking his measurements that they weren't blown as far off course as he had feared.

The wind turned around and the ship's full complement of sails used it to the best advantage. The Dauntless' sharp prow cut effortlessly through the diminishing swells, sending cool salt spray up to cover everyone and everything on deck.

Most of the royal party were still recovering and stayed below, but Artur opted for a walk around the deck almost as soon as the sunlight began its long work of drying the salt-washed deck planks. He stood at the bow letting the fresh wind blow over him for well over an hour and left only when Gaenor came to tell him that dinner was ready.

They reached the outerharborofDana , the royal capital of Firdan, after breakfast two days later. The morning mist had cleared away after dawn and the passengers, now completely recovered thanks to an extra dose of Artur and Gaenor's potion, were all on deck and under foot to get their first glimpse of land in days.

The jibs and stay sails had been struck at first light, and the upper and lower topsails had not been deployed since the previous dusk, but the large square sail of the lower course and a large spanker at the stern were still in use and as the ship entered the outer harbor at the mouth of the River Ren commands were shouted from the bridge. "Stand by to heave to!" Crewmen hurried, often bumping their noble passengers out of the way, to get into position. As soon as the crew was in position, the great ship came about until the mainsail was edge on to the wind and began to luff or flap about at random.

"What are they doing?" Gaenor asked Chas who so far had seemed to display the greatest knowledge of sailing of anyone aboard save the captain and crew.

"It's called heaving to or coming to a halt," he explained. "First we turn until the wind no longer fills the mainsail."

"Strike the mainsail!" came the next command relayed from the captain and first mate by the bosun.

"Now the crew is hauling on the sheets, the ropes, that will pull up the wooden yard, I think it is called, that the lower edge of the sail is attached to until it reaches the upper yard, or is that a boom?" Gaenor shrugged, the fishing boats in Narmouth were all gaff-rigged.

"Furl the mainsail!"

"Now the sail is being tied shut and the only sail that is still unfurled, I notice, is the spanker - that triangular one in the stern. I'm not sure, but that's probably to give the pilot some control until they drop the anchor."

"Strike the spanker and drop anchor!" These orders were followed smartly and the ship came to a complete stop.

"Run up the hailing colors!" A large red and yellow checkered flag was hoisted to the top of the main mast until it flew only slightly lower than the twelve foot-long royal pennant. When that had been done the captain left the bridge and approached his passengers on the middle deck. He knew they had questions, landsmen always did.

"Captain," the young king predictably asked as the ship rocked gently in the waves, "why have we stopped?"

"Rules of the Dana harbormaster, sire," Captain Trobur replied. "All ships are to heave to and wait outside the harbor until the harbormaster and a local pilot can come out to meet us."

"Why? Are they afraid we're trying to smuggle something in?"

"Of course not, Your Majesty," Trobur chuckled, "although I suspect some merchantmen are inspected more closely than others before being allowed to make port. Danaport has a narrow harbor channel, but she is the principal port of Firdan and is very busy. In order to keep accidents, like running aground or collisions, from happening they come out with their own pilot who knows the harbor far better than any foreigner ever could to guide us in. They will also assign us a berth at one of their docks, so we won't have to search for a place to slip into.

"You'll notice that we've already hoisted the hailing colors, that red and yellow flag. That's to officially let them know that we desire to make port in Dana, although they probably noticed your royal pennant while

we were still under sail and were on their way before we even heaved to."

"Well, how long will we have to wait?"

"Probably half an hour to an hour, Sire. Don't worry we'll have you at your cousin's palace in time for lunch."

In fact they made better time than that. A few minutes after the captain spoke with his king, a small boat with a standing lug rig sailed out to meet them. On board the boat were two men, the Danaport harbormaster and his chief pilot. No underlings - only the top men would do to meet the King of Mishanda.

The harbormaster, a tall man who appeared to be in his mid-fifties, approached King Pawlen with an official-looking packet, while the pilot went directly to the bridge. After the obligatory greetings, Pawlen opened the package which contained a simple document which formally welcomed him to the Kingdom of Firdan and invited him to join his royal peers at his convenience.

"Couldn't Marney just have said that without the bother of putting it down in writing?" Pawlen asked with a smile.

"It is our way," the harbormaster replied stiffly. "The King's Word is law, but we have found that great tragedies can be averted if legally it is not the 'King's Word' until he puts it in writing. There have been too many cases of off-handed comments being mistakenly understood as royal commands. This document makes your welcome official and his Highness most definitely wanted you welcome here even before setting foot on Firdani soil."

Pawlen thanked the gentleman as the command, "Stand by to make way!" boomed out of the bosun's throat.

A few minutes later the Dauntless was once more under full sail. Every sheet of canvas captured the substantial wind to hurry the ship into Dana's busy harbor.

"I'm hardly an expert," Gaenor commented as the ship fairly flew across the waves, "but isn't that a lot of sail for this wind?"

"It is slightly over done," Chas admitted, "but I suspect the captain and the pilot are attempting to enter Firdan in fine style. It's an old sailor's trick. They're trying to both impress the boss, who is His Majesty in this case, and to give their monarch the chance to arrive flamboyantly. We don't really have all that far to go and I'm sure this strong new tub can stand up to the minor abuse they are subjecting it to. It could be worse. There are far flashier things they could be doing. I'm just surprised they were able to talk the Danaport pilot into this."

"We do seem to be coming in at an alarming speed," Gaenor fretted.

"If you think you're alarmed get a look at His Majesty," Artur laughed. Gaenor glanced back across the deck to where Pawlen stood within the gaggle of lords and ladies of the court. The king was holding onto the wide gunwales with white-knuckled determination as he stared out at the passing landscape with the sort of fascination that comes from helplessness.

A few minutes later it became apparent that they were headed directly for a wide dock that stuck out into the harbor and had been left open just for their use.

"Stand by to wear!" the bosun shouted. The crew, mostly up in the rigging, shifted slightly to make sure they were secure as the Dauntless made the turn for their final approach to her reserved dock. A minute later the jibs, stay sails and the spanker began to luff. "Gybe ho!"

Suddenly the flapping sails snapped full with wind from the opposite tack and the spanker's boom swung violently across the stern over the heads of ducking sailors. The ship shook under the sudden reversal of stresses and several crewmen nearly lost their perches. The hull and decks groaned briefly and the Dauntless continued toward the dock.

"Oh oh," Chas said softly.

"What?" Gaenor asked, alarmed.

"This is one of those flashier maneuvers I mentioned a few minutes ago. Our captain is going to strike the sails and drop anchor just as we come along side the dock. If he times it correctly we will come to a halt a few inches from the dock exactly in the slip the Firdani have waiting for us."

"And if he doesn't time it correctly?"

"See that smaller ship the next slip in?"

"The one-master? What about it?" Gaenor asked.

"It'll be kindling," Chas replied dryly. "For that matter, so will the Dauntless."

"Terrific," Gaenor sighed. "Maybe it's time I started working on that flying spell again." Chas laughed nervously.

"Oh?" Artur retorted. "Any sudden new insights? Last time I tried one of your flying spells I broke my leg. Remember?"

"Nothing particularly new," Gaenor replied, eyes locked on the approaching dock. "Just thought that this might be our last chance to try it."

"I'll pass," Artur laughed. "Besides, none of those spells ever took momentum into account. We would probably end up flying head-long into that ship while the Dauntless came to a safe halt."

Gaenor didn't reply. She, like the rest of the passengers, was too busy watching the dock approach at alarming speed. She was barely aware of the commands, "Stand by to strike the sails and drop the anchor! Now! All hands stand by!"

As one the crew used their body weight, jumping with the lines in hand to strike the sails with the fastest possible speed. At the same time, the anchor was released, allowing it and its long chain to plummet to the bottom of the harbor. The sails snapped shut and the ship began to lose velocity, pushing a vast wave of salt water ahead of it.

The clanking sound of the chain filled the otherwise silent air. Artur noted that all activity in Danaport harbor had come to a halt and everyone within sight was watching the Dauntless plunge on toward its slip and possible disaster. The ship was still thirty feet from the brig when the anchor chain finally stopped playing out and the large, hooked anchor found a purchase in the muddy estuary bottom. The entire ship

groaned in screaming protest as it was brought to a dead stop in a matter of seconds. So great was the mass of the ship, that even with the anchor deep in the harbor mud it continued to drag its way forward. Gaenor was certain they were going to collide, but with the Dauntless' bowsprit less than a foot from the other's stern the ship finally lost its tug-of-war against the immovable anchor and sprang back several feet before coming to a rest precisely in its slip.

It was the accomplishment of a master mariner that Gaenor would remember for the rest of her life, but hoped she would never have to witness it again, at least not from the deck of the ship attempting the maneuver. She realized that her heart was beating violently and that she had been holding her breath. She now let that breath go with explosive force and realized than almost everyone else in sight was doing the same.

Six

The ship was being secured to the dock with its great hempen cables as Artur, Gaenor, and Chas went below to retrieve their baggage. When they returned to the upper deck, Chas was once more wearing his formal embroidered herald's tabard. There was a long string of coaches waiting for them at the foot of the dock and after bidding farewell to Captain Trobur, the trio made their way to the second in line.

"We'll leave the first for the king," Chas explained his choice, "but I doubt anyone is going to insist we ride in order of precedence and if they do they can try talking the coachmen into changing positions."

"Not bloody likely, m'lord," the driver of the second coach commented with a wink as he loaded the trio's luggage. Chas smiled in response and Artur and Gaenor laughed outright.

"It's hot here," Gaenor commented as they sat down to wait.

"We're in the tropics now, Gae," Artur informed her. "That's why this coach has an open roof and all the wide open windows in the sides - improved ventilation. This box would be like an oven otherwise. I suppose we'll have to do a little shopping before the coronation and buy some lighter clothing. I know I didn't think to pack any summer clothes, did you?"

"Summer clothing? At this time of year?" Gaenor countered. "You're kidding, right? Can we afford to buy clothing acceptable to the Firdan court?"

"Let me handle that," Chas told them. "Since Pawlen insisted that you accompany him, it is only fair that he pick up the tab for all your expenses. Go out this afternoon and buy some comfortable clothing, I recommend something in the local silks, but for the coronation there should be several seamstresses at your disposal at the palace.

They had to wait nearly half an hour before they could proceed to the Firdan royal palace. Evidently neither Pawlen nor most of the rest of the lords and ladies that had arrived on the Dauntless had thought to pack their luggage before the ship had docked. Then too, only Artur, Gaenor, and Chas were traveling light. As they waited, a long parade of trunks, chests, and heavy leather bags was carried from the ship and loaded into and onto the waiting coaches.

The hot air in Danaport was filled with the odors of melting tar and rotting seaweed, at least Gaenor

hoped that's what it was. Without a breeze that morning, the smells seemed to be multiplying, displacing the breathable air with a thick organic haze.

"Is there room in here?" a noble in his mid-to-late twenties asked, sticking his black-haired head through the door. "Ah, Master Chasur, would you mind if I and my lady join you and your companions?"

"Not at all," Chas replied, as the pair boarded, automatically assuming a welcome. "Lord Tallur, heir to the County of Senda and Lady Relle, I present Sir Artur and Miss Gaenor, both of Narmouth."

"I say," the Lady Relle, a perky blond with short cropped hair, remarked to Gaenor, "aren't you the adept girl his Majesty wanted to knight?" Gaenor allowed that she was without bothering to correct the lady's impression that she was adept. "Well, good for you, girl!" Lady Relle told her, patting her arm.

"Relle, dearest," Lord Tallur protested gently. "Not that nonsense again."

"Dearest me nothing, Tallur," she replied. "It isn't nonsense! It's about time we left the Dark Ages. Women are perfectly capable of doing almost anything a man can."

"Oh, darling, really! Could you have carried even one of the three trunks you brought with you?"

"I am lucky enough to have servants to do that, Tallur."

"Male servants, I noticed. In Misha they were loaded by our chauffeur and the stableboy. Here we were met by staff members of the Royal Firdan household. Not a woman among them. Are you trying to tell me their work could have been accomplished by your maid?"

"Of course, dear," Relle replied calmly.

"Those chests must weigh nine or ten stone each," Tallur countered. "Tell me how that frail little maid of yours could have loaded them on the coach."

"She'd have emptied them out, put the chests in place and then reloaded them."

"That's a lot of work."

"She's very patient," Relle replied. "Keep up the good work, dear," she said to Gaenor conspiratorially. "We'll show these men, won't we?"

Gaenor had never considered the concept of equal rights. In the stratified society of Mishanda and in all the kingdoms she had ever heard of, rights came with one's rank. The higher rank or title one held, the more rights that person had and only a man who owned land had the right to vote, although only towns and cities had elected offices. A woman could own land, but she was denied the right to vote no matter how inconsequential the election and if she married, her real possessions became the property of her husband for the duration of the marriage. It was a fact of law and life.

Gaenor thought about it now however. Why shouldn't a woman be legally equal to a man? Certainly Artur had treated her as an equal partner. Of course he could cast a vote for the mayor and city council of Narmouth and she couldn't, but then she didn't own land. Gaenor smiled and asked Lady Relle about the matter. Their conversation lasted for the rest of the wait in the dock area. Gaenor noticed that both Chas and Lord Tallur were extremely uncomfortable by the conversation and only Artur seemed totally at ease and spent much of the time amused by the twitching of the other two men.

Finally the procession began to move. Even that slow movement helped stir up the air and made conditions in the open coaches more bearable. They made their way out of the port and uphill into the business section of the town. Dana Palace monopolized dozens of acres along the northwest ridge at the outskirts of town half a league away, but they could occasionally spot its white marble walls through the gaps between the buildings of the downtown area.

Gaenor had grabbed a window seat when they first boarded the carriage and now stared fascinatedly at the people they passed on the streets. Their garb was loose and brightly colored, but what attracted Gaenor's attention was what wasn't there.

"Great Nua!" she swore. "They're all walking around half naked!"

"It's very hot down here," Chas told her. He and Lord Tallur were also staring out the window, but with appreciative smiles on their faces as they studied the deeply tanned limbs of the women they passed. "This style of clothing is more comfortable in the tropical heat. All but the most formal clothing is like this. Commoners wear cotton and linen, while the more well-off wear silks."

"It is a bit immodest," Lady Relle commented, pulling her husband's head back into the carriage. "Is that why you keep coming here?" she asked him accusingly.

While Tallur stuttered a reply, Artur spoke up. "Actually not all tropical cultures dress so scantily. The Cilben women cover everything except their necks and arms and in Pahn and many of the other Southlands the dominant religion does not allow a proper lady to expose any bare skin at all in public. Whenever they go out, they have to wear heavy leather gloves, long skirts that are weighted down so no chance breeze can lift them up, and at least two veils to cover their faces. Oh, and they're required to wear dark colors only."

"Why bother going out then?" Gaenor asked.

"I believe that's pretty much the idea. At home, even in the presence of men, they can walk around practically naked if they wish. Many husbands prefer it that way, I'm told, and don't like their wives leaving the house."

"Who does the shopping?" Gaenor asked pointedly.

"The women," Artur replied.

"But their husbands don't like them leaving the house? That doesn't make sense."

"I never said it did. It's just the way they are."

"Crazy," Gaenor muttered. "Just plain crazy!"

"The Firdani or the Southlanders, dear?" Relle asked interestedly.

"Both, I think. Don't these people wear anything decent?"

"It's just the way they are," Relle repeated Artur's words. "Actually, I am seriously considering buying a few of these outfits." Lord Tallur winced at that; his wife would certainly insist on the more expensive silk. "They will attract less attention than Mishandan fashions."

"I always thought you liked attracting attention, dear," Tallur remarked.

"Not by wearing unstylish clothing, dear. No, I believe I will require an entirely new wardrobe."

Tallur winced again. "I don't suppose I could persuade you that the cottons would be far more comfortable than the silks?" he asked hopelessly. Relle's laugh was all the answer he needed. "I didn't think so."

"I don't know," Gaenor said uncertainly. "Wouldn't you be too embarrassed to dress like that?"

"In Misha I might," Relle replied, "but not here."

"What's the difference?"

"Think of our initial reactions. Immodest. Indecent. Embarrassing. Although I believe you found it more objectionable than I did, that is pretty much how our countrymen and women would view us if we were to wear such garb. Here in Dana, however, this sort of covering or lack of such is the norm and, I assume, quite fashionable. Why should we be embarrassed to be fashionable?"

"Hmm," Gaenor replied thoughtfully. "Well, I suppose I could try, and I believe his Majesty will be paying for my purchases."

"As long as you keep them reasonable," Chas warned her.

"Of course," Gaenor smiled at him.

"Good!" Relle remarked approvingly. An odd gleam sparkled in her eye as she continued, "As soon as we're settled in at the palace you and I will come back to town and go shopping!"

Seven

Gaenor and Lady Relle were unable to make good on their shopping plans until two days later. Crown Princess Ymanyra had too many plans for ways to welcome the entourage of her royal cousin, but Relle and Gaenor did manage to find Mistress Trelaine who was the chief seamstress in Firdan Palace.

"Of course we can prepare two more gowns for the coronation," the harried seamstress replied to Lady Relle's inquiry, although her eyes raised devoutly to the sky told another tale that Relle read all too well.

"Look," she pressed patiently. "If you have no time for a special commission for me, I can make do with something I already have, but Miss Gaenor here absolutely must have your best work! She is to be part of the coronation ceremony."

The old dressmaker glanced involuntarily at Gaenor who was obviously a foreigner and, given the title "Miss" she was also a commoner. The chief seamstress' first reaction had been to write the girl off as the lady's maid. Palace servants were often even more snobbish than the royalty they served and Trelaine remembered briefly how she had been treated many years earlier when she first came into the queen's

service. She quickly shelved her snobbish notions and studied this foreign common girl who was to play a part in the crowning of the King of Firdan.

Lady Relle caught Trelaine's change of attitude and decided to milk it for all it was worth. "Miss Gaenor is adept," she continued. She managed to keep her expression mostly neutral, but there was a tell-tale twinkle in her eyes as she watched Trelaine start at that bit of information. There were very few adepts in the world and while there were stories of female adepts, Gaenor might be the only one currently extant.

"Of course, lady," Trelaine replied. "What sort of gowns did you have in mind?"

"Lady Relle," Gaenor confessed a while later after Trelaine had finished taking their measurements, "I should have corrected you earlier, but I am not an adept yet. I'll be initiated on our return to Misha, but..."

"That's all right, Gaenor. Besides, did you see what that bit of news did to her? She practically turned herself inside-out trying to reverse her initial snubs!" Relle laughed. "What's more, you're going to be known to everyone in this castle as an adept and that could be quite useful. If nothing else, you'll have every courtier in the realm vying for your favor."

"Is that good?" Gaenor countered. "Sounds more like a bloody nuisance to me."

Relle looked at her strangely. "Already engaged?" she asked.

"Well, no," Gaenor replied, "but..."

"But you know who you want. Is that it? Who?" Relle asked conspiratorially. Gaenor's mouth froze shut and she dropped her eyes in embarrassment. This was something she hadn't been able to tell Ibbet or even Marlie. "Oh!" Relle said knowingly. "It's Sir Artur, isn't it?" Gaenor's eyes snapped open in panic and her mouth dropped open. "I thought so!" Relle crowed triumphantly.

"Lady Relle, please!" Gaenor was horror stricken by what might happen if Artur ever found out, especially since it was so obvious that he harbored no such thoughts for her.

"Oh, Gaenor, really," Relle replied soothingly. "Your little secret is safe with me. I won't tell him, but maybe seeing you actively courted will make him notice you, eh?" Gaenor looked up hopefully. "Come on, Ymanyas's tea party should be well under way by now and we don't want to be too late."

They walked down the long, white marble halls of the palace. The Crown Princess' tea was being held in a large garden at the east end of the palace, nearly half a mile away. The palace, a long, sprawling affair of imported marble, had many great windows displaying the magnificent pictorial glasswork that made Firdan famous. However, for all its size, only the original keep rose up more than two stories. The rest of the palace consisted of many marble-faced smaller buildings, courtyards and gardens, all linked up with covered walkways and enclosed corridors. It was a maze of a subtly intricate complexity and both Relle and Gaenor were forced to ask directions three times before they finally found their destination.

"What I can't abide," Relle continued her nearly incessant conversation as they walked, "is all this white marble. It seems so cold."

Gaenor, by now had recovered her composure and was trying her best to keep up with the vivacious blond who was only a few years her elder. "Maybe that's the idea," Gaenor replied. "It's so hot here in Dana. Maybe the builders figured that a cool sight would help."

"That's an interesting way to look at it," Relle admitted. "Do you think that's why they did it?"

"Either that or they wanted to blind anyone who dared to look at the place in the light of day."

"Yes," Relle remarked. "That does seem more likely. The glory of Firdan and all that. Oh, here we are. Finally!"

The garden that Crown Princess Ymanya had selected was typical of Firdani gardens. There were few flowers, but the spacious grounds held several long-limbed live oaks with long fronds of moss dripping down from their branches. The garden's location, well back from the ridge that overlooked the city of Dana, provided a small natural stream that fed and drained a small, obviously artificial pond. One end of the pond was filled with bright pink and yellow lotuses that Relle said had to have been imported from the Nachli district of Cilbe. There were several brightly colored fish swimming in the pond mainly, Gaenor learned, to keep down the mosquitos. The rest of the garden was mostly gravel and neatly manicured lawn with a very few short flowers for accents.

The center of the garden was a patio of colored tiles that depicted the royal arms of Firdan, although Gaenor did not learn that until later because the entire patio was covered with small square tables around which over one hundred nobles were milling while waiting for the afternoon tea to be served.

Relle took Gaenor's hand and plunged right on into the crowd looking for both her husband and Sir Artur. They found Artur chatting comfortably with Chas, Lord Tallur, and several other nobles.

"Hello, dear," Relle greeted her husband, snuggling her way into the crook of his arm. "Did you miss me?"

"That depends," he answered warily. "How much have you spent so far?"

"Only as much as I'm worth, darling."

"That's what I was afraid of," he responded to the amusement of all around him.

"Oyez!" a herald's voice boomed across the garden accompanied by three raps of his bronze-shod staff. "Their Royal Highnesses, Marnoric and Ymanya of Firdan."

All eyes turned to watch the crown prince and princess of Firdan process into the garden followed by six attendants. Marnoric was a tall, robust man of nearly thirty years. His dark brown hair and neatly trimmed beard framed his square face and gave him a naturally fierce expression even as he smiled to his guests. Ymanya, on the other hand, was a petite ash blond who walked by her husband's side with the grace that comes from utter self-confidence. Both heirs to the throne were dressed in black.

Technically the kingdom was still in mourning and would be until the actual day of the coronation on the next full phase of Tars, the larger of the two moons, after the expiration of the customary, obligatory thirty-day ban on celebrations. The old king had died over a month and a half earlier and the ban had been lifted, but the royal family would continue to wear black until the ceremony.

Marnoric and Ymanya made their way to one side of the crowd of dignitaries who automatically started cueing up to officially meet their hosts.

"Come on," Relle encouraged Gaenor.

"What's going on?" Gaenor asked, allowing herself to be dragged along with Artur, Chas, and Tallur.

"Reception line," came the unhelpful response.

"What?"

"We parade past their Highnesses and get introduced to them as we go," Chas explained. "It's customary."

The line moved slowly and Gaenor and her friends were near the end, but when the herald announced Gaenor's name to the crown prince and princess, Ymany asked, "The adept? You will be performing the binding ceremony?"

Gaenor was flustered beyond words. Obviously Relle's erroneous remark had already reached the princess' ears.

"Miss Gaenor will be assisting Sir Artur," Chas said to clarify the situation.

"Oh." Ymany sounded disappointed. She turned to whisper something to her husband but Gaenor and her friends had moved on before they were done talking.

"Oh oh," Relle fretted. "Word travels even faster around here than at home."

"Making trouble again, dear?" Tallur asked curiously. Somewhat sheepishly, Relle explained what had happened in the dressmaker's room. "I can't take my eye off you for a moment, can I?" he grinned.

"It's not her fault," Gaenor told him. "I should have corrected Lady Relle's mistaken impression from the start and I certainly should have said something at the fitting in any case."

"It's no big deal," Relle disagreed. "I was a complete stranger and made a wrong assumption, and as I recall I never gave you the chance to correct me anyway. The only problem now is that I think Ymany is going to insist on having you cast the binding spell, at least the one on her."

"We'll just have to tell her the truth then," Gaenor shrugged.

"That could be embarrassing," Relle told her solemnly.

"I'll just have to live with that," Gaenor sighed.

"Not for you, silly! Well, you too, I suppose, but I meant for King Pawlen."

"Why? I mean, how? Both maybe."

"He's promised to provide a Mishandan adept, right? Well what happens when Ymany tells him she wants it to be you?"

"He tells her I'm not adept?" Gaenor guessed.

"Right. This will make Ymany uncomfortable for having asked for the wrong person and in turn it will embarrass Pawlen for having allowed her to be put in the position to misunderstand."

"Now I misunderstand," Gaenor retorted. "It's an honest mistake. Why should that bother anyone for more than a moment or two?"

"She doesn't mean that they'll really be embarrassed," Chas tried to explain, "She means that they'll be embarrassed officially."

"Come again?"

"Diplomatically speaking," Chas tried to translate. When he saw that Gaenor still didn't understand, he continued, "It's a complicated system of agreements and deals. Sort of a game, really, but with very high stakes. This won't really make things difficult, but our negotiators will have to give way on some point when they might not normally in order to make up for this minor incident."

"What sort of point?" Artur asked before Gaenor might.

"Who knows? Most likely on some sort of trade agreement."

"But why can't everyone just laugh and shrug it off?" Gaenor asked.

"They will," Chas told her, "but it won't make any difference. The diplomats on both sides will take note of the faux pas and try to use it or minimize it, as the case may be, as best they can. It's their jobs."

Gaenor looked skeptically at Chas, then at Artur, Tallur, and finally Relle. They all obviously understood what Chas was saying and failed to see the intrinsic idiocy. Obviously this was some strange activity that only the upper classes ever had to deal with.

"Nobles!" she snorted in disgust. Then she had an idea. "Why can't I cast the binding spell?"

She returned their confused stares with one of triumphant defiance. It made her feel better now that she had brought them to a subject that she understood even if, or maybe because, they didn't understand it as well as she did. Even Artur's understanding of his long-time profession did not match her own.

"What do you have in mind, Gae?" Artur asked.

"Well, anyone can use one of those fertility amulets and good luck charms you used to sell in the Thimdras, right?"

"You used to sell good luck charms?" Lady Relle asked, laughing.

"It was a living," Artur replied with as much dignity as he could muster.

"Anyway," Gaenor continued, "any object can be an amulet to hold a spell to be released with the proper invocation. Why can't we use a living person?"

"You," Artur filled in.

"Exactly. We can even set the invocative trigger to be identical to the ritual for casting the actual spell, or do you doubt my ability to remember how to cast a spell?"

"Knowing how to cast a spell and actually doing it are two different things, Gae," Artur informed her,

"but it would solve our little problem. Go ahead and work up the amulet spell. We'll use it if we have to. Chas, maybe you'd better warn the king what's up."

Chas agreed and quickly walked away into the crowd. A few minutes later the clear piercing note of a chime rang out across the garden and people started finding seats at the numerous small tables.

"What's going on?" Gaenor asked Relle.

"That's the signal to commence serving," Relle explained. "We'd better find seats quickly if we all want to sit together."

As it was Chas' duty to stand by in case King Pawlen needed his services, he found a place with the other heralds in attendance. Artur and Gaenor sat with Tallur and Relle and two other couples who were so engrossed in their own conversation that they barely took the time to recognize the fact that there was anyone else at their table.

"I got to his Majesty in time," Chas told Artur and Gaenor, table-hopping after the tea had been served along with various small pastries. "No sooner did he understand when Marnoric and Ymanya came to talk to him. It's settled now. You, Artur, will cast the binding spell on the new king and Gaenor, the queen. I sure hope this works."

"Of course it will work," Gaenor told him. Chas smiled tightly and continued on.

Two raps of the herald's staff and a hearty, "Oyez!" brought everyone's attention to the entrance to the garden where a small party of men in the flowing robes of Cilben dignitaries stood waiting for an introduction. "His excellency, the Honorable Senator Martius Girdecus Ralba, Imperial Legate to the Kingdom of Firdan does wish to pay his respects to Their Highnesses on his arrival."

"I welcome the Imperial Legate," Crown Prince Marnoric replied formally in tones that filled the yard.

"Girdecus?" Gaenor asked Artur as the delegation strode forward.

"His son," Artur replied, "or one of them anyway. If I remember correctly he is generally called Martius."

The Cilben ambassador finished his official greeting and politely accepted Their Highnesses' invitation to stay. While another table was set up for them, one of the legate's deputies exchanged glances with Artur and then turned to say something to Martius. A moment later Martius, flanked by a pair of supposed deputies, who looked more like bodyguards, walk casually over to Artur's table.

"Arturus," Martius greeted him with an inscrutable nod of the head. "How nice to see you again." His tone was cold and challenging.

"Martius," Artur responded in the same tones and refused to rise as polite custom dictated. "Finally got the old man to step aside and let you play in the Senate I see." The implication was that Martius could never have risen to serve on the Senate floor on his own merits.

Martius' face grew dark red, but he checked his anger at Artur's insult and merely nodded, smiling tightly, and walked away.

"That's not a good man to have for an enemy," Lord Tallur commented to Artur.

"There aren't many who are," Artur grinned back at him. Then, in a more serious tone, "Martius would never be a friend anyway, my lord, so there was no need to waste my energy on polite conversation."

The tea party lasted until nearly dinnertime and, in fact, for most of those in the garden it was just a matter of changing the venue. Dinner itself lasted well into the night and by the time it was all over both Gaenor and Relle wanted nothing so much as a long bath and comfortable beds to sleep in. It had been a long day, but the men decided to stay up a bit longer drinking.

Before parting company, Relle promised Gaenor they would go shopping in the morning.

Eight

Gaenor woke up at her usual time, just after dawn, and considered going back to sleep. Well, I'm not working today, she thought, but she soon realized that she had more than slept herself out and was a bit stiffer than normal.

"Must be this bed," she said out loud. "Too soft."

"Begging your pardon, my lady?" a maid replied. She had been laying out a set of clothes for Gaenor so quietly that Gaenor had not been aware of her presence. "Oh, I didn't mean to startle you so, my lady."

"It's 'miss,'" Gaenor corrected her. "I'm not a lady."

"I'm sorry, miss. I thought all wizards were lords and ladies."

"Not hardly!" Gaenor scoffed, getting out of the bed. She walked over to see what clothes the maid had selected.

"I hope I chose rightly, miss," the maid said nervously. "I fear you might be too warm here in any of these clothes."

"I came without a chance to pack properly," Gaenor explained, "but I'll be buying some new things this morning."

"Very good, miss. Oh! Lady Relle of Senda requests that you join her for breakfast in her sitting room," the maid said on her way out the door. It's down at the end of the hall on the right." Gaenor thanked her and started dressing.

"Come in, Gae," Relle called when Gaenor knocked on her door.

"Morning, my lady!"

"Gae, drop the titles already. We're friends," Relle protested. Then she noticed what Gaenor was wearing. "Interesting choice of clothes," she commented a moment later.

"Something wrong?" Gaenor asked, looking down at herself.

"No, not really. But the bright color scheme between both blouse and skirt is very Firdani. The maid picked your clothes, right?"

Gaenor grinned. "I figured I could use her judgment as a guide when we go out later."

"That's not a bad idea," Relle admitted. "We do want to be fashionable, don't we? Well, let's eat. I ordered breakfast here in the room so we could slip out of the palace without getting caught up in one of the dreadfully long meals they hold here. If breakfast is anything like dinner, we'd be pinned down for hours."

"Do they make such an affair out of every meal?" Gaenor asked.

"I don't think so. All this is part of the pre-coronation celebrations. I suspect that they normally eat a light, informal meal at breakfast and lunch and only sit formally at dinner same as we do."

"We do?" Gaenor asked pointedly.

"I forget you didn't grow up at the court, Gae. You take to it quite naturally."

"I do try to be adaptable," Gaenor replied, "and life in a royal palace is all too easy to get used to. I'm afraid I'll find sleepy, little Narmouth just a bit boring when I get home."

"Life in the court gets rather tiresome after a while too, Gae," Relle told her between bites of buttered toast. "Maybe I can talk Tallur into coming for a visit. A sleepy little village sounds rather nice to me."

"Where is Lord Tallur?"

"Sleeping last night off," Relle laughed. "You'd have thought he'd have learned better on the ship, but from what I could tell, he tried keeping up with Sir Artur again. It was hours past midnight before he stumbled in. I imagine he'll miss breakfast, maybe lunch too."

"You don't sound overly sympathetic, Relle."

"No, I guess not, but then I wouldn't want to encourage that sort of behavior. Tallur's going to be the Count of Senda some day. That's a tough enough job even with good judgment. Fortunately, he normally doesn't drink too much, just at celebrations, and even then he's starting to cut back."

"If it will help, I'll tell Artur to stop showing off," Gaenor suggested.

"It might. Thank you."

They finished off their light breakfast and, only getting lost in the palace once, managed to make their way down to the stables and commandeered one of the carriages.

"I'm sure we could have walked the distance," Gaenor said as the carriage started moving. At home, anything under a league and a half was easy walking distance.

"Gae," Relle protested, "it's too hot to do all that walking. Besides I imagine that even arranging to have most of our purchases delivered, we'll still have a few things to carry. If nothing else, I intend to change into the first new set of clothes I buy. This suit I'm wearing may be cotton, but Mishandan cottons are tightly woven. They don't breathe as well as the local product and silk is even better."

It had been a long time since Gaenor had the opportunity to go on a shopping spree, but none of those carefree jaunts with Marlie had ever been so unrestrained and extravagant as the temptation Relle led her into. Gaenor, fully aware that she was not spending her own money, had decided to buy just one set of comfortable clothes. Since Chas had told her to buy silk, she did just that with a brightly patterned tunic-cut blouse and an embarrassingly short, cream-colored skirt. Relle, however, had other ideas.

"Gae, you just cannot get by with only one change of clothes. We're going to be here for at least a week."

"So you think I should get one of those wrap-around dress things, too?"

"And another two or three sets as well, girl!" Relle laughed. "Make your selections as mix and match as possible if you can. You don't want anyone to see you in the same thing twice."

"I don't?" Gaenor asked guilelessly.

"Gae, you're an utter marvel. Do you know that?"

"Relle, at home I'm considered very well off. I have five dresses. Two for winter, two for summer, and one for festivals; all in good repair. I could get by with less, of course, but Artur pays wells and it's nice to have one outfit to wear while I'm washing the other. I live in a loft over our laboratory so I don't have a lot of closet space. I keep my winter clothes in a cedar chest in the summer and vice versa. Now you propose to double my wardrobe and at the king's expense? Fine, but where am I supposed to put it all? I don't have any more room in my loft than I do in my luggage."

"Oh pooh! You're capable and intelligent. You'll find a way."

"Even so," Gaenor objected. "I can't mistreat the king's generosity this way."

"Generosity? Hah! It's the very least he can do for you. He gave Artur a knighthood and then pressured him into coming here with him. On the other hand, you're saving his face by casting the queen's binding spell."

"And getting him out of the fix I put him into in the first place," Gaenor pointed out.

"Regardless, by providing a second adept you have doubled the value of his present to Firdan. He owes you, Gae, and a new wardrobe is just the first payment. We haven't got you any undergarments yet, and just wait until we get to the jewelry!"

"No," Gaenor said flatly.

"What?"

"No jewelry."

"But, Gae," Relle protested.

"No. I have all the jewelry I need," she told her friend while fingering the necklace Ibbet had given her.

"That is a very nice piece," Relle admitted, "even if it is only quartz. Anderan? I thought so. But is that all

you have? It's the only piece I've seen you wear."

"I have more, a nice necklace of amber and a few other cheap pieces, but this one was a gift and has a special meaning for me," Gaenor explained. "I wouldn't want it over-shadowed by anything else."

"Well," Relle considered, "it does quite become you and simplicity can be elegant. I'll stop pressing for now, but I think you'll change your mind by the end of the day."

Relle was wrong. Gaenor remained adamantly against the idea of stocking up on expensive jewelry just for the sake of putting it on King Pawlen's tab.

"Gae," Relle tried, "he'll never even notice it. The Royal Treasury is so large this won't even stretch the limits of his pocket change."

"Relle, where does the money in the Royal Treasury come from?" Gaenor asked.

"Taxes, I imagine," Relle replied off-handedly. "Although I do believe the Chancellor of the Exchequer is given a certain percentage to invest in various business ventures." She picked a predominantly red dress off the rack and held it against her. "What do you think?"

"Very nice," Gaenor replied, "but it's not quite your color. Try the blue one. It matches your eyes. Anyway, now who pays those taxes?"

Relle replaced the red dress and tried the blue one. "The landed nobility and gentry are responsible for paying taxes. You really think so?" she asked critically, examining the material.

"Yes, definitely," Gaenor replied. She started sifting through a rack of blouses. "You know. Maybe I should pick something up for Artur."

"There's a men's store just next door," Relle told her. "Oh! That flower pattern is perfect for you, and it'll go nicely with that skirt you bought two stores ago. What's with all the questions about taxes?"

"Just trying to make a point, Relle." She took another look at the blouse then continued, "Taxes might be the responsibility of the nobility and gentry, but in the end the money and goods to pay those taxes come from the commoners, don't they?"

"I suppose you're right."

"Relle, I'm a commoner. In a sense I'm only hurting myself if I spend too much of the king's money."

"You'd never feel the difference, Gae."

"But I would know."

Relle found she couldn't refute that. They finally returned to the palace in the middle of the afternoon after most of the merchants had closed to avoid the heat of the tropical day. Chas was talking shop with the Firdani court herald as the coach dropped Gaenor and Relle off at the door of the New Wing where they were staying. The so-called "New Wing" was actually over a century old, and wasn't even the latest addition to the palace, but the name had stuck.

Chas gaped in shock as the two women stepped calmly out of the carriage, dressed in Firdani clothing.

"Chas?" Gaenor's voice cut through his state of shock. "What's wrong?"

Chas looked up and down at her. "You've got legs," he said stupidly.

Gaenor felt a blush threatening to break out but pushed it back into place by brazening the situation out. "You expected clockwork?"

"Well, no, but..." Chas shook his head to clear it. It didn't really do much good, but at least his eyes were no longer locked on Gaenor's legs.

"Come on, Gae," Relle urged laughingly, pulling on her arm. "Let's go see who else we can scandalize."

"Oh!" Chas called as they started into the palace. "Several packages arrived for you earlier. I had them sent to your rooms. Are there many more on the way?"

"That depends on how many have already shown up," Relle replied. "Why? Did we spend too much?" Gaenor tensed a bit in anticipation of the answer.

"Not as far as I can tell," Chas replied, "although Lord Tallur did blanch briefly over one delivery. I was just curious whether I should ask the king for more money to cover Gaenor's expenses."

"What's showed up so far and how much is left?" Relle asked. Chas told her and she replied that he ought to have enough, but that Tallur might want to establish a line of credit with the Bank of Firdan. "Just kidding," she smiled. "See, Gae. I was right. You weren't spending too much."

"I've still better than doubled my wardrobe," Gaenor pointed out, "and I'll never be able to wear a third of these things at home. Not without being branded strange, insane, or a harlot. That's why I only bought one short dress today. The blouses and that long wrap-around thing, what did the girl call it?" Relle shrugged. "Anyway, I can wear them at home, while the short dress and skirts will be trotted out to show my sister and then carefully packed away for only the gods know how long. Now that's just a plain and simple waste."

"Miss Gaenor?" a young page wearing a red tabard with two silver dragons combatant emblazoned on it asked.

"Guilty," Gaenor replied.

"Their Royal Highnesses would be pleased if you would meet with them in their apartments at your earliest convenience."

Nine

"Go ahead, Gae," Relle told her. "I'm sure Ymanya just wants to meet the female adept. I'll see you at dinner."

Gaenor shrugged and followed the page to the royal chambers. It was yet another long walk after a

whole day of walking, but at least they didn't have to climb any stairs.

The crown prince and princess were sitting in a small room with an open wall that led into one of the palace's gardens. Being on the east side, it was fairly dark in the room that afternoon and several scented candles were being burned both for light and to keep the numerous biting insects away. As Gaenor's eyes adjusted, she noted that Artur was also in the room as well as another man she didn't know.

"Come in, Miss Gaenor," the princess greeted her, "and please have a seat. We were just discussing the coronation ceremony. It will be the day after tomorrow, you know." Gaenor nodded. "Oh, this is Sir Gerax of Ond, the court wizard."

Sir Gerax was a man of medium height and advanced years. He wore his light gray hair long in the back and bald on top, and his only concession to the local climate was the fact that his long black robes were made of silk rather than the heavy wool he might have worn in his homeland. As Gerax nodded in Gaenor's general direction, she detected disapproval in his eyes.

No doubt he thinks I should know enough to stay in my place, whatever that means in Ond, she thought, smiling back at him with insincere grace.

"Gaenor invented most of this magical short-hand system I've been showing you," Artur told Gerax.

"A small accomplishment," the Firdani adept admitted reluctantly, "but one that probably won't make much of a difference."

Artur raised his eyebrows at that comment. "Maybe, but the University at Misha has already made the system part of the required curriculum. Admittedly we don't have symbols for everything, but it's fairly complete and the Dean of the School of Magic contacts us regularly with proposed additions. And I understand the University at Es is studying the system with an eye toward adopting it as well. Frankly, it's so simple and concise, I don't know why nobody ever thought of it before."

"The ancients agree that magic should never be tampered with. This new system is not known to every adept. I fear there will be many unnecessary injuries because of misunderstandings."

"The ancients also agreed that heavier objects fall faster than light ones," Artur countered, "but they were wrong about that too. I tell you this system will revolutionize the science of magic. With it, an adept can not only learn a new spell in record time, but also understand how the ingredients react to one another. The notation actually indicates the general properties of each tool and ingredient."

"Science of magic!" Gerax scoffed. "Magic is an art not a science. The rules, if there truly are any, are too unreliable and unknowable to mere mortals."

"Gentlemen," Crown Prince Marnoric interrupted Artur from firing back a retort at his colleague. "We're here to discuss the coronation ceremony. I'm sure you can continue this learned debate later. After dinner perhaps."

"Of course, your Highness," both adepts replied.

"Gae," Artur said, handing her a piece of paper, "This is the binding spell Sir Gerax recommends for the ceremony. I wrote it down so he wouldn't have to explain it twice."

"Are you able to understand it?" Gerax asked somewhat insultingly. "It is very complex." He didn't say it

but Gaenor was certain he meant, "for a woman."

She glanced at the paper. "Seems rather straight-forward to me. Artur, what's this symbol?"

"Hah!" Gerax laughed harshly.

"She cannot be expected to know a symbol that I just made up," Artur retorted. "It means 'Firdani.'"

"Oh, of course," Gaenor replied. "So let's see, we'll have a sample of Firdani dirt to represent the land."

"Carefully culled and mixed from each of the counties of Firdan," Gerax told her firmly.

"Yes, that would strengthen the spell," Gaenor agreed. "And a bowl of water. That's obvious. Is it fresh water or salt?"

"Both," Gerax replied, surprised that she even thought to ask.

"Sacred fire, Artur?"

"An oil lamp lit from the eternal flame on the holy alter in the Temple of Nueh."

"And air," Gaenor concluded. "I assume that we don't need anything special for that? No, I thought not. So we have the four elements as the ancients understood them, which when used will bind their Highnesses to the Land, Sea, the Industry and all the people of Firdan." Gerax nodded reluctantly. "Let me see if I have the ritual down right. I'll do the first variation." She performed a series of gestures and spoke a long incantation. Even if she were adept, the spell wouldn't be effective unless performed with the four primary ingredients. "How was that?" she asked when finished.

"I don't understand," Gerax gasped. "How did you learn it so fast?"

"I just followed the directions," Gaenor shrugged. "It repeats four times, once for each basic element with a slight variation each time. I'll have to practice it a few more times to make sure I get it memorized, but it's really quite a simple spell when you take it apart like this, isn't it? Wouldn't it be even more effective if we were to use an oak wand and a," she made a gesture with her right hand, "as a prefix and suffix to the actual spell? The catalytic effect would..."

"An oak wand!" Gerax argued, throwing his hands up in the air theatrically. "Why not an ash wand, or pine or ebony for all the good it would do?"

"Ash is a little too reactive," Gaenor replied in a matter of fact tone. "It would bind them all too literally. They'd turn into equal amounts of dirt, water, air and ashes. Not quite the effect we want. Pine at best wouldn't do a thing, although it might weaken the spell, and ebony, in this context at least, would reverse it altogether binding them to do only wrong for their kingdom."

"Didn't believe me, did you?" Artur commented dryly to the stunned Sir Gerax. "Gae's the best theoretical adept I've ever had the honor of working with."

"Please, wizards," Marnoric spoke up nervously, "this binding spell has been used for as long as can be remembered and it seems to have been sufficient. My wife and I would prefer that it be cast just as it is." Ymanya nodded her agreement. That settled the matter.

"I take it we can't ask Sir Gerax to help initiate me," Gaenor commented to Artur when they had left the meeting.

"To say the least," Artur laughed. "Even putting aside our little ruse concerning your abilities as an adept, I don't think he'd approve of initiating a woman into what he sees as the 'Art.'"

"I'm beginning to understand why Relle was so pleased to find a female adept. Is he typical of other adepts?"

"He's a bit extreme," Artur admitted, "but his views are not uncommon among the conservative adepts."

"Conservative?"

"They're mostly the older ones and their personal apprentices, most of whom never attended the University, but learned directly from their masters."

"You mean like me?" Gaenor pointed out.

"Gae, if you were that sort of conservative, by now you'd probably be married to a fishmonger and pregnant for the third or fourth time."

"Thank the gods I'm not a conservative!" Gaenor swore.

"Well, you have to forgive Sir Gerax for some of his prejudices. I think a lot of it stems from the fact that he can never go home."

"What do you mean?"

"He's from Ond - one of the Southlands. Magic is outlawed in all the Southlands. Really outlawed. The death penalty is mandatory for any known adept to be caught there. Even the Cilbens aren't that strict. They'll tolerate adepts as long as they don't practice within the boundaries of the Empire, but in the Southlands..."

He was abruptly cut off by a loud noise and a puff of black smoke that appeared about twenty feet in front of them. A thin wiry man, clad all in a tight-fitting, bright blood-red outfit jumped out of the smoke. The fingers of his gloves were tipped with sharp metal blades, but it was the long-thin sword and matching dagger that occupied most of Gaenor's attention.

The red-clad assassin crossed his swords in a ritual salute and then screamed, "Die, traitor!" as he charged toward Artur and Gaenor.

Ten

Gaenor froze in place, transfixed by the horror of the moment, but Artur's long unused battle reflexes asserted themselves. He pushed Gaenor roughly aside with one arm while reaching into his belt pouch

with the other.

When he lived in Cilbe, Artur, like most Cilben nobles, kept his tinder box there. Since becoming adept Artur had few occasions to smoke any form of tobacco, but old habits die hard and having a ready means for starting a fire came in handy on any number of occasions. However, being adept, he no longer needed an entire tinder box. A small piece each of flint and steel would do the job equally well.

Artur grabbed the two items and tossed one of them into his other hand. Without pausing to think, he slammed both hands violently together and screamed the one-word incantation with his attacker just beyond sword-reach.

A bright flash of heat and light startled and blinded the assassin for an instant; just enough time for Artur to act. He dropped to the floor, tripping up the man in red, who fell on the slick marble, rolled and started to get back up again. Artur expected that, however, and was on his feet first.

He came at the assassin from behind, but the assassin was both skilled and in practice and used Artur's own weight to throw him across the hall. All that Artur managed to do in his counterattack was to force the attacker to drop his sword. The assassin wasted no time and instead of retrieving his sword, he lunged at Artur with the long, thin dagger.

No man, no matter how noble, is ever allowed to command a Cilben legion without first serving a one-year training period. Artur could still hear the grizzled old decurion who taught the class in hand-to-hand combat describe how he got the odd matching scars on the palm and back of his right hand. The move was a drastic ploy that took iron nerve to pull off, but the old teacher promised that almost any opponent would be too shocked to counter it.

Artur met the thrusting blade with his open hand and let the razor sharp steel slide through the flesh between the metacarpals of his middle and ring fingers. As his palm reached the cross guard of the blade, he closed his hand tightly around it and the handle, forming a fist with the knife blade sticking out of the back of his hand. He yanked the dagger away from the assassin and slammed the back of his fist into the man's face. The long blade was thrust through the assassin's eye and into his brain, killing him instantly.

"Artur?" he heard Gaenor ask behind him through the haze of his adrenaline. Turning he saw his partner nervously holding the assassin's sword in a bad attempt at an on-guard position. "Are you all right?"

"I will be," he replied, "but I'd better find the palace healer to get my hand properly dressed." He carefully pulled the dagger back out of his hand and winced at the pain he was just starting to feel. "Put the sword down, Gae. The way you're holding it, I could disarm you in my sleep. If you want, I'll show you how to use the damned thing some other time. Oh, grab the sheath."

"Why?"

"We might as well keep it. There aren't many people who can say they survived an attack from a Temi assassin. It might make a nice trophy."

Gaenor took the entire sword belt from the dead Tem and returned the sword to its sheath. Artur wiped the dagger off on the red jumpsuit and handed it to her too.

"What's a Temi?" she asked quietly as they continued on down the hallway.

"A Tem," Artur corrected her. "The Temi are a fanatical society of assassins in Cilbe. They are officially

outlawed, but secretly tolerated by the emperor. Somebody doesn't like me."

"Girdecus?"

"You mean Martius? Maybe, at least that would be my guess. It could have been his father and Flacco might have been setting me up in Misha, for that matter."

"But definitely a Cilben?"

"The Temi won't work for anyone else, not even if so ordered by the emperor himself. No, about the only Cilben I don't suspect is old Radicus."

"The soldier you met in Misha? Why not him?"

"He renewed his oath of allegiance to me in Misha. There was no call for him to do so and a two-hitch veteran petty officer isn't the sort to swear a false oath. We got lucky this time, but now whoever sent that first Tem will know we've been warned and will probably send more than just one after us next time. When we get back to our rooms, I'll prepare a few surprises."

On the way, they found some palace guards and Artur told them what happened and gave them instructions regarding the body. The healer, when they found him a few minutes later, doubted that the attack had been so recent when he examined Artur's wound.

"But you should be bleeding profusely, my lord," the man said gruffly. "Did you use some sort of magic on yourself?"

"No," Artur replied, "but I heal very quickly."

"Nobody heals that quickly." Artur didn't bother answering and quietly let the man sterilize and bandage the wounded hand. "I'll want to check this again first thing in the morning," he instructed Artur before letting him out of the small office.

Chas and King Pawlen were waiting in Artur's room when he and Gaenor arrived.

"Sir Artur, we just heard about the attack," Pawlen said without preamble. "What really happened?" Artur told him concisely, without leaving out any details. "I never realized you were Cilben," the young king commented at last when Artur was finished.

"That's because I'm Mishandan, Your Majesty," Artur replied smoothly. "Have been for years."

"Of course," Pawlen nodded. "So what do you want to do about this? We'd be within our rights to lodge an official protest to both the Crown of Firdan and the Cilben ambassador. Marney will be quite put out when he hears about this and his first reaction will probably leave him more than willing to expel the entire Cilben delegation."

"That won't solve the problem," Artur pointed out. "The official delegation might leave, but there's no way to keep the Temi out if they feel they have reason to be here, and they may well decide that they have a blood score to settle with me."

"Why?" Chas asked. "You were only defending yourself."

"Since when does a feud have to be logical?" Artur retorted. "The Temi don't expect to fail a mission. Live or die, they almost always kill their intended target. When they fail it's because the target killed them first. To kill a Tem is to incur a blood debt, which they almost always settle."

"How would they know their man wasn't killed by one or more of the palace guards before he ever reached you?"

"Doesn't matter to them. By their own code, since I am currently a guest of their Highnesses, the palace guards are technically to be treated as though they were my allies. If they get in the way, they die, but if by some chance they kill the intended assassin, the blood debt is attributed to me."

"Wait a minute," Pawlen replied thoughtfully. "Do you mean that they might resort to killing everyone in the palace? There are a lot of monarchs staying here."

"That's true," Chas agreed. "The king and queen of Aston arrived just this afternoon. Gostrina and Wanlaria have both been in for days and I heard that the high lords of Pahn and Sorvohn are due in this evening, and they all have large entourages traveling with them."

"In theory, they could become desperate enough to try to slaughter everyone in the palace," Artur admitted, "but in practice, they wouldn't dare attempt it unless any of Your Majesties publicly declared your support of me."

"Well," Pawlen retorted, "I certainly won't cast you aside just because some Cilben assassin wants you dead."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Artur replied, "but there are subtler ways to support me. The Temi are not fools, nor are they looking for any new enemies. Their blood score applies only to me and those who attempt to stop them from killing me. If you were to, say, expel the Cilben embassy for some diplomatic reasons on your return to Misha, the Temi would not consider it a related matter."

"Done then," the king told him. "The Cilben embassy is as good as gone."

"Are they after me too?" Gaenor asked.

"I doubt it," Artur told her. "The assassin specifically challenged me. He would have killed you because you were there to witness the encounter, but his superiors probably don't know of your existence. You're safe. In fact I think you should stay that way by keeping away from me, at least for the time being."

"Never!" Gaenor retorted fiercely enough to make Artur look at her closely.

"All right," he replied at last, "just as long as you realize the danger you're in." She nodded gravely.

"Now what?" King Pawlen asked.

"For you, nothing. Relax and enjoy the coronation. Gae and I are going to be up late tonight preparing a few surprises for our red-suited friends."

"One more question," Pawlen promised on his way out the door. "If these Temi won't stop trying to kill you, how do you expect to survive?"

"I've been giving you the worst-case scenario. There are two ways to settle a Temi blood debt short of

being killed. The first is to kill the person who originally employed them. This effectively cancels the contract. The Temi view it as though it was a war being decided by the meeting of two champions."

"Do you know who hired them?"

"Not with any certainty," Artur replied.

"But we suspect Girdecus," Gaenor added.

"Or his son," Artur concluded. "Of course there are political problems inherent in killing an ambassador and we have no conclusive proof that either of them is to blame, although there aren't a whole lot of people capable of hiring the Temi who want me dead and even fewer who could know where I am. In any case, killing either Girdecus or his son is right out at the moment."

"What's the other way?" Chas asked.

Artur laughed mirthlessly. "If you successfully defend yourself against a sufficient number of Temi, one of the clan chieftains will be obliged to handle the matter personally. If you can kill him, the rest of the Temi will consider you to be a clan chieftain by right of conquest and the Temi never kill their own, except by formal challenge."

"Does that happen very often?" Pawlen asked.

"Intra-clan challenges? Who knows!" Artur shrugged.

"I meant someone being able to defeat a chief."

"Well," Artur replied thoughtfully, "there's a story about one of the gods who, posing as a mortal, did it once."

"Mythology!" Gaenor exclaimed. "Your life is at stake and you're giving us Cilben religious stories! When was the last time a human managed to fight and defeat a chief?"

"I don't recall ever hearing of anyone who has," Artur replied calmly and paused to observe the shocked expressions of his companions. "On the other hand," he continued, "I don't recall ever hearing of the Temi attempting to kill an adept before either. Just remember that their greatest weakness is that they are extremely superstitious. Magic is banned in Cilbe so it's likely they have no experience with it. Don't worry. I have a few ideas that might just give me the edge."

Pawlen nodded and he and Chas left the room. Gaenor turned to Artur and looked questioningly.

"What?" Artur asked.

"Tell me some of your ideas," Gaenor replied. "I'll be a lot more help if I know what you plan to do."

"I have a very good plan, Gae," he told her, cocking his head to one side and smiling as he did whenever he was about to make a joke. "I'm going to consult with you."

"That's it? That's your entire plan?"

Artur nodded. "Exactly. Now what kinds of spells do you think will be the most effective?"

"That depends. Will the Temi continue to stalk you one-at-a-time?"

"Maybe, That's up to the chieftain who assigns them. The next one will probably be alone, but after that I suspect they'll come in pairs or trios. The fact that I could defeat even one Tem will shock them. They aren't likely to take me lightly after that."

"So we need to kill them quickly and with little or no danger to anyone else who might be present. Will they all attack you with sword and dagger?"

"I doubt it. Each one will use those weapons with which he or she is most proficient. We'll have to be prepared for anything."

"Great. Just one thing you didn't think out correctly," Gaenor told him. "If the Temi have no experience with magic, there's no reason to assume that they'll suspect that magic is at work."

"Sounds reasonable," Artur agreed.

"That isn't good news, Artur," she informed him. "If they don't know magic is at work there's no reason to think their superstitions will work for us."

"That's a good point, and we'll have to plan accordingly."

"All right. The biggest obstacle is the time it takes to cast a spell," Gaenor thought out loud. Artur nodded and waved his hand in a "keep going" gesture. "Of course, we can use the same amulet spell we plan to use for the coronation. What sort of spells do you want to have at hand?"

Artur sat silently for a few minutes and then abruptly smiled.

Eleven

"Gods! Why are you so nervous, Gae?" Relle asked solicitously. "The way you keep fluttering about, you'd think you were the one being crowned today." The two women were alone in one of several small rooms behind the royal dais that Relle had hustled Gaenor into when people started arriving in the grand throne room.

"I've never cast a spell before," Gaenor reminded her friend. "This will be almost as if I were really adept and I want to be sure everything is just right."

"It will be, Gae. Really," Relle assured her, "but if you rearrange your tools just one more time, I swear you'll wear them out. Sit down and relax Gae. Gods!" she swore again. "All you have to do is flap your arms a bit and say a few words or something and it'll be all over. Think of poor Ymany. She'll have to sit through hundreds of boring ceremonies and dinners every year for the rest of either her or her husband's life, while you get to go on having interesting adventures."

"Adventures aren't all the story-tellers make them out to be," Gaenor replied nervously, "except maybe in the past tense. Interesting adventures are worse. They are cold, wet, dangerous, and if you really need

to know the truth, most of the time they're even more boring than ordinary, every-day life."

"How so?"

"When a story-teller recounts some great epic about the slaying of a dragon, you would think the hero just rode out of his castle one morning, took a left at the first fork in the road and encountered a big lizard. Then it's just a matter of killing the beast and getting home in time to marry the princess before dinner, right? Well, what gets left out is the weeks and months of tediously trekking about the landscape, talking to hundreds of peasants, each of whom tells the hero a different story about what the dragon is like and where it might be found. What also gets left out is the cost of the food the hero must buy or, if he is nowhere near civilization, how many hours each day he must put aside his search in order to find enough to eat. You also don't hear about the rainy days and nights, sleeping in soaking wet blankets in dark caves or on wide tree limbs, and you certainly don't hear about the hundreds of minor illnesses the poor hero must endure as a result of this rough lifestyle. In the end, the lucky one is probably the dragon. It just gets to wander around minding its own business which is terrorizing the populace and eating livestock, until the hero of the piece blunders on into it. Oh! One more thing you never hear about; the dozens of other would-be heroes who rode off looking for the beast and who either never found it or else did and lost the fight."

"My! Aren't we cynical this morning!" Relle declared.

"Nervousness doesn't exactly bring out the best in me," Gaenor admitted.

"No fooling," Relle replied dryly. "Have there been any further attempts on Sir Artur's life?"

"No, not yet. Damn, Relle! I just pray to any god who cares to listen, that he'll get out of this alive, and from what he tells me, divine intervention may be the only thing that will do it."

"Are these Temi really that good? I mean they are only human after all, aren't they?" Relle asked uncertainly.

"Oh, they're human all right. Artur thinks that the first attempt was by one of their own novices. He says that the Temi underestimated him because they think he's sixty-seven years old."

"Why would they think that?" Relle asked. "He doesn't look a day over thirty."

"Because he is sixty-seven," Gaenor replied.

"Really? I must ask him how he keeps his youthful good looks. I'd just love to look that good at sixty-seven."

"From what he tells me, it's not worth it. First of all you have to be nearly dead. Then you have to be lucky enough to be found by someone who can cast the necessary spell. Don't ask me what sort of spell, because I don't know. Artur doesn't know either for that matter. Ever since he told me about it, I've been trying to work it out, but..." she trailed off, staring hopelessly at nothing in particular.

"Gae?"

"I'm worried about Artur. We prepared a dozen amulets last night. Defensive spells, offensive spells, anything we could think of. We're each wearing half of them on our belts. See?" Gaenor indicated six dangling bits of carved wood attached to her belt by flimsy thongs. The pieces were chosen because to

the untrained eye they would merely look like pretty ornaments. To invoke them she needed to merely yank them sharply off her belt and throw them at her target. "He's also taken to wearing that sword and dagger we took from the assassin, just in case, but he can't wear them during the coronation ceremony. I'm so worried the next attack will come while we're busy casting the binding spells."

"The palace guards have been alerted, Gae," Relle told her. "I doubt a fly could get in just now without being noticed."

"I hope you're right." There was a soft knocking at the door. "Yes?" Gaenor called.

"Miss Gaenor," one of the crown princess's maids stuck her head in the door, "it's time." Gaenor nodded nervously and waved the maid away.

"Let's go!" Relle urged her. "Remember; you're a powerful adept, capable of doing anything that crosses your mind, and you're about to show that power by binding the new queen to her kingdom. Go show them what a woman can do!" Gaenor looked at her friend for a moment and then laughed.

"Thanks, Relle. I'll see you later?" she asked as they left the room.

"Of course." Relle winked and hurried into the crowd to join her husband.

Gaenor looked around the large hall. From her position on the dais, the thousands of tightly-packed nobles who had managed to wangle the honor of an invitation seemed to blur into a single, seething, polychromatic mass. Taken that way, Gaenor didn't feel the multitudes of eyes that must have been staring at her and lost some of her nervousness.

The dais itself had been decked out in the royal colors of Firdan - red and silver, and an immense red banner emblazoned with two silver dragons combatant - the royal arms - covered the better part of the back wall of the stage. In front of the banner stood a pair of tall chairs, thrones really, made of richly carved and stained wood, padded and upholstered with royal red velvet. There were two small tables beside the thrones which held the tools and ingredients of the binding spells.

Artur was already standing behind the table beside the king's throne and the Firdani herald - the Argent Dragon King of Arms - stood in the narrow gap between the two thrones. Gaenor took her place as the herald stepped forward and rapped his staff resonantly upon the dais floor.

Gaenor tried to keep track of everything that happened, but in the press of trying to keep her own role straight, she found that without realizing it, she had somehow failed to notice that each of the visiting monarchs had processed down the wide central aisle and taken their places in front of the reserved seats that waited for them. She was so lost in concentration, reviewing in her mind the spell she was about to cast that she was only dimly aware of the crown prince and princess of Firdan as they too walked down the aisle, surrounded by two dozen retainers and another half dozen priests and priestesses, and climbed the five wide stairs up to the dais.

"Miss Gaenor?" the herald whispered urgently.

Gaenor shook her head to clear it. She saw that Artur was now standing directly in front of the crown prince who sat with the crown, in the hands of the High Priest of Nueh poised over his head. The High Priestess of Hennor likewise held the queen's crown over Ymanya's head. Gaenor realized that with the ceremony going on right in front of her, she had been too nervous to notice any of it. Now it was time to cast the binding spell and they were waiting for her.

Gaenor smiled nervously and stepped around the small table so that she was standing in front of Ymany, but still within reach of the table where her tools were. She glanced at Artur and he winked at her. Together they each picked up the small pots of Firdani soil and began the long incantation.

Artur had stored the actual binding spell in Gaenor and she had wanted him to set the final gesture of the ritual as the key to invoking it. However, he insisted that she could only do the job convincingly if she had to complete the entire ritual precisely.

"It'll be good practice for you," Artur had said over her protests.

A strange calm came over Gaenor as she began the incantation. It was more than just being able to lapse into an activity that made her forget the thousands of watching eyes. A section of her mind realized that even as she went through the complex series of motions the only person she could see or even sense was Ymany.

To outside observers, the two adepts had become enveloped in a pale red aura that spread to include their target monarchs. As the spell progressed, the auras grew brighter and more intense until the adepts and the monarchs were lost from sight within the twin glows. From inside, it seemed to Gaenor that the world itself had disappeared and that only she and Ymany existed in a tiny bubble universe with a nearby red sky.

The spell progressed. Gaenor found that, once started, the magic itself urged her to continue. After the first few sentences and gestures, Gaenor found that she no longer had to think about what she was doing. The spell itself told her to toss pinches of the dust-dry soil in all directions. The specks flew off like jet-black circles that soon passed through the bright red bubble. The remaining soil was sprinkled on Ymany where it rested briefly before disappearing. She idly wondered as she placed the now empty jar down and picked up the crystal bowl full of water whether she could stop the spell if she wanted and found that she didn't want to. The magic pushed her on inexorably towards the spell's completion.

The nature of the spell changed as she placed her fingers into the water. The globe of red light that surrounded her and Ymany gradually changed from its bright red color to an equally intense blue. The change was a smooth transition briefly touching on incandescent shades of hot pink, fuchsia, violet, and thousands of colors she had no names for, finally settling on indigo.

The words of the incantation and the motions of the ritual also became slower and more relaxed. Gaenor had trouble believing it was her own voice speaking the words; it sounded much deeper than anything that had come out of her throat before. Artur's voice had never seemed to change while he was casting a spell. She sprinkled water in all directions and it flew off her fingers in bright green sparkles. Then she up-ended the bowl over Ymany and the water formed a dark green bubble around the princess. the bubble contracted and soon conformed to the shape of Ymany's body and clothes making her seem like a perfect jade statue of herself.

Gaenor continued the incantation and the green color around the princess gradually faded, absorbed by her body. Then there was a pause in the spell. Ymany looked at Gaenor inquiringly. Gaenor smiled and shrugged, briefly feeling a release from the spell's restraints.

"Is there something wrong?" Ymany whispered nervously.

"No," Gaenor replied just as softly. "Time is part of the spell," she explained. "It represents both the length of your life and the patience you'll need to be a good queen." Ymany nodded, satisfied. Then

Gaenor felt the spell take over again to hold her still and realized that Ymanya's question and her own reply, while not part of the written instructions, were both an integral part of the spell, representing the monarch's need to seek answers and wisdom in order to rule wisely as well.

They seemed to wait an eternity before Gaenor felt her hand reach for the oil lamp that had been ignited by the holy fire of Nueh - the Firdani version of Nua, king of the gods. As her hand touched the lamp the blue aura changed color once more. Instead of a gradual change, however, this time the rich blue abruptly flashed to a bright, almost unbearable yellow.

Gaenor began the incantation once more, waving the oil lamp around in nearly the same gestures she had used for the soil and water. Improbable blue-white sparks flew off from the flame in much the same way that the green water and black soil had. Finally she placed the oil lamp into Ymanya's hands.

Gaenor paused again and felt the spell gathering itself up for its conclusion. She went through the ritual and incantation once more, this time with her hands slightly cupped to push the air around. As she did so, transparent spheres flew from her fingertips. When each one struck the still-yellow bubble that enclosed them, it caused a small section of the yellow to disappear. A wind began to blow, whistling through the holes in the enveloping aura. It blew gently at first and then with greater intensity.

Gaenor finished the spell by bringing her hands sharply together. The wind gusted briefly at gale strength, nearly pushing Gaenor off her feet, and then suddenly subsided, taking the few vestiges of the yellow aura along with it. A great cheer went up from the spectators in the hall and the priest and priestess lowered the crowns onto the heads of Marnoric III and Ymanya, King and Queen of Firdan.

Twelve

"Now do you see why you had to do the whole spell?" Artur asked, helping Gaenor back to her room.

Gaenor nodded. "Why am I so tired?"

"Gae, how long do you think it took to cast that spell?" Artur asked.

"I don't know. I lost track of the time. Half an hour maybe? It was a long spell."

"Longer than you think," he told her. "We were at it for just over two hours. I asked Chas while their Majesties were on their way to present themselves to their subjects."

"Couldn't have been," Gaenor refused to believe. "The incantation was a long one but it couldn't have taken more than five minutes to recite. Even with three repetitions and pauses it can't have taken over half an hour."

"Time works differently when you practice magic."

"It does?"

"Definitely. It expands and contracts at will. Sometimes it does a back flip with a double axial twist."

"A what?" Gaenor asked, tired and confused.

"What I mean is that magic is one of the primary forces of the universe. It can affect anything. Time is one of the easiest things to affect. Ever notice how it seems to go faster when you have a lot to do or how it just drags when you're bored?"

"But it doesn't really move faster or slower," Gaenor replied, stopping a moment to face Artur. "It just seems to."

"That's true," Artur admitted as they continued walking toward their rooms. "Many spells twist one's perception of time. Sometimes a minute can seem to last an eternity or vice versa. The more powerful a spell is, the greater the perceived change."

"Why didn't you warn me?" Gaenor asked accusingly.

"Well, I really wasn't sure it would affect you that way. I had already stored the spell inside you, you will remember. You just had to release it. It might not have affected you at all."

"But why didn't it take two hours for you to store it in me?"

"I'm sure it did, Gae." She looked at him disbelievingly. "You were out from the time I started the amulet spell until I finished."

"Strange," she commented.

"When you've had some rest, perhaps you can figure out why magic affects adepts this way."

"Okay," she agreed sleepily, "but what I really want to know is why this time distortion effect doesn't affect the actual spells."

"It's just a side effect, I guess," Artur shrugged.

"Artur," Gaenor admonished him, "any product of a magical spell has to come from somewhere. It's the Law of Conservation of Matter and Energy. You taught me that yourself."

"Is Time matter?" Artur asked, "or energy?"

"Good point," Gaenor conceded sleepily. "Can I get back to you on that?"

Artur opened his mouth to reply but was suddenly cut off by a loud roar coming from the New Wing. They glanced briefly at each other and then ran as fast as they could toward the source of the noise. The door to Artur's room had been blown off its hinges and was resting, half in splinters, against the wall on the far side of the corridor.

Both Artur and Gaenor, fatigue instantly forgotten, grabbed and invoked protective amulets from their belts and charged into the room, ready to use the more offensive spells Artur had prepared. What they found within the chamber, however, proved that this once they needn't have gone to the trouble.

The room was a shambles. Glass had been blown out of the windows and everything else had been haphazardly and violently thrown against the walls as had a slim man in a bright red jumpsuit.

His body had been mangled by the explosion and his arms and legs were all bent in decidedly fatal directions. There were several large darker red blood spots on the Tem's garb and there was a suggestion of a pool forming beneath the body.

Artur took in the scene grimly, but Gaenor felt her gorge rising and ran to the window for the comfort of fresh air.

"Looks like I overpowered that protective ward," Artur commented dryly. "Still, it was a good idea. I'm glad you thought of it, Gae. Gae?"

Gaenor was leaning out the window, retching uncontrollably. She was leaning so far out the window that Artur feared she might fall out. He helped her back in and got a look at what had pushed her nausea over the edge. Broken and bloody, the body of another Temi assassin lay draped over a large decorative boulder in the garden two stories down.

"They didn't waste any time in escalating their attacks did they?" Artur commented emotionlessly.

Gaenor looked up at him. "How can you be so calm?"

"Calm? Gae, I'm anything but calm. This is a war. It might only be me against an illegal Cilben sodality, but it's a war nevertheless."

"But the way they died," Gaenor choked out. "Horrible, and all the worse because it was my idea. I did this to them."

"They died instantly and painlessly," Artur told her. "That's far better than they would have done for us. Look, Gae. If they hadn't tried to set up an ambush here in my room, they'd still be alive. There is very little of normal honor to the Temi."

"I thought you said they had a code of honor," Gaenor replied.

"A very specific one, Gae. The first assassin was required to challenge me before attacking. The shout, 'Die, traitor!' filled that requirement. Having done that they are now free to attack me whenever and in any manner they please. The next warning we'll get will be the chief's personal challenge. This one had a crossbow, see, and a few throwing knives, the other was another swordsman."

"Sir Artur!" Chas shouted from the hallway. He was at the head of a large number of nobles and guardsmen. "What happened? Oh, I see." Chas swallowed hard and managed to control his stomach. Several of the nobles were not so fortunate.

Artur explained what had happened and pointed out the other body in the garden below. King Pawlen and Lord Tallur entered midway through the story and he had to repeat himself on several points. Pawlen shooed most of the others out of the room, leaving only himself, Artur, Gaenor, Tallur, and Relle who refused to leave Gaenor, who was still looking very green. Chas excused himself so he could arrange for another room for Artur to stay in, since this one was in such bad shape.

"Your Majesty," Artur remarked after the others had left, "I fear that my continued presence here is a danger to everyone. By your leave, I shall leave first thing tomorrow morning."

"Where will you go?" the king asked.

"I don't know," Artur admitted with a shrug. "Someplace secluded where I might make a defensive stand."

"You don't sound too sure of yourself," Tallur pointed out.

"I don't expect to survive," Artur agreed, "but there's always a chance, and if not, there's no need to take any of my friends down with me."

"You're not ducking out on me!" Gaenor told him heatedly. "We've been through this."

"Yes, Gae, we have," Artur agreed tiredly. "I'd really rather that you stayed behind, but I know you well enough to realize that you'd follow me in any case. You'll be safer with me than tagging along behind."

"Sir Artur," Pawlen said solemnly, "I hate to lose my newest knight so soon. Are you sure your chances are as bleak as all that?"

"I've never heard of anyone surviving two Temi attacks before, not in real life anyway, your Majesty. The third will probably get me and it will be best if I am far away from here when it comes."

"Very well, but on the off chance that you do make it, I command you to let me know immediately."

"I'll send you a letter on my return to Narmouth," Artur promised.

"Perhaps you can join me in Ander come harvest time? I may have something else to celebrate as well then."

"Perhaps," Artur replied bleakly. Pawlen and Tallur left then. Relle remained and was talking quietly to Gaenor in the corner. "Gae, I'll have to renew our amulets."

She looked up and nodded. "Relle just had an excellent idea. We can charge me up with one of the offensive spells just like we handled the binding, only this time make the trigger something simple, like the snapping of one's fingers."

"Not bad," Artur nodded. "Taking an interest in magic, my lady?"

"I've always been interested," Relle replied, "but being highborn, I'm not allowed to practice so I never really pursued it. I was wondering, though. Can you put a spell into anyone? It doesn't have to be a big powerful one, but just once I'd like to know what it's like to be adept."

"What sort of spell would you like?" Artur asked.

"Nothing special," Relle replied. "Maybe just a flash of light or a puff of smoke?"

"I have a simple spell that produces spheres of colored lights," Artur suggested. "I think I can store enough of a charge in you to last a month or two of usage. Would that be sufficient?"

"Oh yes!" Relle replied delightedly.

"All right. Meet with Gae and me right after dinner tonight and I'll see what I can do."

Thirteen

Their Majesties Marnoric and Ymanya persuaded Artur and Gaenor to put off their departure until after breakfast the next morning. They had an intimate meal together. The only others present were King Pawlen and Chas.

"Are you certain my guards can't provide adequate protection, Sir Artur?" Marnoric inquired.

"Perhaps they can, your Majesty," Artur replied, "but at the risk of their and possibly your own lives. I've already put too many at risk by staying here so long. I would have left at the first sign of trouble if I hadn't an important job to do." The King of Firdan nodded and the conversation turned to other matters.

After breakfast they all walked together to the main courtyard where a pair of horses with full saddlebags stood waiting for them. Lady Relle and Lord Tallur were also there along with most of the Mishandan court to bid Artur and Gaenor farewell.

"Chas, you'll make sure our things are delivered to my sister?" Gaenor asked for the third time.

"Of course," he assured her, "and the letter you wrote as well."

"Thank you," she replied simply. Relle came forward and they hugged each other fiercely.

"You take care of yourself, Gae," Relle commanded her, but with no hope in her voice. "I expect to see you again soon!" They released their mutual hug with tears streaming down both their faces.

"I'll do my best, Relle," Gaenor tried to reassure her friend.

"Sir Artur," King Pawlen said clasping the adept's hand, "You have Our best wishes and support. I just wish there was something I could do for you," he concluded with a helpless shrug.

A soft whistling sound was barely audible over the subdued conversation in the courtyard and a moment later a small wooden dart protruded from Artur's right forearm. He grunted at the sharp pain. Gaenor turned to see where the dart had come from.

There, above the main gatehouse stood three red-garbed figures. Gaenor screamed as she snapped her fingers and pointed at the Temi assassins. A thick bolt of lightning erupted from her extended finger and flashed jaggedly on its way toward its target.

The bolt of lightning struck one of the assassins dead center on his chest. He was dead instantly, but the energy of the lightning coursed through his body and into the mossy stones of the building, still damp with the morning dew. Moisture, heated by the intense power, exploded into steam and several blocks of the gatehouse were shaken loose, taking another of the Temi with them. He landed on his head, dead on impact.

Gaenor was reaching for one of her amulets when the third Tem bolted, running across the roof of the gatehouse to the walkway on top of the palace's largely ornamental battlements. Before Gaenor could ready another spell, he jumped down to the far side of the wall.

"After him!" King Marnoric shouted. Two dozen guardsmen ran as though the devil were on their heels. "They'll get him if anyone can," Marnoric said positively.

"Why such a small dart?" King Pawlen asked as Artur plucked the thin wooden shaft from his arm. Blood began to flow freely through the resulting hole. "They could have killed you with a normal, iron-tipped crossbow bolt."

"This is normally far more deadly," Artur replied, his eyes locked on the flow of his own blood. "These darts are poisoned. Fortunately, a magic spell my master put on me some years ago protects me, or I'd probably already be dead. Well, I better get this bound properly before I leave."

Gaenor persuaded Artur to wait for the healer in a small nearby audience chamber. "You don't know what sort of poison they used," she told him as she inspected the dart for herself. "It must have done something to you. I've never seen you bleed so freely this long."

"The dart probably hit a vein," Artur admitted, keeping his hand tightly clamped over the wound. "In that case it won't hurt me to wait. Walking will only make it harder to close the wound."

The healer showed up a few minutes later. From the way he was breathing, Gaenor deduced that he had come on the run and had not been conveniently nearby.

"Can't you stay out of trouble?" the healer demanded gruffly between puffs and pants. "I'm surprised you skipped the last couple days, although from what I hear you got lucky yesterday. Speaking of which, why weren't you in my office yesterday morning?" Artur gave him a crooked smile and a shrug. "Well, never mind that now. Let's see what they did to you. There, now this wound looks fresh. See the difference from the one you had the other day. This one's still bleeding, while that one." The healer caught sight of Artur's hand. The only remaining trace of the knife wound was a thin white line on the back of his hand. "That's impossible!"

"I told you I healed quickly," Artur told him smugly.

"Well, this wound doesn't show any sign of quick healing."

Artur looked at the wound carefully. "You're right," he agreed worriedly. "Hasn't even slowed down. That's odd. Must have something to do with whatever was on that dart."

"Should I prepare a healing spell?" Gaenor asked.

"I'd like to see the dart," the healer commented at the same time.

"Get my bag but hold off until we know what we're dealing with," Artur told Gaenor while handing the dart to the healer. Gaenor rushed off to where the loaded horses were still standing just outside.

"This was dipped in some sort of liquid," the healer noted. "See. This blood line shows how deeply it penetrated your arm, but there's some sort of oily sheen that covers another quarter inch up the shaft. You have any idea what it might be?"

"The Temi use every poison known to man and one or two only they know about, but I've never encountered anything that would affect the magic of my health spell."

"Ah! That's how you do it!" the healer proclaimed. "I really should have guessed, although I didn't know there were any general health spells powerful enough to close a stab wound as quickly as yours obviously did."

"It's a very rare spell," Artur explained. "I don't even know it myself."

"How'd you ever cast it then?"

"It's too long a story," Artur replied. "Do you have any idea why this wound isn't healing?" Gaenor returned with Artur's black leather bag and started arranging its contents in an orderly manner on a nearby table.

"An anti-coagulant maybe?"

"What's that?" Artur asked.

"Something that keeps your blood from clotting. There are times when such an agent has its uses, but right now it's keeping you from healing. I'll sterilize this now. It will probably sting like that stab wound the other day did."

Sir Gerax entered the room just then. He too had come at a dead run. "I just heard," he explained.

Artur nodded and asked the healer, "Will it heal if we just bandage it up?"

"It ought to," the healer shrugged. "Normally I'd prefer to sew it up with a stitch or two of sterile silk."

"Sew?" Gaenor asked. "You sew people?"

"It's a technique I learned from my master. Very common in Firdan, and it helps to hold a wound closed while it's healing."

"Interesting," Gaenor murmured thoughtfully. "Why aren't you doing that now?"

"It might interfere with his magic. I don't know enough about the health spell or whatever that gunk is on the dart. You're leaving today anyway, aren't you?" he asked Artur.

"If I can, yes."

"I'll prepare a number of spare bandages for you. I think there's magic at work here, but I'm no expert on that."

"What about you, Sir Gerax? Know anything about healing?"

"A little. More to the point, however, I might be able to learn what was on that dart and what it's doing to your health spell. Your tools are already set up. Mind if I use them?"

"Be my guest," Artur shrugged.

Gerax picked up several items and examined them, putting most of them back in their places.

"Do you have a rose crystal rod?" he asked.

"Never had much use for one," Artur informed him.

"Really? I have a spare you may have. Comes in very handy for divination spells." Artur nodded his thanks while Gerax opened his own bag and extracted a small velvet pouch from which he took a short, stubby rod of perfectly transparent rose quartz.

With his chosen tools, Gerax spoke a brief incantation and made a few mystic gestures. He combined two powders in a bowl of water and stirred them together with the quartz rod. When they were mixed he let the rose quartz rod fall back into the bowl, and stood still for a few moments before repeating the incantation.

"That's very odd," he commented when finished. "According to this, most of the dart and the wounded part of your arm does not exist."

"You mean he isn't really wounded?" Gaenor asked sarcastically.

"No, of course not. Any fool can see that he is, girl," Gerax retorted. "I mean that the spell is unable to detect anything that touched whatever was on this dart. The substance inhibits magic. Stops it cold."

"That explains the wound," Artur commented.

"Is there a cure?" Gaenor asked.

"A cure?" Gerax responded, "I didn't even know anything like this existed. Maybe they can help in Es."

"At the University there?" Gaenor asked hopefully.

"Where else?"

"That settles it then," Artur said decisively. "We're going to Es."

"Let me try one more spell while the good healer finishes bandaging you up."

"Good healer!" the healer snorted gruffly making it obvious that these two irascible men didn't tolerate each other any more than they did anyone else. "There, that's the best I can do for you," he told Artur. "You should change the dressing once a day, and keep that wound clean until it closes. I'll go get those spare bandages." He walked purposefully out of the room and was almost instantly replaced by King Pawlen and Lady Relle.

"Well?" Pawlen demanded.

"Sh!" Sir Gerax quieted the king. Pawlen's face briefly showed anger, but the anger quickly turned to amusement. The Firdani adept obviously was too absorbed to realize who he was talking to. "That's what I was afraid of," he said a minute later, retrieving the rose crystal and wiping it off before returning it to its pouch.

"What's wrong?" Artur asked worriedly.

"Whatever that gunk on the dart is, its effect is progressive. It's going to spread until either it dilutes too much or wipes out all vestiges of magic within you. Including your ability to cast spells. I think your only chance is going to be in Es. The University in Misha might help, but Es is closer. I'll write you a letter of

introduction. The Dean of Magic was a classmate of mine. He'll be able to speed things up once you get there."

"If we get that far," Artur replied. "I'd better prepare a few more amulets. I'll most likely need them, and I'd better reset that lightning spell in Gaenor." He got up and started sorting out the needed tools.

"Sir Gerax," Gaenor asked interestedly, "what are the mystic properties of rose quartz? And does the shape make a difference?"

Part IV Gostrina

One

"We're being followed," Gaenor noted on their fifth day out.

"You just noticed?" Artur remarked. He sounded tired to Gaenor. It was like he was suddenly feeling all sixty-seven of his years. It was too early to tell, but she thought his skin was beginning to wrinkle. It could have just been the light. "They've been back there since we left Dana. Three of them, I think."

"Will they follow us into Gostrina?"

"Gae, we left Firdan two days ago. I estimate that we'll be in Es in another five or six days."

"What are they waiting for then? Why don't they attack?"

"I'm not sure. They may be waiting to make sure their poison is working."

"They aren't going to wait forever, you know."

"I know, but they're too far away. None of our spells can be directed accurately enough. We'd just be wasting time and energy."

They were riding through a region of low, rolling hills and tall grass that formed the eastern border of the great valley of the Trina River. Aside from the three red-garbed assassins that followed them, always from two or three hills back, they hadn't seen a living soul since the road they were on left the banks of the Ren.

"What a waste of good farmland," Gaenor commented.

"Oh, I wouldn't call it a waste," Artur replied. "It just isn't being exploited. Good, fallow land offered up by the gods just waiting until the time when we need it, Gae. That's not a waste. We should only have more such untapped resources."

"You make it sound intentional that they don't use this land."

"No, of course not. Humans aren't like that. Not at all. We'll use anything we can get our hands on, but Gostrina is sparsely settled. Almost nobody lives out this way, so they don't need to farm this land yet. I imagine that Firdan could claim some of this land, but the border between these realms were settled by negotiation thirty years ago and Firdan's needs haven't grown so much as to threaten the agreement."

"Where do most of the Gostrinans live?"

"About a third of the population lives in Es," Artur replied, "making it about the same size as Misha, maybe a little larger. The rest live mostly in towns along the Trina or on the west side of the kingdom. I don't know what it is about people, but in every land that borders the Parch, there are settlements all along those borders. It's like by living at the edge of the world's greatest desert they can keep it contained. Well, who knows. Maybe they can, but I haven't seen any sign of it."

"Tell me about the Parch," Gaenor requested.

"What's there to tell?" he replied, shrugging. "There's a lot of sand and dust, even more gravel, and absolutely no naturally occurring surface water. It's hot in there too. It bakes the life right out of a person. Without water you'd be dead in a day. Salt too. You practically have to eat salt."

"Salt?" Gaenor asked somewhat disgustedly.

"Salt," he confirmed. "Even with all the water you can drink the heat will sweat the salt right out of your body and leave you dead of heat prostration. All told, I don't recommend the place for casual visits." He laughed at his own joke and Gaenor joined him. It was good to see him laughing again. He hadn't laughed so freely since the first Temi attempt on his life and Gaenor was afraid he'd given up.

"So what about those guys?" Gaenor pointed a thumb back over her shoulder in the general direction of the Temi.

"What about them?"

"Are we going to let them just follow us?"

"What do you suggest? Go after them ourselves?"

"Well, yeah."

Artur reigned in his horse and turned to look at her. What a remarkable young woman! he thought, echoing the same thoughts he had when they had first met. Then, I'd marry her if she'd have me and I only had the time. That wasn't a new thought either, but he quickly shelved the idea as he had every other time it had crossed his mind. If she'd been truly interested in that sort of relationship, she'd have had her father or some other member of the family approach him with a proposal. Besides, he was dying. He could feel his health spell beginning to falter and he was rapidly changing into a sixty-seven year old man. It wasn't horribly old, he had to admit to himself, but too old to be able to match the physical prowess of Temi assassins in the prime of life.

"Too dangerous," he told her at last.

"They sure wouldn't be expecting it," she pointed out.

"No. They wouldn't at that," he admitted, "but I doubt we'll be able to sneak up and catch them asleep."

They probably sleep in shifts."

"Then we have one advantage over them.," Gaenor told him confidently. "We've been getting all our sleep. Well, I have anyway," she corrected herself when Artur shook his head slightly. "What's the matter? Don't trust your wards?"

"As a matter of fact, Gae, no. I don't. It's getting harder to cast a spell - I can feel that - and the problem with defensive wards is that you don't know for sure if they work until they're tested."

"Then how do you know you're having trouble?"

"Gae, you cast the binding spell so you know how it feels to use magic, to have it flow right through you. Well now it feels like the power is having trouble flowing. I have to concentrate harder, force the power through me, just to get the same results."

"There still has to be something we can do," Gaenor insisted.

"Sure, let's just pull into this next copse of trees on the left and wait for the Temi to ride on by."

"Now you're talking!"

"Gae." Artur shook his head. "Gae, they're just too good to fall for such a simple ambush. On the other hand that gives me an idea."

"Yes?"

"Let me think about it. I'll let you know when we stop for lunch. Just don't plan on getting much sleep tonight."

"That's okay," Gaenor replied lightly. "Maybe I can catch up when we get to Es. Do you think we can get me initiated there too?"

"Maybe," Artur replied uncertainly, "The Gostrinans are a bit stuffy. They have certain antique notions concerning the proper place for women."

"So do Mishandans," Gaenor pointed out.

"So they do," Artur laughed, "but the Gostrinans are a little more conservative. I doubt that there's anyone like Lady Relle in Gostrina; she's probably unique even in Misha. Even if there was someone as out-spoken here, it's unlikely her husband would tolerate such revolutionary ideas."

"Not much he could do about it, is there?"

"On the contrary, he could divorce her for heresy."

"Heresy?"

"The central tenet of Gostrinan religion is that the gods created everyone and everything for a purpose."

"That's the way I learned it too," Gaenor told him. "What's the difference?"

"The difference is in what they consider to be the purpose of a woman and the key word is property."

"Property?" Gaenor repeated.

"A Gostrinan woman owns nothing. The only wealth she has belongs to her husband. An unmarried female orphan is a pauper regardless of how rich her father was. If she has no male relatives to take her in she must enter a workhouse and a life of virtual slavery."

"That's horrible!"

"Well, in practice the system isn't as strict as all that. Families do their best to make sure that their women are either married off or have a male relative to live with. Their dowries are carefully kept track of and, surprisingly, women actually handle most household finances."

"That's very strange," Gaenor commented.

"Not from their standpoint, I guess." Artur shrugged and rode on while Gaenor contemplated what little she knew about Gostrina. The sun had been past its zenith for an hour before they paused on a clear, grassy hilltop some time later.

"How about some lunch?" Artur suggested, pulling in on his horse's reins.

"Isn't this a little too out in the open?" Gaenor objected.

"If the Temi were following just to kill us they would have done it already," Artur replied, climbing down from his saddle. "No. I think they're following us just to keep an eye on us, at least for now anyway."

"So we're just going to ignore them for now?" Gaenor also got off her horse and started looking through her saddle bags for something to eat.

"For now? I suppose so. We'll move against them tonight. Until then, however, we want to watch them as closely as they're watching us and if we stay out in the open they'll have to keep their distance unless they decide to make their move now, in which case we'll be able to see them coming. How about some of this smoked meat and bread?" he asked, changing the subject.

"All right," Gaenor replied. "Cheese?"

"Why not? Let's open this wine as well."

"Wine, Artur? Don't you think we should keep our heads clear?"

"Just a cup, Gae. We'll make a picnic of it. Besides, I'm going to use some wine in the spell tonight."

"That's not much of a hint," she commented. Wine was a common catalytic ingredient in their magic.

"Hmm? Oh, sorry, I didn't mean it to be." he pulled a blanket out of his pack and laid it out on the ground. "Let's eat."

"The bread is getting a bit stale," Gaenor commented a while later as she put the left-overs away, "but I think we can squeeze one more meal out of it." Artur was still sitting on the blanket, making some notes.

"Good. That ought to be enough," Artur replied. "We'll be in farm country by tomorrow anyway. Now I need to cast a small spell and we can continue on."

"What sort of spell?" Gaenor asked.

"I want to be able to find them tonight, so I figured I could put a locator on one or more of them. Here." He passed her the notes he had been making. "What do you think?"

Gaenor studied it carefully trying to find a flaw, but soon gave up. "Rather clever. Is this what you wanted the wine for?"

"No," Artur admitted, "I have something similar in mind for that, but that's how I got the idea. Let's do this quickly. We've already been sitting here long enough."

Artur's spell require no special gestures; just a brief chant and a drop of wine spilled on the ground. Then he walked across the road and repeated the process.

"That should do it," he decided, recorking the bottle. "The next person to pass between these two spots will be marked."

"Won't you need some sort of tracking spell to find him?" Gaenor asked as they mounted up and returned to the road.

"Already have one, Gae," he said, holding up his left hand and indicating the ring he wore there. "I haven't had to use this since that time in Nistor, but the detection and analysis spell stored in this ring should suffice." Gaenor nodded and with a brief look over her shoulder, urged her mount down the road.

Two

They rode on until sunset, traveling out of the grasslands and into a region marked by sporadic copses of trees. Artur chose one fair-sized copse to stop in just as it was beginning to get dark.

"Not much light left to set up camp in," Gaenor complained.

"We won't be staying, Gae, so don't unload anything we don't need. We'd better eat now, though. We won't get much chance to do so again until after midnight."

"All right. Are you going to set up the defensive wards again?"

"Not tonight," Artur replied, starting to lay a fire. "As I said we're not staying and if I'm reading the results correctly, we tagged at least two of our friends out there with the locator, so I'm fairly certain that they're about a mile away at the moment and not moving. My guess is that they're setting up camp for the night. In a little while, one of them will probably venture out to make sure of where we are."

"What makes you say that?"

"It's what they've done every night so far."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Gaenor asked with a note of anger in her voice.

"There was nothing you could do about it, Gae, and they never came close enough to set off our wards. I might not have noticed them myself if I hadn't been so nervous our first night out. Remember when I took a stroll around our encampment? That's when I noticed the last rays of light highlighting someone in bright red trying to slink through the high grass."

"What ever made them choose red as their color?" Gaenor asked suddenly. "It isn't exactly inconspicuous, unless most people wear red in Cilbe."

"No," Artur told her, "whites and pastels are the most common colors in Cilbe, although indigo is popular and the very rich and noble are entitled to wear certain amounts of purple depending on their actual rank. The Temi chose red, I'm told, because it's the color of blood. They continue to use it because it strikes fear in the hearts of any they choose to target. I have known men to fall on their own swords when they learned a Temi contract had been taken out on them. Of course they only wear red while on a mission. the rest of the time they might dress like any other Cilben."

"I take it that there's no Cilben word for camouflage then?"

"Not one the Temi recognize," Artur laughed. "It's one of their three weaknesses."

"In Dana you told me they're also superstitious," Gaenor recalled. "What's their third weakness?"

"They almost never fail."

"That's a weakness?" Gaenor asked disbelievingly.

"I think it is," he replied. "We've beaten them twice now. The third time they got me at the cost of two of their men, but the fact that these three are following us without attacking means that they are unsure of themselves. They're worried about us. They've never lost so many men on such a simple mission before and that scares them. It's my guess that there are three very worried men out there. I could probably scare them quite literally to death right now."

"Is that your plan? To scare them?"

"That would take too long. I'm afraid I'm not a very patient man, Gae. No, I'm just going to kill them." After saying that, he brought his flint and steel together sharply and spoke the simple incantation. The pile of wood he had constructed burst into flame, brightly illuminating the trees around them.

"Spectacular," Gaenor murmured, carrying what was left of the bread, meat, and cheese next to the fire.

"I want them to know where we are," he replied helping her spread their food out. "Want me to freshen that bread?"

"Reversal spell?" Gaenor asked.

"No, toasting over the fire. Gae, I do believe you're becoming too dependant on magic. That doesn't usually happen until after initiation."

"Then perhaps, I'll have out-grown it by then."

"I hope so." Artur sliced the bread and carefully toasted it on a convenient flat rock. "Here comes our Tem," he said a few moments later. "He just started out."

Artur and Gaenor ate nervously as the assassin zigzagged his way toward them. When he got to within two hundred yards, he began circling around them. The man in red was obviously one of the best trackers but on a dark moonless night, even the best cannot avoid stepping on the occasional dry, fallen branch. In the stillness of the night such noises could be heard by both Gaenor and Artur even over the sounds of insects and tree frogs. It took nearly an hour before the Tem was able to complete his circuit and rejoin his fellows.

"Start loading the horses, Gae," Artur instructed her. "I'll be gone for a while, but when I get back we'll want to ride hard and long. Oh, keep the fire going too, I may need it to find my way back." Gaenor objected, saying that she wanted to go with him. "Not this time, Gae," he told her firmly. "Your presence might not slow me down, but it wouldn't speed me up either." They argued for another few minutes, but Gaenor gave in eventually and sulkily started loading the horses as Artur slipped out of the campsite with his black leather bag and the partially full bottle of wine in hand.

Gaenor suddenly realized that she hadn't had a chance to ask about the spell Artur was about to cast. She ran out of the campsite frantically looking for him, but he had already disappeared into the night.

"Damn!" she swore quietly to herself. There was only one reason Artur wouldn't ask her about a spell; it was too dangerous. Now there was nothing she could do but wait and worry in between prayers to every god she could think of, because the small chores Artur had assigned to her wouldn't take more than five minutes.

Artur knew that Gaenor would try coming after him, in spite of all his reasoning, so he had prepared for that. One of his amulets contained a spell that would encase him in a field that would absorb all light, making him seem to disappear into a solid black egg. The spell was particularly useless at most times, but on a moonless night with a heavy overcast, it was sufficient to approximate invisibility.

Artur, standing silently, wondered briefly why true invisibility had never been accomplished, but quickly turned his mind to business. The spell would only last a single hour and he wanted to use it to his best advantage. He waited until Gaenor returned to the campsite and then moved as quickly as he dared toward the spark of orange light where the Temi were camped.

He slowed down and became more cautious as he approached. The night was warm and the air was filled with the chirping of insects and the intermittent light of fireflies. The Temi were camped on top of a grassy hill, clearly visible to anyone who cared to look. Artur wondered whether this was an attempt to intimidate him or precaution on the part of the Temi. It didn't matter. Artur had no intention of getting close enough to be seen even if he had been clearly visible.

Artur opened his little black bag and pulled out a small phial of the explosive powder that had been his hobby ever since his first case with Gaenor as his assistant. He whispered a relatively long incantation as he poured the contents of the phial into the bottle of wine and shook it up. The contents were now symbolically bonded as a single substance.

Then he began another, more complex spell using the wine-black powder mixture as the only ingredient. The spell was basically similar to the one he had cast to allow him to track his pursuers. Both spells were forms of wards, curtains of magical energy that would wait until either dispelled or activated by the prescribed trigger activity. In this case the trigger would be the touch of any human.

Artur recited the complex incantation and completed the ritual by dropping some of the wine mix on the ground. He circled partway around the Temi and repeated the process. He did this again for a total of twenty times until the assassins were completely surrounded by the resulting ward.

He had been visible again for twenty minutes by the time he rejoined Gaenor. She had been huddled by the fire trying not to think of all the things that might have gone wrong.

"What took you so long?" she asked a bit more sharply than she intended as he tiredly dragged himself toward the fire.

"The spell took more out of me than I thought it would. I don't suppose you made any tea while you were waiting."

"You look terrible. Maybe some of that wine would do you more good," Gaenor told him reaching for the small teapot she had been keeping warm near the fire.

"There isn't any left and I doubt it would have been drinkable after I finished with it anyway." Gaenor raised an inquiring eyebrow so he explained what he had done.

"Oh my!" Gaenor gasped.

"A problem?"

"We'd better get moving as soon as possible," Gaenor told him. She poured some of the luke-warm tea into a wooden cup and handed it to him.

"I know." He chugged the cupful and tossed the cup back to Gaenor. "Thanks. Let's go."

"You feel up to riding at night?"

"No, not really, but I don't feel like waiting around to see if our pals have been making a habit of checking us out more than once a night either." He struggled back to his feet and started walking toward the horses.

"We'd better put out the fire," Gaenor told him before he'd made it more than five steps.

"I'd rather leave it going, Gae. It will make it look like we're still here."

"Not this time," Gaenor told him stubbornly. "I will not leave a fire unattended. It just isn't done! Besides, it's a warm night. We would have let it burn out anyway."

"All right," Artur nodded. "Douse the fire while I get the horses."

"Artur," Gaenor called. He turned and she threw the wooden cup back at him. "Pack this up while you're at it. The teapot too."

"Just how powerful do you figure that spell is going to be?" Artur asked Gaenor when they had ridden nearly a league down the road.

"There's no way to tell," Gaenor replied. "We were probably safe where we were, but I didn't want to

risk my hearing on the noise when it goes off."

As she said that, there was a sudden flash behind them, like a distant lightning bolt. They both stopped to watch. It flickered illumination across the cloudy sky for a few seconds as it slowly died away. "No sound?" Gaenor asked, puzzled.

"Wait for it," Artur told her. A short eternity later they heard a deep rumbling sound not unlike that of rolling thunder. "Well, maybe we didn't have to move out so fast after all. That's nothing like the blast I expected."

"You think they survived that?"

"Hardly, but I thought I was setting off something that would make the earth shake, flatten that hill, and knock down trees for a mile or two around. I doubt that did more than scorch the grass."

"It's just as well," Gaenor told him. "Only the gods should have that kind of power to wield."

"You're right," Artur sighed, turning to continue on. "When would I want to move a mountain anyway?"

Three

They first saw the Pyramid to Nauo late the next afternoon as a speck of unspeakably bright light on the horizon while they were still fifteen leagues away. As they slowly approached on the following day, Gaenor watched the immense structure rise up from the flood plain of the Trina like a not-so-miniature mountain.

The pyramid had been faced with mirror-polished, pure white marble, but the top third of the structure as well as the edges of each face had been covered with gold.

"Most of it is only gold leaf," Artur told her as she gasped at the untold wealth represented there.

"Even so," Gaenor countered, "they must have used many pounds of gold."

"About five hundred pounds," he replied. "The edging is sheet gold, however, and that accounts for most of the weight. Tough to look at, isn't it?"

"Very," Gaenor agreed. "It's a good thing it's hazy today. They made it this way to represent the glory of the face of Nauo, who we call Nua, right?"

"So I was told last time I was here. You've been studying, Gae."

"I told you years ago that I could speak Gostri. Descriptions of the Pyramid were almost obligatory in the textbooks I learned from."

"I've always wondered, Gae. Who taught you to speak Gostri? That's not one of the usual subjects taught in the Narmouth Public School."

"I taught myself," she informed him. "There were a few books in Gostri in the library and I wanted to read them. I spoke to a few Gostrinan merchants who come to Narmouth every now and then to get my pronunciation right. I still speak with a heavy accent, I'm told, but at least I can be understood. How did you learn?"

"By magic. I've shown you that spell, remember?"

"I'd forgotten," she admitted. "It didn't occur to me to wonder about it in Firdan, but isn't it odd that the Firdanis speak Shandi? It's heavily accented, but definitely the same language we speak at home."

"Until a hundred years ago Firdan was a principality of Mishanda," Artur informed her. "That's why the ties between the two realms are so close. Firdan was granted autonomy when it became too difficult to govern it from Misha. I wouldn't be surprised if the southern districts of Goster, Toth and Pandenda are granted autonomy someday too. Mishanda is a very large kingdom, only the Cilben Empire is larger." Artur stopped abruptly and winced with pain.

"Artur, what's wrong?"

"A little pain in my joints is all," he replied. "I've been riding too much lately. We'll be able to rest in Es."

Gaenor had been watching Artur closely since they had left Dana. He wouldn't admit it, but his wound was still not healed. The bandages he discarded showed that there was still a slow trickle of blood draining away his life and he seemed to have aged at least two decades since then. His face was deeply lined now and his curly blond hair was not only thin on top but showing distinctly silver-gray roots. He refused to discuss the matter, but Gaenor was afraid that he was dying.

Businesses were beginning to open up for their evening trade as Artur and Gaenor rode through the streets on the far side of the Pyramid of Nauo. Es was dominated by the great pyramid and Gaenor suspected that much of the intense heat on the west side of the city was due to the harsh sunlight that was reflected by the gold and marble even in the late afternoon when the shadows should have been long and cool.

The University of Es stood to the southwest of the pyramid - a collection of tall, pale yellow stucco buildings that covered several acres of ground around a common courtyard that had been carefully landscaped with trees, grass and a small pond at one end. They rode in through the main gate while students and faculty alike stared at them.

"You'd think they never saw horses," Gaenor commented dryly to Artur.

"Maybe they haven't seen one on university grounds," Artur replied. "There don't seem to be any hitching posts on campus, but frankly I think they're staring at you. I suspect that a woman on campus, especially a pretty one, is a rare sight."

"Pretty?" Gaenor asked delightedly, "Do you think so?"

Artur chuckled in lieu of an answer and turned to one of the wide-eyed students. "You there," he called. "Where is the Magic Department?"

"Do we have one?" the thin young man asked in reply, barely able to take his eyes off of Gaenor.

"That doesn't bode well," she noted.

"Must be a very small department. How about the dean's office?" Artur persisted.

"Which one?" the student asked.

"Which office?"

"Which dean?"

"Terrific," Artur muttered, mostly to himself. "My Gostri isn't perfect; maybe I'm using the wrong term. Young man, who is in charge here?"

"Oh, you want the rector," the student replied. "His office is in the third building on the right."

"Thank you," Artur told him simply and started riding on.

"But," the student called, "you won't find him there."

"Oh?" Artur stopped the horse again. "Where is he then?"

"I hear he went to Firdan for the coronation. He should be back within the week."

Artur traded stares with Gaenor. "Well," he said finally, "he must have left somebody in charge, didn't he?"

"I guess that would be Doctor Naxtir," the student told them. "His office is in the same building. I'll show you the way." Artur and Gaenor climbed down off their mounts and followed the student across the verdant campus. "Oh, I'm Radnire of Es," the student introduced himself.

"Gaenor of Narmouth," Gaenor responded. "That's in Mishanda, and this is Sir Artur the Southlander."

"Really?" Radnire asked. "Which one of the southlands?"

"None of them, actually," Artur replied to the disappointed student. "When I settled in Narmouth the locals there thought I was from Pahn or Sorvohn and before I could correct them, the name sort of stuck."

"I understand," Radnire said, nodding. "I have an uncle who was ambassador to Pahn for a while. When he retired most of the family called him Dromlis of Pahn even though he was a Gostrinan born and bred."

There was no obvious place to hitch up the horses, so Artur and Gaenor tied the reins to the foot of a statue outside the administration building. Radnire tried unsuccessfully to stifle a laugh when they did that and explained that while it was traditional for the students to dress the statue up in silly clothing before a festival, he'd never seen anyone treat the bronze figure like a hitching post.

"Why not?" Artur shrugged. "It's not a very pretty statue. It's about time it had some useful function."

Doctor Naxtir was a completely bald man whose nose more resembled the beak of an eagle than an ordinary human appendage. His response to Artur's greeting was guarded and he blatantly ignored Gaenor's presence. Artur showed him the letter of introduction that Sir Gerax had provided.

"This is for Doctor Haxmire," Naxtir sniffed disapprovingly.

"We know that," Artur responded, deciding that courtesy would only be wasted on this educated lout. "Where can we find him?"

"In his office, I suppose."

"And where would that be?"

"Top floor of the Hadlex Building. Now, if you will excuse me. I am a busy man."

"I'll show you the way," Radnire volunteered, startling Artur who thought the young man had left minutes earlier.

"One more thing," Naxtir added as they turned to leave. "Your servant," he pointed at Gaenor distastefully, "will have to wait outside. Women are not allowed on campus."

"Servant?" Gaenor asked in deceptively soft tones.

Artur recalled some of the spells that were represented by the amulets on her belt, not to mention the rather destructive lightning spell he'd charged her with, and quickly spoke up. "Doctor Naxtir, Miss Gaenor is a native of Mishanda and my partner, not my servant. Her presence is necessary in my business with Doctor Haxmire. She will continue to accompany me."

"She will wait outside the University's gates or I shall have her arrested," Naxtir threatened. "Doctor Haxmire can accompany you outside if he desires."

"Artur," Gaenor asked sweetly, "may I turn him into a pumpkin? He'd look good orange."

Naxtir eyes bugged out with a brief flash of fear. "Out!" He screamed. "Complete your business and get off my campus!"

Gaenor was the last through the office door. She turned in the doorway, dropped her voice several tones, and murmured, "Well, maybe a cucumber."

"You have a real mean streak, Gae." Artur noted.

She smiled at him. "He had it coming."

"He can make a lot of trouble for us, though. Perhaps you should wait outside."

"Forget it. You're stuck with me all the way."

"If anyone asks," Radnire volunteered, "I'll tell him that it sounded as though Doctor Naxtir changed his mind."

"He might have at that," Gaenor laughed. "Thank you, Radnire of Es."

"It's no big deal," the student shrugged. "I took his class in analytic geometry last term. He teaches with the same attitude that he welcomes visitors. Would you really have turned him into a pumpkin?"

"I might have," Gaenor confirmed, "if I had that ability. As it happens, I have not yet been initiated as an adept."

"I'm not sure you could have actually transformed him," Artur commented thoughtfully.

"No, probably not," she agreed after thinking it through, "not without a fair amount of advanced preparation."

"And you don't often hold a grudge all that long," Artur added.

Gaenor found herself highly disappointed by the Magic Department. When Naxtir had told them that Doctor Haxmire could be found on the top floor of the Hadlex Building, she had assumed that the department occupied the entire floor. She imagined several laboratories similar to Artur's, all neatly organized and busy with the experiments of several adepts.

What she found, however, was a single glass door. The timeworn and faded legend, "Department of Magic" stenciled on it looked as though it had been applied sometime during the previous eon, and that the glass of the door had not been cleaned since before that.

There was no response when they knocked on the door, but it was unlocked so Artur turned the handle. The door opened to reveal a small room that was not quite as large as the closet Gaenor had in her room in Dana Palace. There were two desks that had been placed against each other with just barely enough room for one person to sit down at each desk. The walls were lined with bookshelves that reached all the way to the low ceiling. The shelves were full not only of books, but of numerous notebooks as well as papers and even parchments that had been precariously balanced on top of the textbooks anywhere they could be made to fit. More than a few papers had failed to stay where they had been put and instead littered the floor in numerous strata.

At first Gaenor thought the pile of gray cloth that slumped over one chair and desk, was somebody's forgotten laundry, but as she drew closer, she discovered it was actually a sleeping man.

"Doctor Haxmire?" she asked quietly. When there was no response, she tried again louder. Her third attempt caused the gray-haired and bearded man to look up sleepily, wave his hand dismissively in Gaenor's general direction and then go back to sleep.

"Well, that was effective," Artur commented dryly. "Let me try." He shook the sleeping man gently, but came to the conclusion that either the man was deliberately trying to ignore them, or was simply unable to stay awake. He cleared off a space on the desk by nonchalantly sweeping a disorderly pile of paper off it and onto the floor. The difference hardly showed, but it gave him a little room in which to work.

"What's he doing?" Radnire whispered to Gaenor.

"Casting a spell," she replied as Artur started selecting tools and ingredients.

"Real magic?"

"Well, it's a far cry from juggling or sleight-of-hand," she told him.

"Wow!"

Gaenor smiled tightly at Radnire's awe, remembering her own reactions the first time she had seen a real

adept at work. Radnire was about the same age that she had been when she first started working for Artur.

"What's your field of study?" she asked him while trying to keep an eye on what Artur was doing.

"I haven't declared one yet," he responded. "I don't have to decide until next year anyway. So far I've just been taking classes in just about everything. I didn't know they taught magic here, though." From the sound of Radnire's voice she suspected that he fully intended to look into that for the next term.

Then Gaenor noticed which tools Artur was selecting. He was going to administer a stimulant spell. Something that would keep the man at the desk awake. She considered his choices and after a few moments decided to suggest, "Use the ash wand instead of the oak."

Artur turned and looked at her for a moment and then replied, "Yes, of course. Good idea," and went back to his preparations.

"What difference would that make?" Radnire asked quietly.

"Every material has different magical properties," Gaenor explained. "Ash is more reactive than oak, although oak produces stronger effects. I saw which spell Sir Artur was preparing and felt that ash would produce a more desirable result."

"I thought you said you weren't adept," Radnire told her.

"I'm not."

"Sure doesn't sound that way."

"Anyone can learn the basic fundamentals of magic," Gaenor told him, "but one must undergo a special initiation ritual in order to unlock one's ability to control and use the power."

"Oh. What is he trying to do?"

"Watch."

Artur had finished his preparations. With the ash wand firmly in his left hand and several ingredients arranged within reach of his right, he began the ritual. The entire process took almost two minutes.

"You might as well sit up," Artur told the man at the desk as he placed his tools and unused ingredients back into the black leather bag. "That spell would keep a rock awake for a week."

"You can say that again," the man in gray complained. "Feels like you propped my eyes open with toothpicks."

"Are you Doctor Haxmire of Kandoe?" Artur asked.

"I am," the man replied. "Who else would be sleeping in my office?"

"Another member of your faculty perhaps?" Gaenor suggested.

"There are no other members of my faculty," Haxmire replied bitterly. "You are looking at the Dean and

entire staff of the Department of Magic of the University of Es. What can I do for you? Here to curse your mother-in-law or something?"

"As it happens, doctor," Artur replied, "I don't have a mother-in-law, but if I did, I'm fairly confident I could curse her myself."

"I suppose you could at that," Haxmire admitted. "You sure did a good job on me. You'll have to give me that spell. It might come in handy if they ever allow me to teach a class again."

"Why won't they let you teach, sir?" Radnire asked.

"University politics. Magic is a difficult subject at best and this has never been a very large department. Five years ago we had three adepts on staff and a dozen students, but that was until Kendur of Misha killed himself and two others in a classroom demonstration of Menandin's Principal. Don't ask me how, I investigated the incident personally and I still don't know."

"What's Menandin's Principal?" Radnire asked interestedly.

"Simply stated," Gaenor replied, "it says that similar objects will behave similarly."

"Very good, girl," Haxmire complemented her warmly. "Are you adept?"

"Not yet, sir," Gaenor replied, "but I have a standing invitation to become adept at Misha. I used Menandin's Principal as the basis for my revised classification of reactive materials and its uses in a new method of notation."

"Was that you?" Haxmire asked, amazed. He started sifting through the papers on his desk. "You must be Gaenor of Narmouth then. I have a copy of your paper somewhere around here. Excellent work, girl. Truly revolutionary. I got the impression you were a post-doctoral student at Misha though. Ah! Here it is." He pulled out a thick bundle of paper bound together between two pieces of red cardboard.

"What's that?" Gaenor asked.

"Your dissertation, girl. I understand that several copies of it were made and distributed. Didn't you know?"

"It's the first I heard of it."

"They really should have sent you a bound copy," Haxmire told her.

"They're probably waiting to present it at her initiation," Artur suggested.

"Yes, that must be it," Haxmire agreed. "Still, they should have given you your diploma."

"I never attended classes," Gaenor replied. "Sir Artur taught me."

"Ah, then the diploma is awaiting your arrival in Misha as well. So, what can I do for you all?" This time Haxmire's question was without the bitter sarcasm that colored it the first time he asked. Artur handed him the letter of introduction from Sir Gerax. "Oh dear," he said once he had read it. "Oh dear!"

Four

"What's wrong?" Gaenor demanded of Doctor Haxmire worriedly. "You can help, can't you?"

"I really don't know," Haxmire replied. "I've only heard of one case like this before. I'll perform the tests, but I can't promise anything. Maybe when we positively identify the poison, we can work out a cure."

"But you already think you know what it is, don't you?" Gaenor remarked.

"Have you ever heard of thionase?"

Gaenor mutely shook her head, but Artur slapped his right hand against his thigh and exclaimed, "Of course! I'd forgotten about thionase; it's been so long."

"What is thionase?" Gaenor asked slowly and deliberately.

"It's an extract taken from extremely rare lichen that grows only along the edges of the Parch," Artur told her. "It's very hard to extract and the amount they covered that dart with must have taken a year or more to manufacture. I've never witnessed it for myself, but it is reputed to be able to cancel the effects of magic."

"I can't believe you've never mentioned it," Gaenor complained.

"My master told me about it in passing," Artur replied defensively, "mostly as a dangerous substance to avoid when I left the Parch. In all my years as an adept I've never actually heard of anyone using it before."

"I have," Haxmire told them both, "once, but aside from knowing that it can cancel magic, there's very little known about it. Perhaps when we learn more about thionase's mystic properties we can find a way to reverse Sir Artur's condition. You know, this will be the first time in years I've had cause to invent a new spell," Haxmire fretted. "I hope I can rely on your aid, Miss Gaenor."

"Of course, but I may have trouble getting back on campus." She explained what had happened when they had encountered Doctor Naxtir.

"Naxtir!" Haxmire spat. "He's the major reason why this department is in the shape it's in. After Kendur of Misha's disaster, he led the movement to have the Department of Magic closed as being too dangerous. There were enough conservatives around the university to bar any changes in the curriculum and Doctor Londur of Toth - he was Dean back then - was popular enough with the rest of the faculty, but the anti-magic movement was strong and they got the alumni on their side.

"Eventually the rector had to strike a deal. The department would be allowed to continue, but we could no longer list our course offerings in the university catalogs, nor could we openly encourage students to attend classes. Londur died a few months later and we lost half our students that year. Only gained one freshman the next year and none at all since then. They've all graduated, only two bothered to do enough post-graduate work to earn initiation, and I had to send them to Misha."

"You said you couldn't recruit new students," Artur pointed out, "was there a restriction against hiring new teachers too?"

"No, but I couldn't find any adept who was willing to work here under the restrictions. If they were interested in teaching, they took on apprentices just like in the old days. I hear one of my old students has started a small school of magic up in the mountains near the Mishandan border. Maybe I should go join him."

"Are you allowed to teach new students?" Radnire asked hesitantly.

"Teach, yes. Of course I am required to fully explain all the dangers and disadvantages, and not to discuss the advantages."

"I can see the advantages, sir," Radnire told him, "and I haven't found a major to declare yet." He left the obvious questions hanging.

"What classes have you taken so far?" Radnire told him. "Good distribution. The perfect adept must have the equivalent knowledge to a degree in just about everything."

"Everything?" Radnire squeaked.

"It's something to strive for even if you can never quite achieve it. Well, think about it. If you're still interested tomorrow come back and I'll try and talk you out of it."

"And if you can't?"

"Then I suppose I'll have to teach you what I can. Now about you, Sir Artur. I'll have to do some research tonight and make a few preparations before we can start. I don't suppose this wake-up spell of yours is likely to wear off any time soon?"

"I've never cast it on anyone who was actually awake. I'd say you'll be up for a few days."

"And then you'll sleep for twenty-four hours or more," Gaenor added.

"Of course," Haxmire muttered sourly. "Well, come back tomorrow morning and..." The aged adept abruptly stopped as the door to his office was opened without warning to reveal Doctor Naxtir and two large men dressed in the menacing, dark green uniforms of campus security.

"Still here?" Naxtir asked Gaenor nastily. "I told you to get off campus."

"Doctor Naxtir," Radnire retorted. "I distinctly heard you tell Miss Gaenor to conclude her business with Doctor Haxmire. She could hardly do so without remaining on campus."

"I think that sounds reasonable, sir," one of the guards told him.

Naxtir gave the guard a glare that clearly stated just how little of his meager salary was to be considered compensation for his thoughts. "I want that female off the grounds of the University."

"This female," Haxmire told his colleague, waving Gaenor's thesis in his face, "has one of the finest minds devoted to the field of magic today and comes highly recommended from the University at Misha."

Furthermore, she has not yet concluded her business with me."

"I don't care what her status is in some foreign school," Naxtir fairly screamed. "She will leave this campus now!"

"I'll find us an inn," she told Artur.

"Nonsense!" Haxmire told her. "You'll both stay with me." He shot a look at Naxtir daring him to deny the adept's right to have whatever houseguests he pleased. "Guards, please escort Miss Gaenor to my flat. Is that off-campus enough for you, Naxtir?"

"Just don't let me catch her here again," Naxtir responded.

Gaenor allowed herself to be escorted off campus, but she had no intention of remaining away and she said so when Artur, Haxmire, and Radnire joined her later.

"Of course you'll be there," Haxmire told her, between bites of the food he had Radnire deliver - a wide flat concoction of bread and olive oil strewn with various meats and vegetables. "Do you really think that I'm about to attempt a new spell without the benefit of consulting you? Oh, I'd attempt it on my own if you weren't available, but it would be vain folly not to use every available resource especially when a man's life is at stake."

"Artur taught me everything I know about magic," Gaenor said modestly, while having trouble keeping all the toppings on the triangular slice of oily bread. She finally gave up trying and ate the fallen vegetables with her fingers.

"No, Gae," Artur disagreed, after a brief hesitation during which he finished swallowing the surprisingly cold ale that Haxmire had produced from his basement. "I taught you everything I know about magic. You took that knowledge so much further than I ever could have."

"But you understand everything I've come up with, don't you?"

"Understanding an invention and inventing it yourself are not the same thing," Artur told her. "Do we need to work on campus though, Haxmire?"

"I don't have the room in here, for all of the cleaning Miss Gaenor did."

Bored and unable to abide a mess, Gaenor had waited a full five minutes before starting to neaten up the living room of Haxmire's small flat, which stood two blocks south of the University. A few minutes work had exposed a small section of an exquisitely-made mosaic floor. Curiosity kept her working far longer than she might have. By the time Haxmire and Artur arrived with news of impending food, she had organized the papers from the floor of the flat into several categories, of which the largest quantity was trash. The trash had been bundled up and stacked outside the back door, where she noticed Haxmire's neighbors had done likewise. She had finished dusting the furniture and was in the process of scrubbing the floor. Even in the dim light of several oil lamps, she could make out the brightly colored patterns that had been laid out in the living room floor.

"I didn't touch your bedroom," Gaenor informed Haxmire, "and the kitchen and dining room would take weeks."

"I have a kitchen?" Haxmire asked. "Oh yes. Never used it. I can't cook."

It shows, Gaenor thought to herself, but kept a tight rein on her tongue. The man was their host after all, even if he didn't know how to keep house. It would take him days just to figure out what to do with the papers she had stacked up on his dining room table, assuming that he didn't just let them stay there until they fell back to the floor. At least she and Artur would have a relatively clean room to sleep in.

When they had finished eating, Radnire excused himself. "It's getting late," he explained, "and I have an exam tomorrow morning."

"I'm going to leave you too," Haxmire told them. "Since I won't be able to sleep, I might as well start setting up for tomorrow. I'll be back before you wake."

Haxmire was as good as his word and was busy moving the stacks of paper from the dinner table when Gaenor's eyes greeted the first rays of light to reach her from over the southeast edge of the Pyramid of Nauo. By the time she and Artur were fully awake, their host had finished setting the table with plates of sweet pastry and two pots full of steaming liquids.

"Tea or Qahwah?" he asked them.

"Qahwah?" Gaenor asked. "What's that?"

"A strong, stimulating beverage from Sorvohn," Haxmire explained. "I've developed a taste for it over the years."

"I'll try it," Gaenor told him. She took a sip of the thick, dark liquid and nearly spit it back out again. "Too bitter for me. Maybe some honey would help, but I think I'll stick to tea," she reported a moment later when she trusted herself to speak. Spitting it out would have been a gross discourtesy, but swallowing the brew took all her self-control.

Artur picked up her cup and sipped. "Not bad," he decided. "I wonder how I missed this when I was in Sorvohn last. Is it particularly popular in Es?"

"Sorvohnian cuisine has a small but loyal following among the faculty," Haxmire replied, "and the local nobility tend to agree with us. There are two places that serve Sorvohnian food in town, both tend to be full of starving professors and filthy rich nobles. It makes for an odd mix." He chuckled to himself. "We can go to one tonight if you'd like. I think I've worked out how we're going to get you inside, Miss Gaenor, if you don't mind wearing a disguise."

"What sort of disguise?"

"Well, contrary to what Naxtir might have said, there are women allowed on campus, even if they're the cleaning crew."

"So if I dress up like a maid, I can just stroll in the front gate," Gaenor concluded.

"If you aren't too insulted," Haxmire qualified. "The way you cleaned the flat yesterday gave me the idea."

"I'm not insulted at all. I've worked as a maid before. It's good honest work. I have a simple frock I can put on. Will that do?"

"Quite, but you'll want to wear a white linen kerchief and apron. It's a sort of a uniform. I stopped by the head maid's room this morning and explained the situation to her. She's quite anxious to meet you, I think, but you won't go in through the front gate. That would attract too much attention. Use the service entrance on the west side."

Five

"Damn!" Haxmire muttered. The laboratory of the Magic Department stood in sharp contrast to Haxmire's office and home. Instead of the mess and clutter and cramped quarters, the lab was a wide-open room with hundreds of tools and ingredients neatly organized on shelves that lined three walls. The external wall was long enough to accommodate four large windows which Haxmire had opened wide in order to avoid the oppressive heat of early summer. In the center of the room was a long, stone-topped counter with cabinets and shelves built in underneath. Haxmire had Artur sitting comfortably in a high-backed wooden chair, while he performed numerous spells on Artur and the dart that had wounded him. Gaenor ignored the chair that had been thoughtfully supplied for her. Instead she paced the room worriedly, examining the shelves, hoping to find something that might cure Artur.

"Thionase?" Artur asked emotionlessly.

"It almost has to be," Haxmire agreed. "There are whole sections of your body that I can't even detect and that is very odd. It's spreading very slowly, but there is very little in your urine, so I can only conclude that it might be weeks before your body totally expels it, or there might be traces in you for years. I just don't know."

"Isn't there something we can do?" Gaenor asked, feeling helpless. "Some way to hurry it along?"

Haxmire shook his head. "You're the theoretical genius. You'd know better than I would," he told her. "What do we dare try? We can't even analyze this stuff. The affected part of the dart you brought doesn't even exist if I can believe my analysis spell, which obviously I can't. All I can suggest is that we let the thionase run its course." He turned to talk directly to Artur. "It's true that you're starting to feel your age, but sixty-seven is not an impossible age. Be thankful this isn't happening when you're two hundred."

"Will his health spell be restored after it runs its course?" Gaenor asked.

"I doubt it. His body just isn't expelling the thionase rapidly enough. What's worse, however, is that he is also losing his abilities as an adept." He turned back toward Artur. "I'm afraid that you'll have to find three other adepts and be initiated all over again."

"Oh well, I did it once, I suppose I'll manage it again."

"We can do it in Misha," Gaenor suggested. "We can be initiated at the same time."

Before Artur could reply, three blood red-garbed Temi assassins jumped into the room through the open windows. The one in the middle held something in his hand and was about to throw it, but Gaenor snapped her fingers and pointed. The thick, blindingly bright lightning bolt struck her target and vaporized him instantly, destroying the window behind him as well.

At the same instant, the package in the hapless Tem's hand burst open releasing a cloud of smoke that was blown toward the Tem on the right. That assassin made choking sounds while clawing at his own throat. Artur reached for and invoked an amulet without taking the time to see which one it was. A large, clear, pale blue egg of energy formed around the stricken Tem enclosing him in with most of the poisonous smoke. Most of the rest drifted harmlessly out the window.

The remaining assassin had been briefly stunned by the ferocity of Gaenor's and Artur's counter attack, but quickly recovered enough and closed on Artur. Artur barely had time to pick up his own Temi sword, still in its sheath on top of the lab bench, in time to parry the man in red's first blow. Gaenor had an explosion amulet ready, but didn't dare throw it with Artur and the assassin so close to each other.

Artur managed to flick his sword free of its sheath and tried to keep the Tem on the defensive, but the assassin was obviously in much better shape and Artur found his reflexes and stamina rapidly failing him. They both fought in the formal style of a Cilben duel. That meant that while both fighters fought with a light, slightly curved, single-handed blade, neither would use his free hand unless his sword arm was incapacitated and only then to continue fighting in the prescribed manner. It also meant that either this assassin was too young to know better or, more likely, was supremely confident of his abilities.

The energy bubble that enclosed the poisonous smoke and the now dead man began to fail. Noting this, Haxmire picked up a wooden rod of some sort and spoke a quick incantation. A light breeze began to blow through the room, forcing the residual poison out the window.

"Ventilation spell," he said as much to himself as to the nearby Gaenor.

Gaenor stood ready to use her explosive spell, but it appeared that both Artur and the Tem were in-fighters, preferring to fight at close quarters rather than at swords' length. Finally, however, Artur, tired and bleeding from a dozen shallow cuts, lost his footing and fell to the floor. Before the assassin could close in for the kill, Gaenor threw the amulet, striking him on the forehead.

There was a loud explosion and the decapitated body of the final Tem fell against a nearby set of shelves knocking them and their contents down.

"I thought you killed them all," Gaenor said weakly, carefully avoiding looking at any of the bodies. "How did they find us again?"

"I did kill them all," Artur replied, picking himself up off the floor. "At least I got the ones we knew about. There must have been observers watching them, ready to report when they failed in their mission. Most likely there was someone watching these three as well. We'd better get ready to move on as soon as possible."

"Sir Artur," Haxmire protested. "You're in no condition to travel."

"What? These little scratches?" Artur replied. "They're nothing, even without my health spell. Most of them have already stopped bleeding. It's a good thing thionase doesn't inhibit the natural healing process. I thought that dart wound would never heal. It still aches, but at least it wasn't in my sword arm. I didn't need that sort of handicap today. Thanks, Gae. I owe you my life yet again."

Gaenor never had a chance to reply. The door into the lab was flung open and Radnire came running in.

"My gods!" he exclaimed. "What's been going on up here?"

"We had a little run-in with some friends from Cilbe," Artur replied dryly.

"Yeah," Radnire retorted sarcastically. "Right. Well, your troubles are just starting, Doctor Naxtir and his security goons are right behind me. We have to get Gaenor out of here."

"Too late," Gaenor noted. Standing behind Radnire was Doctor Naxtir; a portrait of calm and deliberate fury.

"Your loyalty to your friends is admirable, young man," Naxtir said maliciously. "I hope you will feel it is worth your expulsion from the University. You too, Doctor Haxmire. Due to the gross damage and the potential scandal your negligence has caused this institution, I will recommend to the Board of Deans that your tenure be removed and you be banned from teaching in Es. We'll be meeting in an hour."

"I don't know who you are, sir," he said to Artur, "but you will leave this campus now and I will have you arrested if you ever return. Now you, girl." He turned toward Gaenor with an decidedly nasty grin. "I told you to stay off campus, but you deliberately returned, obviously disguised as one of the maids."

"But..." Gaenor tried to protest.

"Shut up!" Naxtir screamed. "You can explain it to the constable." He glanced briefly at the guards and said, "Arrest her."

Six

"I shouldn't have let them arrest her," Artur complained drunkenly. Without his health spell at work, the ailing adept was a cheap drunk. He was mid-way through his second glass of ale, and already slurring his words.

Gaenor had been reaching for a defensive amulet to make a break from the lab when Artur had stopped her. She agreed to go to the constable's station quietly because they all thought they could talk her way out. Unfortunately, the constable preferred to believe Doctor Naxtir and had promptly jailed Gaenor until she could be brought to trial.

"You'd better slow down, friend," Haxmire told him morosely. "Some men can hold their ale, but you don't seem to be one of them."

"I used to be. Now I can't. I can't do anything." Artur lapsed into contemplation of his half-emptied glass.

"Good thing Naxtir let me clean out my belongings," Haxmire said to Radnire. Getting no satisfaction from the authorities, the three men had returned to the University to clear out Haxmire's and Radnire's belongings before adjourning to the nearby tavern. The recently expelled Radnire, who had been consistently bemoaning the fact that he would have to face his father, however, wasn't in much better shape than Artur and looked at Haxmire with drunkenly depressed confusion.

"Great," Haxmire muttered. "Two of them." He reached into his leather bag - one similar to Artur's, pulled out a small red-dyed leather pouch, and cast sober-up spells on his two companions.

"Oh, my head!" Artur complained. "What sort of spell was that?"

"I needed you both without the benefit of twin alcoholic stupors. I can cure drunkenness, but know no cure for a hangover."

"Never mind," Artur moaned, "I do." He had to cast the spell Gaenor had invented in Omath three times before he was cured. Haxmire watched what he did and then performed the same ritual for Radnire. "I'm losing it," Artur noted. "I shouldn't have had to cast that spell more than once."

"I know," Haxmire said sympathetically.

"It's going to get worse, isn't it? Pretty soon I won't be able to cast any spells,"

"I would say so. Yes." Haxmire agreed.

"Damn! I was in this same position twenty-odd years ago, only then I was considerably younger and in better shape." He recounted his flight from the Cilben Empire and into the Parch. "If I ride hard, how quickly can I make it to the Parch?"

"You got very lucky once, Artur. I doubt you'd survive that gambit again," Haxmire told him.

"I'm dead for certain if I stay here. For that matter, I'm endangering both of you and the gods only know how many other innocents who might get caught in the way too," Artur told them. "I'd better leave tonight."

"You're going to leave Miss Gaenor behind?" Haxmire asked.

"It would be for the best. I'll leave enough to pay her fine. You are sure that's all the sentence she'll get?"

"Oh yes, and not very much of a fine either. The constable would have let her go if she were a local girl, but the law says that she must stand trial and he wanted to make sure she didn't just leave town."

"In Mishanda we could have just paid the fine and the matter would have been dropped," Artur commented.

"In Gostrina," Radnire told him, "a fine may not be levied without benefit of a trial. It cuts down on false accusations."

"It does?" Artur asked. "Well, it doesn't matter. I won't need much money where I'm going. I'll leave most of it for Gaenor. When she gets out, tell her that I want her to go directly to Misha and get herself initiated. If I survive, I'll meet her back in Narmouth."

"But you're going to the Parch? Why there?"

"Because, once inside, the Temi will give me up for dead, and if I can find my old master, he might be able to cure me. I see now that nobody else can."

"I wish there was something I could do to help," Haxmire sighed.

"Actually, there is," Artur told him. An hour later, with several new amulets packed up in his saddle bags,

Artur was heading intentionally toward the deadliest desert on earth for the second time in his life.

Dawn found him twenty leagues east of Es where he stopped to rest and water his horse along a peaceful, meandering stream. He leaned back against the trunk of a tall water oak and closed his eyes for a minute that turned into four hours. By the time he next viewed the world the sun had climbed from the horizon until it was nearly perched at its zenith.

"So much for that spell," Artur said aloud to himself. Before leaving Es, he had Haxmire cast the same wakefulness spell that was still keeping Haxmire wide awake, but it had little or no effect on Artur. "I must be becoming immune to magic. It's a pity I'm not trying to escape a pack of adepts."

His horse, a dark brown mare, was well trained and had not wandered far while he slept, nor did she attempt to evade him when he approached to re-mount. He put his foot in the stirrup and swung himself up and into the saddle.

"Oof!" he grunted at the sudden sharp pains he felt in his joints. "I must be getting stiff in my old age. Damn! A week and a half ago I was still a young man. Oh well. Onward!" It was nearly dusk when he arrived at the front gate of a comfortable looking inn along the waterfront of a small village that called itself Gendri.

The innkeeper was a thin weasel of a man who seemed suspicious of any and everyone, especially strange old men who appeared to have, until recently, colored their silver hair blond. He demanded that Artur pay for his room in advance. Artur agreed reluctantly, but flatly refused to pay for his food and drinks in advance as well.

Artur ignored his host's suspicious nature and after arranging for a room, found a pleasant corner table near a wide window from which he could watch the full moon, Tars, rise as he ate his dinner of bread, cheese, and smoked sausage, and drank the thin brew that passed for ale in this outpost of civilization. Artur privately suspected that the contents of his glass were from an entirely different keg than the liquids that filled those of the regular customers. His seemed slightly lighter as though it had been watered down, but it might have just been a different batch with a lighter malt.

"An omen!" Artur heard a voice gasp from just outside the inn. He turned to look out the window and saw a group of people staring and pointing up at the sky. Following their pointing fingers, he saw what had captured their attention.

The large round face of Tars had a small chunk eaten out of it. Looking closely he could discern that the smaller, darker disk of Mialla, was moving in front of the larger and brighter moon whose light all but over-powered it. In a few minutes it was completely in front of Tars, making it look as though a large, round hole had been carved out of it.

Everyone in the inn crowded around the windows or rushed outside to view the unusual phenomenon. At first there were oohs and ahs at the sight. Then the tone of conversation rapidly turned to worry as they tried to figure out what it meant.

"Maybe we should ask the priest," someone suggested. There was some agreement and about half the crowd wandered away up the street. The rest just stood around watching Mialla traverse the disk of Tars.

Artur smiled to himself. There was nothing supernatural about the occurrence. According to Cilben mathematicians, Mialla crossed in front of Tars twice a year, but the phenomenon was so short-lived that

it was only visible over a small area of the world each time it happened, so from any given location it was only visible once every ten years on the average. Actually it was observable even less often since even partially cloudy conditions could obscure it for the few minutes that it lasted. In his travels, Artur had witnessed it four times.

Artur took a long pull at his glass and watched until Mialla finished its traversal. Once beyond Tars, the smaller moon became almost invisible again until it had moved halfway across the sky.

With the celestial show over, Artur turned his eyes back to the table to discover that while he had been watching the sky, the serving maid had been bringing him fresh glasses of ale. There were two empties on the table in front of him and the one in his hand was nearly empty. He noted that he still felt fairly clear-headed and ordered a fourth glass, lighting a pipeful of his carefully hoarded tobacco while he waited.

After he finished smoking, Artur paid for his food and drink, left a generous tip for the waitress, and went to find the out-house before retiring for the night. He was on his way back when something hit him from behind, causing a great shower of blue-white fireworks to burst in his eyes. That was the last thing he saw for a while.

Seven

Artur was awakened by a loud explosion. He tried to sit up quickly, pushing his legs over the side of his bed, but as he brought his torso to the vertical, his concept of the world started spinning uncontrollably and he felt his gorge rising. He closed his eyes and put his head between his knees, feeling a little better immediately.

There was a large bump on the back of his head that was painfully sensitive to his lightest touch. He heard the sounds of several people shouting coming from outside, but he didn't feel well enough to investigate.

A second explosion, however, distracted him from his concentration on the problem of where he was and why he felt so bad. There was something going on outside. Feebly, he made his way to the room's solitary window and shoved the shutters open. The sudden infusion of light made his head spin again. Everything seemed so blurry, but it had the benefit of reminding him that he had been hit from behind last night.

Was it last night? he wondered, or have I been unconscious even longer?

He continued to force himself to stare out the window until the view came into some sort of focus. Down below, the broken remains of two red-clad warriors lay next to a small crater. Evidently whatever had killed them had caused the large divots in the inn's front garden. To one side, another still-moving red blur was facing a long-haired warrior, while a dozen or more on-lookers stood around shouting various bits of encouragement. It was harder to focus on the moving figures, but Artur gradually realized that both fighters held the long, slightly curved swords that the Temi favored and were circling each other warily.

"Where is he?" a familiar female voice demanded of the Tem. "Damn you! Where is he?"

"By the gods!" Artur swore softly as the scene suddenly snapped into perfect focus. The "warrior" with the long, dark-brown hair that was whipped about in the stiff breeze outside was Gaenor!

Artur felt as though his heart had stopped and that the arid dust of the Parch had suddenly taken up residence in his mouth. Gaenor had been a quick study when it came to sword play, but he had not had the time to do more than teach her how to hold the weapon and a few basic defensive and offensive moves. Now the woman that he loved - and for the first time he found himself truly admitting that to himself without reservation - was attempting to match her skill against a master of the blade.

There was no doubt that the Tem was a master swordsman. The Temi code of honor did not extend to using the same weapon as one's opponent. If the Tem was a bowman, he would have been nocking an arrow, not drawing a sword.

Gaenor held her ground, turning only to continue facing the Tem. Her on-guard position, Artur noted, was acceptable, but the Tem had not yet actually engaged her in battle. She was waiting, as Artur had instructed her, for the assassin to make the first move. A novice always had a better chance if he waited for his opponent to strike first. Almost anyone could block a single sword blow and sometimes over-confidence would give them an opening for an attack. The Tem, however, also subscribed to that philosophy and both he and Gaenor were waiting for each other to move first. Artur hoped that Gaenor's patience would hold out. It was almost certain that she would be cut down on the first blow if she tried an attack.

Artur frantically looked around the room. Someone had obviously put him to bed after he had been knocked out. He was still dressed in his tunic and trousers, but someone had thoughtfully removed his belt and boots. He picked up his belt and noted that the pouch he kept his money in was missing.

That explains why I'm still alive, he supposed. Had he been ambushed by a Tem, he would have still had his purse, but his blood would have been fertilizing the grass behind the inn. Most of the wooden amulets were still attached to the belt however, and he quickly plucked one that held a fireball spell and ran back to the window.

The assassin had finally given up waiting for Gaenor to strike first and Artur heard the cold ring of steel on steel even as he got to the window. he looked out, expecting to see Gaenor's dying body twitching on the ground and was surprised to see that she had not only survived the assassin's opening gambit, but was clumsily pressing her counter-attack with such ferocity that the Tem was pushed off balance and forced to go strictly on the defensive.

Watching the scene, Artur noted the look of consternation on the assassin's face and remembered an old joke that claimed the world's most feared swordsman was one who had never picked up a sword before. There was some truth to that; a veteran would fight in an orderly and disciplined manner, but a novice was completely unpredictable. Gaenor's blows were not particularly hard and were being thrown with undisciplined intensity, but she was very fast. There were numerous holes in her style, but the best the Tem could hope for as long as she continued to fight unceasingly that way was a double kill. Had she been the assassin's intended target, he probably would have accepted such an outcome willingly, but his death at Gaenor's hands would not complete his mission.

Artur had to wait before using the amulet he had selected. If he cast the spell now, Gaenor would be hit by the spell too; she was too close to the assassin.

Slowly the Tem found himself losing ground. As he stepped backwards, Gaenor would press forward until he bumped against the thick trunk of an oak. With no recourse, the assassin finally took the risk of

locking swords with Gaenor. Then, with all his strength, he pushed her away from him, earning a shallow laceration along his left forearm for his trouble.

Gaenor was flung several feet backwards. She tripped over a tree root and fell flat on her back. The assassin stepped forward to press his new-found advantage and was swiftly consumed by a large ball of blue and orange fire as Artur was finally able to cast his spell.

Gaenor looked up at the inn's second floor where Artur was still framed in the window of his room. She got up, sword still in hand, and waved joyfully at him. Her joy soon turned to worry, however, when Artur, exhausted from his exertions, collapsed until he hung partway out the window.

The innkeeper tried, unwisely, to block her way as she attempted to dash up the stairway, but she still hadn't sheathed her sword and it only took the sight of a single glint of light off the etched and polished steel to send the little weasel scurrying for cover.

A few moments later, after trying two wrong doors, Gaenor pushed open the door to Artur's room. With a soft, low-pitched cry, she dropped her weapon and rushed to help Artur get back inside. He was incredibly weak and dizzy, but able, with only a small amount of guidance from Gaenor, to get back into bed.

He lay on his back with his head propped up against a pillow and stared at her. "What a remarkable young lady," he murmured before falling asleep.

"Woman!" the innkeeper spoke sternly from the doorway. "I demand to know what is going on here?"

Fire flashed in Gaenor's eyes and any sensible person on seeing that would have immediately reworded their last sentence, but the weasel-like landlord was certainly not sensible.

"You demand?" Gaenor asked incredulously. "You knew he was up here, but you denied it when I asked you two hours ago. I wouldn't have found him if some of the townsfolk hadn't noticed him riding into town."

"Your description was inadequate," the man insisted. Gaenor looked at the sketch of Artur she had been showing everyone. It was a perfect likeness.

"You're blind," she snarled, retrieving her sword. She only intended to sheath the weapon, but the innkeeper shivered in terror as she picked it up. "Have breakfast for two brought up," Gaenor commanded in a tone more imperious than most kings would dare to use, "and perhaps I'll forgive you."

"And who is going to pay for that?" he demanded. "Your friend was robbed last night. If he hadn't paid in advance, I'd have kicked him out then."

"I'm not one of your dependant Gostrinan woman," Gaenor told him with a wave of her sword, "and I have the money. And may the gods pity you if I ever learn you had something to do with that robbery, because they're the ones you'll have to answer to if I do!"

The weasel scurried out of the room and could be heard stumbling hastily down the stairs. Gaenor turned back to Artur and saw that he had woken up again. She finally sheathed the sword and sat down on the edge of his bed.

"Very impressive," he whispered taking her hand.

"Artur," Gaenor replied helplessly, "what happened?"

"Our host pretty much summed it up," he admitted. "Somebody hit me from behind and cut the purse off my belt. Got some of the amulets too, I think."

"There are a few sitting loose next to your boots," Gaenor told him.

"Good. The gods alone know how dangerous that might have been had they accidentally invoked them, not that I care about them, but some innocents might have been injured as well. I think they joggled my brains a bit, gave me a bit of a concussion."

"That's not too surprising," Gaenor remarked. "Let me see your eyes. Hmm, they look alright. How do you feel?"

"Weak and dizzy. If this is old age, I'll pass."

Gaenor laughed in spite of herself. At least he still had his sense of humor. That was a good sign.

"I guess I was wrong," Artur continued.

"About what?"

"The Temi. They obviously have encountered adepts and magic before. The thionase proves it, been meaning to tell you that, but after you got arrested..."

"Nevermind that now. Let me see where they hit you," she instructed him. He turned his head away from her. "You have a bit of a goose egg back here, but it doesn't look too horrendous. You'll live this time."

He faced her again and asked, "Why? Why did you follow me? I left you specific instructions not to."

"You fool!" she exploded gently. "And where would you be if I had? That snake of a landlord would have tossed you out today because you couldn't pay for another night's lodging, and you're in no condition to travel. Maybe tomorrow or the next day."

"But," Artur insisted, "why?"

"Because I love you!" she blurted out, tears flowing freely. Then she gasped in embarrassment and hid her face in her hands. Of all the things a properly brought-up Mishandan girl should never do, being the first to declare one's love was high up on the list. The proper way was to demurely wait for the man to admit his love. Then, if she was amenable, he would arrange the betrothal with her parents. Gaenor had always thought of herself as proper, a little unconventional perhaps, but still a proper Mishandan woman. Now with four simple words, she had shattered that illusion and she was mortified.

Artur reached out and gently moved her hands from her tear-streaked face. "You do?" he asked. Even after all those years of living in Mishanda, Artur still had a lot to learn about his adoptive people and their customs. There were subtle ways for a Mishandan girl to let a man know she was interested in him and Gaenor had used all of them. He knew that she was fond of him; he was neither blind nor stupid. But love? Cilben betrothal customs were nearly the opposite of those of Mishanda. In Cilbe an interested woman would arrange to have her father approach the prospective bridegroom. Of course, as often as not, such arrangements were made regardless of the woman's preferences, but an understanding father

would consult with his daughter before acting. An honorable Cilben man would wait until so approached before showing any open affection toward his love regardless of his feelings. As in Mishanda, there were subtle ways of letting one's feelings be known without an open declaration, but cultural differences kept Gaenor as in the dark as Artur was. Instead, both of them had silently waited for the other to make the first move. "How remarkable," Artur whispered before returning the sentiment.

Gaenor hugged him fiercely, tears still flowing, until he groaned in pain from the rough handling. She broke her grip and apologized profusely until she realized that he was laughing and then she joined him, holding him more gently now. They were still trying to explain to each other why they had never said anything about their feelings when one of the serving maids arrived with a tray of food and drink.

"I was hoping that I might have slipped away from the Temi when I left Es," Artur admitted as they ate. At first he feared that he might not be able to keep the food down, but the fear proved to be unfounded. Food and drink was starting to fortify him and he felt much better.

"They might have followed me instead," Gaenor admitted, "but I'm fairly certain they were already in town when I got here."

"They probably were. How did you find me?"

"Doctor Haxmire told me which way you were going and this was the most direct road. The horses King Marnoric gave us are fairly conspicuous so I just asked as I rode along. Quite a few people remembered your passing and, because I'm a girl, they assumed I had no money so I didn't have to bribe anyone. You really should have waited for me, you know. I rode all day and night in order to catch up to you and changed horses twice. Got some pretty good deals too. Gostrinan men don't know how to deal with a self-reliant woman. Their code of honor requires that they be polite and not try to cheat me. I, on the other hand, learned to haggle at my mother's knee. I eventually wound up with a rather enthusiastic stallion. I think he was trained as a knight's charger. He sure runs that way. Why did you leave me behind?"

"Going alone seemed like a good idea at the time," he told her. "Haxmire assured me that you were in no danger, and I knew that I was and so was everyone else around me as long as I stayed put. How is Haxmire, by the way? Is that spell starting to wear off yet?"

"He looked about as tired as I feel when I last saw him," Gaenor admitted. "He said he was planning to sleep for a week after I left. Both he and Radnire were kicked out of the University."

"I remember," Artur told her.

"Oh yeah. Well, Radnire was pretty much afraid to go home and admit he'd been expelled. His family isn't rich and he needed the scholarship money, but Haxmire formally took him on as an apprentice and together they're going to Mita where that former student of Haxmire has started a school. Now Radnire's story is that he's transferring to a more elite school. Haxmire, as his master, is responsible for tuition, room, and board, so that's as good as a scholarship."

"Good," Artur replied. "I think Radnire shows a lot of promise and I was feeling rather guilty about both of them. It's a shame that the University of Es no longer has a magic department, though."

"They haven't had one in years," Gaenor told him, "and with Haxmire, the school in Mita will now have two adepts on staff. One more and they can initiate their own."

Artur nodded. "And as a new school," he added, "they'll probably be more receptive to new ideas. We may be on the verge of a new age of magic."

"Maybe," Gaenor agreed. "If we ever manage to get away from the Temi, we'll have to stop in Mita on our way home." Artur agreed.

Part V The Parch

One

"They're still back there," Gaenor reported. "A dozen or more of them."

"In which case they're likely to stay there," Artur replied. In the two days since they had left Gendri, a group of Temi had continued to follow them at a distance. "As long as we continue to head for the Parch, they'll probably just let us go."

Half a league in front of them stood a large town. From their vantage point Artur and Gaenor could see its outskirts and in the center a pyramid to Nauo which was the dominant feature on the skyline. It was small compared to the one in Es, but still twice as tall as the next highest building in town. Beyond that, the western horizon glowed with a bright yellow-white light that hurt the eyes to look at.

"That town up ahead must be Fronor," Gaenor commented. "Looks like it really does go right up to the edge of the Parch."

"So we've been told," Artur agreed.

"Do we circle around it?" Gaenor asked, "or ride straight through."

"We go in," Artur told her decisively. "Last time I rode into the Parch, I lost a good pony that didn't need to die except for my own ignorance. We'll sell the horses and proceed on foot. We also need to buy a few items."

"Like what?"

"Salt, primarily. Haxmire charged up enough amulets with water spells to keep us going, but without salt the heat in there will kill us in a day or two."

"Are you sure they'll have salt?"

"Absolutely. Nobody could live this close to the Parch without salt as a regular part of their diet. The glare alone generates too much heat. It might be expensive, but it will be here. Also, it won't be dark yet for two hours or more and I'd rather not enter the Parch in daylight. We'll stop to get one last civilized meal as well."

Fronor was a large town with wide streets, but very little traffic. Gaenor commented on that and Artur

pointed out that most intelligent people had taken cover from the afternoon's oppressive sunlight. No doubt they would be out again after the sun set.

Another thing the Gaenor realized was that this town smelled cleaner than some of the other Gostrinan towns she had visited. The heat, she noticed had dried out the gutters rendering them almost odor-free. In Mishanda, almost every town had well-designed sewage systems keeping such stench from intruding on everyday life, but in Gostrina the natives seemed to think that was what gutters were for and their cities smelled as filthy as they looked. Disgusting! she had thought. Only the raised wooden sidewalks and strategically placed stepping stones at street crossings in Es kept one from becoming absolutely filthy. In smaller towns one had to choose one's steps carefully. Artur, however, pointed out to Gaenor, that the sort of sewage systems that typified the Mishandan cities couldn't have been built in the flood plain towns of Gostrina where the rate of drainage was simply not adequate. At least they weren't dumping their refuse directly into the Trina although Gaenor wondered just how clean the waters of that river were.

None of the shops were open in the glare of the afternoon sun, but they found a livery where the owner was still in, doing paperwork. He was a friendly, out-going soul who offered them an outrageously low price for their mounts. After some hard haggling over a pot of tea at his expense, however, they reached a deal that all parties found equitable. He also directed them to a nearby tavern.

The taverns in Fronor were the only businesses that remained open throughout the day. They were a welcome refuge from the unbearable glare from the Parch and a social institution for the people of the town. Taverns in Fronor, they soon learned, were easily identified by the almost black, smoked glass windows. More than mere taprooms, they were actually full-service restaurants similar to those in the larger cities, and the people of Fronor made a habit of eating their afternoon meals in them and then spent most of the time before dusk sipping slowly at their ale and playing a wide variety of games.

Gaenor was delighted to find a Caroms table in one of three back rooms and she and Artur spent most of the afternoon pushing colored balls into leather-webbed pockets. There were several people interested in watching them, but when Gaenor offered to step aside to let somebody else play, most insisted that they would prefer to watch. Those who did decide to take her up on her invitation - two men and a young woman who had obviously never played before, but managed to work up the courage to try when Gaenor set the example - showed her how to play a four-way team variant of the basic game so no one needed to wait his or her turn. Artur was just as happy to sit out and conserve his strength for the Parch.

He hadn't admitted it to Gaenor yet, but he was fairly certain that he was no longer capable of casting a spell that hadn't been pre-set in an amulet. He hadn't tried to since they had left Gendri, so he didn't know for certain, but he felt different now, sort of empty.

While Gaenor passed the time with three-rail bank shots and the like, Artur bought drinks for certain selected natives who could tell him where to buy the items he and Gaenor would need. One man, on learning that they were venturing into the Parch, spent a good half hour trying to talk him out of it, but on realizing that they were intent on their fool's mission suggested that they each purchase a pair of glare glasses before they left town.

Glare glasses, they learned, were small panes of the same black glass that had been used for the tavern windows. They were set into a wood and leather, goggle-like affair that covered half the face. The residents of all the Gostrinan towns that bordered the Parch wore them habitually when forced to venture outside when the glare of the sun off the sands of the Parch was particularly intense.

"Why did you make such an issue of the fact that we were heading into the Parch?" Gaenor asked when

they started once more on their way. The sun had just set from their perspective, but the last red rays were still kissing the peak of the local pyramid. Shops were just opening up for the evening trade, but two pitchers had gone a long way and some of the merchants present at the tavern were more than willing to sell Artur what he needed before their normal business hours.

"Just a little insurance," Artur replied. "I want to make sure our friends in the funny red suits know precisely where we're going. I hope that they're watching us this very minute. We absolutely want them to see us disappear into the Parch."

"Won't they try to follow?"

"I suppose that it's always possible that they might, but I doubt it. The Parch is certain death, at least they think so."

"It's just a desert, isn't it?"

"Gae, three quarters of a million square leagues is not just a desert. There is no known life form that can survive in there without magical assistance. Even all the water we're carrying is less than a two day supply."

"No!" Gaenor gasped.

"Yes. The Parch earns its name every day. It never rains there. Never! The air in there is so hot and dry that it sucks every drop of moisture out of a body and in record time. Haxmire filled enough of my amulets with water spells to get us where we're going, so don't try to tough it out if you're thirsty. Drink your fill. I think you'll be surprised just how much that is."

The Nauo Pyramid in Fronor had been built with its western edge along the exact boundary of the great desert. There was a cleared area, one hundred feet wide, around the other three sides, enclosed by a twenty-foot high wall. As they walked by, Gaenor stopped for a minute to study the ornately carved gate of golden stone in the middle of the eastern wall. There were no guards standing in the gateway or on the straight path that led to a gold-leafed doorway in the pyramid itself, but Gaenor saw a priest sitting just inside the pyramid.

"He approves the offerings to Nauo," Artur explained. "In Es, the priest at the gate has a large staff of escorts - priestly novices mostly - to help people find their way through the vast internal maze to the main sanctuary. The local pyramids are much simpler and have only one path."

There was only one street that lead to the edge of the Parch inside the city. It was fully two rods wide and ran along the south side of the temple compound. Artur explained that while the rest of the boundary was closed off with a nearly continuous line of buildings, this one street had been left open to welcome the god Haumo, the patron of the Parch and other deserts, in case he should want to visit. Gaenor laughed gaily on learning that, but her laughter died a sudden death as a flash of light and puff of smoke erupted at the end of the street, about twenty feet in front of them at the top of the sharp rise that marked the border.

The smoke cleared away quickly in the early evening breeze to reveal a single red-clad Tem. The assassin wore a sword on his left hip, but left it sheathed and instead held both his arms up and stretched out toward Artur and Gaenor. Gaenor began to reach for one of her rapidly diminishing supply of amulets, but Artur stopped her.

"He wants to talk," Artur told her, "There will be no attack unless we refuse his truce." The he imitated the Tem's gesture and stepped forward.

"I am Leracus," the Tem announced formally, "Chief of the Ridec Clan."

"I'd wondered how much longer it would be before we met," Artur replied casually to mask his own unease. "You honor me."

Leracus inclined his head in acknowledgement. "It has been heard that you intend to enter the Parch. Please explain. Why do two such courageous and worthy warriors choose to throw their lives away?"

"We have business there and will be there for a matter of weeks."

"That is impossible," Leracus replied. "I have been told that only a wizard might survive in the desert. Surely you must know that the thionase in you has cancelled all your powers by now, and we know that the female warrior is not yet adept."

"All?" Gaenor asked Artur involuntarily.

"I believe so, Gae. I haven't tried to cast a spell in two days." Then he turned to face the Temi clan chief. "Still we must go."

"You go to your deaths," Leracus retorted. He seemed visibly troubled.

"I do not think so," Artur replied calmly. "Regardless, we do what we must."

The Tem considered that and then nodded, stepping aside to let them pass. Artur and Gaenor walked by Leracus, but before they could step across the edge, he stopped them.

"Senator," Leracus called gravely. Artur stopped and turned to face the man. "If you return in less than four days we will meet again, but will not talk. This is my challenge. You understand?" Artur nodded gravely. "My men will watch the border for you. Longer than that and we shall count you among the dead and so report to our employer."

"We will not die," Artur said simply.

"If you do not die," the Chief of the Ridec Clan replied at last, nodding once, "your names will be counted among my clan and we will sing of you." He stood stiffly at attention and saluted them by snapping his right arm across his chest, fist clenched over his heart and bowed his head ever so slightly. Artur returned the gesture and after a moment of hesitation, so did Gaenor.

Then, without another word, they took their first step into the dreaded Parch.

Two

And took their first step into the dreaded Parch.

Artur knew what to expect, but no amount of warning could have prepared Gaenor. It was as though they had suddenly been transported into another world. The unnaturally dry air stuck in her throat and she imagined that she could feel her skin drying out.

Artur sipped out of one of his water skins less than a minute after they had entered the Parch and Gaenor followed suit. The sand they walked on was still hot from the recently set sun and it felt as though they were walking through an oven.

Gaenor instinctively knew that she shouldn't be talking. She lost moisture with every breath and talking just accelerated the process, but there was something she just had to know.

"Artur, you didn't tell him about the amulets," she remarked after they had walked a mile from Fronor.

"The situation required honesty," Artur told her, "but not that I disclose everything. He might not have let us pass if he had known."

"But he knew that you were no longer adept."

"That was his doing. He wouldn't have used thionase without knowing its exact properties. I wonder how many other adepts they have hunted. Enough I suppose. If we live and run into him again, maybe you can coerce him into telling you more about thionase."

"If they had used it on themselves, would they have been immune to our spells?" Gaenor asked.

"Maybe they did use it on themselves," Artur decided thoughtfully. "It would only protect them against the direct effects of magic. We weren't casting spells at them. We threw lightning and fire and various other forces. That the fire and lightning was of mystic origins made no difference; they weren't magic."

"True," Gaenor agreed knowledgeably. "The spell was complete from the time the fire balls and lightning left our hands. Once on their way they were essentially natural phenomena."

"And therefore thionase was no protection," Artur concluded. "Now had we tried to use magic to curse them or break their bones or whatever, they would have been perfectly safe."

"Why didn't we?" she asked. "We couldn't have expected them to use thionase. We didn't even know about it at the time."

"I just didn't think of using that sort of spell," Artur admitted. "Lucky, huh?"

They continued walking. The sand made for slow going, but after the first hour they found themselves walking on hard-packed soil and rock and they made better time from then on.

They stopped to eat an hour after Tars rose which Artur claimed was midnight or close enough to it. They only rested for as long it took to eat a piece of bread and a small slab of a very salty cheese. Then they both drank as much water as they could and continued on.

The first dark gray tendrils of light were beginning to tint the eastern horizon when Artur called for a halt. The sky was already a bright blue and the sun about to leap upward from the horizon when they finally found a suitable place to make camp on the lee side of a sand dune.

"I don't really like this," Artur explained to Gaenor. "We could be buried if a sudden storm comes up,

but we'll have to take our chances. Maybe tonight we can find a cave or at least a cliff. When their small canvas shelter - little more than an open lean-to - was set up for the day he told her, "Pile as much sand as it will hold on top of it. It will give us additional insulation from the heat. I'll be right back. I have a spell to cast."

"What sort of spell?"

"A calling spell, and before you ask, it's one of the amulets Haxmire made for me."

He walked purposefully up the side of the dune, stumbling twice in the unstable sand. Gaenor watched him go and realized that he had very little of the vitality he had just three weeks ago. She didn't know what kept him going, but she decided that she had better try to get him to pace himself a little better that evening.

She was almost finished piling sand up on the roof of the sturdy little shelter, when she became aware of an eerie humming sound coming from above her. She looked up to see Artur's form glowing a bright golden yellow. The glow might have been an optical illusion caused by the intense light of the rising sun, but the sound began to pulsate arrhythmically. Artur remained motionlessly glowing for a quarter hour. Finally the only sound Gaenor could hear was the soft whistle of the almost vertical, heat-induced wind.

"What did you call?" she asked Artur when he finally rejoined her.

"Who," he corrected her. "I called my master and told him the situation. He is preparing for us."

"What sort of spell can do that?"

"It would take too much to explain now, Gae. I'll tell you when we get to where we're going."

"Where are we going?"

"I don't think it has a name," Artur said, suddenly sounding puzzled. "I never thought to ask and have only ever heard it referred to as the village."

"How far?"

"A week or more at the rate we've been walking. Nights are short this time of year. Gae, there's something you should know about the people we are going to meet. They aren't human."

"What then?" Gaenor asked, half joking, "Vieri?"

"Exactly."

"You're kidding! Artur, there are no Vieri. It's just an old wife's tale."

"I'll admit that most of the stories are very wide of the mark, Gae, but the Vieri are real. They were the ones who found me better than half dead seven hundred leagues from here. They saved my life, in fact, by initiating me as an adept and placing that health spell on me so that my own power could heal me."

"That's why you couldn't tell me how it worked," Gaenor guessed.

"They taught me everything I taught you, Gae, but their laws allow the practice of their higher magics

only to people who have first lived one thousand years."

"They truly live that long?" Gaenor gasped.

"So they told me," Artur replied with a shrug. "Maybe they lied."

"Fascinating thought," Gaenor muttered before lapsing into silence.

Sleep came hard to them as the day wore on. Even in the shade of their shelter, the heat was unbearable. Gaenor dosed fitfully only to wake up with her throat dry and sore. She drank her fill from one of the water bags and then passed out again.

Finally, she woke up when the sun was just touching the western horizon and the temperature was starting to drop. Artur was already sitting up next to her and rummaging through their packs.

"Here, Gae," he said, passing her some healthy portions of bread, cheese, and smoked meat. "Feeling dizzy? Better eat some of that salt too, and drink more water. You'll feel better soon enough." He was right. Half an hour later, she had recovered sufficiently to move on.

The second night was even colder than the first, but Artur had insisted that they bring a set of the woolen clothes they had brought from Mishanda, so the chill did not feel as intense as it might have. They spoke only rarely, and spent most of their infrequent breaks drinking water and eating lightly.

"Artur," Gaenor asked during one such break, "Are you sure we're heading in the right direction? We've had to make so many turns to avoid cliffs, and dunes that I'm all turned around."

"Follow the stars, Gae. There to the north, do you see those three stars that form a nearly perfect triangle?"

"The Three Brothers, of course!" Gaenor exclaimed, wondering how she could have forgotten such a basic fact of life. "And which direction are we supposed to be heading?"

"Southwest, almost exactly," Artur told her.

"But you know the way," she pressed.

"Not from this direction," he admitted, "but I lived with the Vieri for over a year. I'm sure I'll recognize some of the landmarks as we get closer."

They ran out of water that night. It was an hour before dawn and they were walking through a region marked by dozens of tall monoliths that rose up from the desert floor like petrified giants.

"This is as good a place to stop as any," Artur shrugged.

They set up the shelter where it would be in the shade of a monolith for the better part of the day and would then supply its own shade for the rest. When that was done, Artur chose one of the water spell amulets and invoked it in a small depression in the hard-packed earth.

Water welled up out of the ground until it formed a small pool. Gaenor all but dived into the water to get a drink of the cool clear liquid.

"Fill your water skins, Gae!" Artur shouted hoarsely. "This pool won't last very long." They had only filled half of their skins before the water level had dropped too low to be useful. A few minutes later there were only a few faint traces of moisture left. "That should be enough to get us through the next day," Artur told her. "We'll try this trick again tomorrow night. Maybe it will work better."

"Where does the water come from?" Gaenor asked. She knew that the spell could not have just created it.

"There is water under the Parch," he told her. "It's over a thousand feet down on the average, maybe twice that here, but it's down there regardless. The spell forces it to rise to the surface. The lower the water level, the less time we have to take advantage of it, so we have to fill our skins first and drink directly only if we have time afterward."

The next dawn found them on a vast plain of gravel, without any sort of shelter in sight. Artur was having trouble walking and much of Gaenor's strength went toward helping him along. There was no place to stop in sight and they were nearly out of water again so they pressed on until the sun had been up for almost an hour.

They finally found a large boulder with a small fan of sand on one side where Artur could sit in the early morning shade while Gaenor set up their shelter. She let Artur finish the rest of the water while she invoked the next water spell amulet. Holding two skins in the resulting pool at once, she nearly had the time to fill them all up.

A hot wind blew all that day, dehydrating them even more than the sun alone had. It was almost two hours after sunset before they were able to move on that night and they were only able to travel three leagues before the sky began to lighten.

The following evening Gaenor twisted her ankle painfully by putting her foot down wrong into a depression in the ground that she could not see in the dark. Artur looked at it and they decided that she would be able to go on if her ankle were tightly wrapped with a long strip of cloth. The going was painful, but they still made progress.

When they stopped at dawn, however, they discovered that somehow during the mishap, their supply of salt had been lost. Artur was visibly shaken by the discovery, but he said with more certainty than he felt that there should be enough salt in the food they had.

Two nights later, they used their last water spell. The resulting pool lasted well over an hour so they not only had full water skins, but were able to drink their fill twice before the pool disappeared.

"We'll have hard ground the rest of the way," Artur declared as they started out that evening, but later on they lost half of his water when he suddenly passed out from exhaustion. Gaenor set up the shelter only a league from where they had camped the night before and they spent the remainder of the night and the next day resting.

The next evening Gaenor was feeling dizzy and lethargic and had to force herself to get up and break camp. Artur was in even worse shape, but Gaenor was able to encourage him to continue moving on. They traveled over five leagues that night, but ran out of water for the last time while resting the following evening.

They made it another three leagues after they ran out of water, desperation giving them strength. But after a day without any more water than had been trapped in their remaining cheese and meat, Artur

didn't have the strength to get up. Gaenor, remembering that sometimes one could find hidden water in a desert by digging. She spent the night feebly digging with her bare hands in what seemed like a good location. She knew that Artur said that the water level was very deep under the desert, but the remarkable success of their last water spell encouraged her to try.

The attempt was in vain and she only had enough strength in the harsh light of dawn to crawl halfway back to the shelter where she had left Artur. Before losing consciousness, she imagined that angels were coming to their rescue.

Three

Gaenor lay on her back and opened her eyes to a comfortably cool and moist darkness. At first she couldn't see and then she realized that she was still wearing her dark glare glasses.

Nighttime? she guessed. Feels so good!

She reached up and pushed the glasses up onto her forehead. Then she realized that she was in a cave somewhere. The ceiling was smooth, light brown stone that arched overhead and seemed to glow dimly. It took a few seconds before she could see clearly in that light. The floor, however, was carefully textured and absolutely flat as if it had been patiently carved. The walls, too, had an artificial, carved look to them.

Gaenor realized that she was lying on a bed that had also been carved out of stone, but the mattress was gloriously soft. She stretched, feeling every muscle in her body protest, a sign that she must have been unconscious for a long time. She tried to sit up, but a gentle brown hand with gracefully long and tapering fingers pushed her back down into the mattress.

"Careful, dear," an almost musical soprano voice cautioned her in what Gaenor realized was the Old Tongue - the language of magic, or Artur's magic at least.. "You are not ready to get up yet."

Gaenor's eyes snapped up to focus at a delicate but upside-down face above her. She tried to turn around but the same gentle hand restrained her while the body it was attached to walked around the bed with a large bowl of something hot and liquid.

Gaenor caught herself staring at the creature. She was beautiful. Her long, jet black hair cascaded down over her shoulders and fell to below her waist. Gaenor estimated that she stood about four and a half feet tall, but she was so perfectly proportioned that she appeared taller than she actually was. Her face was formed with equally delicate features with high cheek bones and almond-shaped, black eyes that spoke of millennia of experience although she appeared to be no older than Gaenor, and she had long, pointed ears that protruded ever so slightly through her hair. However, what struck Gaenor ever so much more profoundly was the color of her skin. It was a deep, rich brown, the color of the well-aged wood of a walnut tree. Gaenor had grown used to the tanned skins of the people of Firdan and Gostrina, but they looked positive pale compared to this exotic beauty.

"I am Kseniya Keshayu," she introduced herself, sitting down on the edge of the carved stone bed. "How are you feeling?"

"You're a Vieri," Gaenor said in wonderment. She said it in Shandi.

"Vari," Kseniya corrected her with a gentle smile and then continued on in strangely accented Shandi. "One Vari, many Vieri. You are Gaenor of Narmouth." It wasn't a question. She spoke each word with an unnatural precision that by itself would have proved Shandi was not her native tongue.

"Yes, I am. How did you know?"

Kseniya looked embarrassed. "It does not please us, but it was necessary to violate your privacy. You are knowledgeable in the Way. Surely you realize that there are spells that can divine anything."

"The Way? And what do you mean violate my privacy?" Gaenor demanded.

"Gently, dear one," Kseniya said soothingly. "Here. Prop yourself up a bit and eat some of this." She pushed the bowl at Gaenor who suddenly became aware of a cavernous hunger within her.

"This is delicious!" Gaenor exclaimed. "What is it?"

"Mutton broth," the Vari replied. "I am pleased you like it."

"It's wonderful. Might I have the recipe?"

"Of course." Gaenor wasn't certain, but she thought that a pleased blush was spreading across Kseniya's face. "Now I shall answer your other questions," the jet-haired Vari continued. "The Way is short for 'Way of Life.' The Way is magic and the proper uses of it. Vieri are born adept. That power is always with us so it became necessary for our ancestors to establish the Way so that we would never abuse our abilities.

"I fear we came close to that when we probed your mind. You were in no condition to answer our questions and we needed to know whether you came with our beloved Arturus as a friend or enemy. You are welcome among us, Gaenor of Narmouth," she concluded warmly.

"Artur!" Gaenor shouted suddenly. She was amazed how weak her voice sounded when she tried to raise it. "Where is he?"

"Gently, dear Gaenor. Arturus is in another room, not far from here. His recovery is expected to be slower than yours. He is an old man and the thionase infection has destroyed his magical ability to augment the healing process."

"He will live?"

"I believe so. Yes."

"What about his abilities as an adept?"

"When the thionase has finished its work we will unlock those abilities once more and he will be as you know him again. Now please answer my question. How are you feeling?"

"Still a bit hungry," Gaenor replied, now over half done with the broth.

"That is not surprising as you have not eaten in almost three days, dear. Now finish that bowl and you

may have some bread to help fill in the corners. The health spell can do wonders, but it does need something to work with."

"What health spell? The same one Artur had?" Gaenor asked, certain of what that meant.

"In order to heal you quickly and in the most safety, we performed the rite of initiation. That is something you wanted, is it not?"

"You mean I'm finally an adept?"

"Indeed, dear. This is not something we do lightly, for it could easily unleash a great evil on the world should we choose wrongly. In our study of Arturus we found he was a good man, although we never expected him to take an interest in learning to cast voluntary spells. In you, however, we sensed something far greater. You have the knowledge and a surprising amount of wisdom for one so young. You also have a great task ahead of you, but we shall discuss this later after Arturus, too, is well again."

"I had hoped to be awake when I was initiated," Gaenor commented regretfully.

"You would have remembered nothing even so," Kseniya told her. "I am told that you lose all awareness of time and your surroundings while the spell is being woven into your being."

"When may I try to get up?" Gaenor asked when she had finished eating.

"Whenever you like, dear," Kseniya told her with a crooked little smile.

"But you said..."

"That was before you had eaten, child. You will still be weak for a few days, but if you are feeling well enough to get up, then do so."

Gaenor sat up readily and swung her legs out and down to the cool stone floor. She felt a bit dizzy and Kseniya directed her to put her head between her knees for a minute. When she was feeling better, Gaenor tried again and managed to sit straight up without disorientation. Kseniya gave her an encouraging smile.

"Where are we?" Gaenor asked suddenly.

"My village," Kseniya answered simply.

"Village? It looks like a cave."

"That too. We have some simple buildings on the surface, but most of the time we live down here. There are not many natural caverns, of course, but the ones we have cut ourselves are almost as good."

"But the air! Why is it so comfortable in here and where did the mutton come from?"

"You already know the spells for summoning water?"

"I know of them," Gaenor admitted. "Artur has not yet told me how they are cast."

"They are fairly simple," Kseniya remarked, "but you understand how they work?"

"Yes, Artur explained."

"Well, we do not need them here in the village. The caverns have been excavated all the way down to the water table, although we do have a few spells that keep the moisture from escaping into the desert. Also, we raise sheep and goats, and many vegetables and other food stuffs here in the caverns."

"Without the sun?"

"We can control the light and temperature far more absolutely by magic."

"One thing Artur couldn't tell me," Gaenor changed the subject. "Does this village have a name?"

"No," Kseniya laughed. "Should it?"

"I've never seen a village, town, or city that didn't," Gaenor pointed out.

"I imagine that is so you can keep track of them all, but all the Vieri live here," Kseniya informed Gaenor. "We have only this one settlement, so there has never been a need to give it a name to distinguish it from any other."

"But if you were to put it on a map," Gaenor pressed, "What designation would you give it?"

"What is a map?" Kseniya asked. Gaenor explained and Kseniya allowed that such an instrument could conceivably be useful, but since Vieri rarely left the Village and always knew how to get back when they did, it probably wouldn't be widely used by them. "It is similar, however, to our star charts."

"Star charts?"

"Yes, dear. Some of us study the sky."

"In order to predict the future?" Gaenor asked.

"No, to learn more about the universe around us."

Gaenor didn't know what else to say, so she eased herself up until she was standing. Her knees started buckling under her almost immediately, but Kseniya's deceptively strong arms gave her some additional assistance and she managed to stay upright.

"Take one step at a time," Kseniya advised. "Your legs have not been used in days. They are bound to be weak at first."

Gaenor nodded and with the Vari's aid she made it to the door and back. Then she was prepared to lie down again, but Kseniya would have none of it, so they walked to the door and back a few more times until Gaenor was able to do it on her own.

"I should be getting more tired," she commented as she took her first solo trip to the door, "but instead I'm feeling better."

"Activity helps the health spell," Kseniya told her. "You should always push yourself a bit if you can after you've been hurt. It will help you heal faster. Would you like a tour of the village?"

"I'd like to see Artur."

"He probably isn't awake yet," Kseniya warned her. "And it won't be pleasant."

"That's all right. I want to see him."

"I understand." Kseniya nodded and led the way out of the room.

The gallery outside the room was as artificial as the room itself. It was a uniform two yards wide and eight yards long with doors on either side at irregular intervals. Each gallery they passed through ended in circular rooms of varying diameters depending on how many other passageways also intersected there. Each gallery was also quite dark until they stepped into it and then the ceiling suddenly lit up with the same sort of light as in the room. Gaenor was surprised at that the first time it happened and then surprised again when the room darkened behind them.

"What if you want your room to be dark when you're in it?" Gaenor asked as they walked through the gallery. "Can you do it?"

"Of course. There is a special section of the wall right next to the bed. I'll show you later. Just touch it and the light will stop."

"Really? What sort of spell does that?" Kseniya explained the technical details as they walked. She was surprised not only by the understanding Gaenor showed but by the fact that she was unable to follow everything Gaenor told her in return about reactive and catalytic agents in magic. Kseniya's knowledge of magic was vast, but to her it was an art. Naturally, similar substances reacted similarly, but sometimes there were surprises; reactions would be unexpectedly powerful or two normally powerful ingredients, when mixed, would do nothing at all. Gaenor, however, viewed magic as a science and her system of classification was not based on the results of spells but on the innate properties of the ingredients, tools, and incantations. On seeing Kseniya's confusion, Gaenor stopped herself and started to explain her system from the ground up. Kseniya still had a thousand questions when they found the room Artur was in, three galleries away, but she was beginning to understand the basics, at least, of what Gaenor was talking about.

The room was dark until they entered, proof that Artur was still asleep after his ordeal. His face was deeply lined now and he seemed to have gotten smaller, shrunken in on himself. He had very little hair on top of his head, but someone had neatly trimmed what was left on the sides and his beard until none of the youthful blond color was left. That, Gaenor felt, made him look all the older.

"How much longer?" she asked Kseniya.

"Soon. He is beginning to respond to some of our strongest spells and his condition has stabilized and started to reverse itself. He should wake up some time in the next few hours, I think."

"I'd like to stay with him."

"We will return soon. Come. I have some things to show you."

They walked down still more corridors until Gaenor was hopelessly confused. "It is really a very simple system," her guide told her. "There are eight levels in each of eight regions and eight sections in each level. Each section has eight subsections which each have eight galleries. Everything is color coded using the colors of the rainbow plus black and white. The system is not perfect since there are not eight rooms to each gallery, but we make do. Your's is the red room of the blue gallery of the blue subsection of the red section of the red level in the yellow region. Red, blue, blue, red, red, yellow."

"That's simple?" Gaenor laughed. "I should have taken notes!"

"Does it help if I tell you that the colors are arranged in the same order as a rainbow with the black before red and the white after violet?"

"Not really."

"You will become accustomed to it," Kseniya told her confidently, "and until then I shall provide you with a guide."

The yellow region was a mostly residential area and not a very full one at that. The Vieri had built their village much larger than necessary on the premise that their need for space was likely to grow. The village itself, Kseniya explained, was part of a far larger magical work, but she refused to explain that in detail claiming that Gaenor, for all her knowledge, was not yet ready for one of the higher magics.

The yellow region terminated in the entrance into a large natural cave. They had not seen many Vieri so far, only the occasional passersby who would smile pleasantly to cover their own curious stares at the visiting human. In the cave, however, there were hundreds of Vieri.

Most were only passing through the cavern on their way to somewhere else but a dozen, seated in a niche in one of the walls played exotic music on strange instruments. They stopped and started frequently and Kseniya explained that they were only practicing and would play uninterrupted that evening. The only other occupants of the chamber who did not seem to be moving on were obviously children.

Over two dozen Vieri children caught sight of Gaenor and Kseniya and suddenly swarmed around them. Gaenor knelt to greet them and although she only understood a little of what they said, she felt welcomed by their open, smiling faces. Eventually a pair of adults herded them away and back to their lessons.

"Our children," Kseniya said, her voice filled with emotion. "Our future. They have never seen a human before and were curious. I hope you did not mind."

"Not at all. I love children," Gaenor replied.

"We live a very long time but have children so infrequently. They are our most precious treasure. Without them there is no reason to continue. Do you understand what I am saying? There are some fifteen thousand Vieri, but only fifty children."

"So few?"

"It is the way we are," Kseniya shrugged.

Another female Vari approached them shyly. She was obviously an adult, but Gaenor got the impression that she was still very young, perhaps even younger than Gaenor herself.

Kseniya remained silent and the young Vari introduced herself in broken Shandi, "I am Cornellya Vasylya. You with Arturus?"

"I am Gaenor of Narmouth. Yes, I am with Artur."

"Arturus am, no is," she paused search for the right word, "godfather?" she concluded uncertainly. Kseniya nodded agreement and Cornellya continued with more confidence. "Arturus name me. Told parents it make me part of his family."

"Of course," Gaenor agreed warmly. "Artur is head of the Cornellian Family in Cilbe." Cornellya nodded vigorously.

"May I accompany?"

Gaenor looked at Kseniya. Her guide returned her gaze interestedly, but said nothing. "I'd be delighted," Gaenor responded. Kseniya smiled. This was obviously the correct response. "I hadn't expected that anyone would speak Shandi here."

"We did not until you arrived. When I probed your mind I also learned your language. We are all learning it now."

"But why? How often will you have an occasion to use it?"

"Language is a reflection of the people who speak it. By learning your language we learn something of your people, the way they think. This is important knowledge to us although it is quite possible that you may be the only representative of your people we ever meet. Besides, you were unconscious so we were not able to teach you our language at the time. We will teach it to you if you desire."

"I'd like that very much," Gaenor responded earnestly. "I know a little of the Old Tongue for incantations, but I'd like to be able to converse in it."

"Good. Cornellya can teach you and you, in turn can help her with Shandi." Gaenor and Cornellya smiled at each other. Kseniya nodded and led them toward a large natural hole. The light coming in through it was so bright that it could only lead to the outside world.

"Am I really adept?" Gaenor asked wonderingly just before they stepped outside. "I don't feel any different."

"It is a subtle change, dear," Kseniya told her. "Try a spell and convince yourself."

Gaenor thought for a moment, realizing that without Artur's tools and ingredients, her options were a bit limited. Then she noted the intricate carving that had been done at the entrance into the cave and got an idea. Putting her hand to the carving, she spoke a quick incantation that did nothing more than state her intention that this carving symbolize the entire Vieri village. Kseniya's eyebrows went up a bit at that, but a pleased smile told Gaenor that she had perhaps been more accurate than she knew. Then with a few gestures she spoke a common prayer, one she had learned as a child, asking for the blessing of Nua. A sparkle of lights and a shimmering sound filled the air around them and then both the sound and the light spread out to fill the cavern and all the galleries and rooms beyond.

"Remarkable," Kseniya breathed. "What was that second part of the spell?"

"Just a simple blessing," Gaenor replied. "I asked Nua to look down and smile upon you."

"An auspicious beginning." Kseniya smiled, but Cornellya was far more demonstrative. She ran the two short steps to Gaenor and hugged her warmly. Then they all walked outside.

The air was as dry as Gaenor remembered, but there were dark gray clouds overhead as far as she could see.

"I didn't know clouds could form over the Parch," Gaenor remarked.

"It is not something that has happened in a thousand millennia, maybe longer," Kseniya replied. They formed the day we found you and Arturus a few leagues from here and they have been here every since. The area they cover is small yet and unstable, but it is growing in area and strength.

"Worse," Kseniya continued, "it is raining. The rain evaporates before it strikes the ground, but each drop that evaporates lowers the air temperature a tiny bit and raises the humidity and as that happens, the rain comes closer to the ground."

"Is that bad?"

"Very much so, dear. In two years, maybe a little longer, the rains will reach the ground and when that happens our village will begin to flood. This we could deal with, but when the rains come, they will turn the desert into fertile farmland and humans will come to use it. We live in what you call the Parch because this is the one place where we are left alone to live in peace. If we lose our home, we will die."

"Two years is a long time. Maybe it will stop before then," Gaenor ventured.

"The storm is not natural. It will go on until stopped," Kseniya told her.

"But how can anyone stop the rain?" Gaenor asked.

"By going to the source and stopping the people who are bringing this curse down upon us and the rest of the world."

"The rest of the world?"

"Once weather patterns are destroyed here, it will begin to snow heavily in the far North. The snow will pile up until it is a mile or more high and it will form a glacial ice sheet and begin to flow until it covers a quarter or more of the world."

"That's horrible!" Gaenor exclaimed. "Who would do such a thing?"

"They live on a large island to the east."

"Ichtar?" Gaenor asked with an involuntary shudder.

"Even so," Kseniya replied calmly.

"But that's where..." She paused as the implication thundered through her. "Demons!" she barely whispered.

Here ends the first book of Gaenor's Quest

The second book continues with the worldwide search by Artur and Gaenor for companions with which to assault the dreaded domain of the demons!

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