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The Black Clouds of Noon

by

Jonathan Edward Feinstein

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Author's Note

If you have not yet read *The Red Light of Dawn*, you may want to go download and read it before going any further with this one. A lot happened in that volume and unlike my other works, Gaenor's Quest is a multi-volume story. What you have here is the second in a series of four volumes and while you probably won't be lost without reading the first book, this story was written as a continuation. On the

other hand if you haven't read that one yet and want to read this first anyway, you've been warned.

As I mentioned in *Dawn*, this was an attempt to write a fantasy story on a wholly made up world with a cultural level that is roughly mid 19th century. However, even without looking at the map, you'll quickly realize that this is definitely not Earth. Instead it is called the World when it is referred to at all. Unlike Maiyim in another series I've written, I never gave it a special name. It's just the World.

In designing the World I decided to mix and match various cultures, so Cilbe may seem superficially Roman, but just like the Romans themselves did, I borrowed from other cultures. You will see differences both in Cilbe and elsewhere. Some readers may enjoy trying to figure out where various cultural aspects came from, but it isn't important to the story so there is no need to do so.

In my note to the first book I mentioned technology levels as being 19th Century but without gunpowder. In this book I inadvertently messed that up a bit when Gaenor starts to question Conservation of Matter and of Energy as it was seen in the 19th century and learns that someone is thinking about Relativity about fifty years early... Well, I said it wasn't Earth.

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>

Jonathan Edward Feinstein
Westport, Massachusetts
December 5, 2003

Prologue

"My dear friends and fellow Cilbens," Senator Arturus Cornellian Marno began his oration. Sourly he thought to himself, *There, that ought to cover everyone in the Senate*. "We stand here considering the proposal made by the esteemed Sinius Girdecus Ralba that we should once more go to war. And with whom are we to go to war with? Does the noble Girdecus suggest that we guard our borders from the ever present attacks from the Barbarian Kingdoms to the east? The Barbarian Kings, even he must admit have been an irritant to our empire for centuries. Does he want us to annex the Thimdra States? The Thimdras are politically weak and a rich source of trade goods from the lands to the Far East. Or perhaps he wants us to teach the arrogant monarch of Maxforn who so recently sent that now infamous letter of insult to our Emperor, His Serene Majesty Lusius Bassian Marlsa?

"No. Our noble colleague wants to send our legions to Baria. Baria? Girdecus, have you lost your taste for tobacco?" Several senators chuckled at that. "Maybe Baria's queen turned down your romantic advances? I understand she's quite beautiful and can certainly afford to be quite discriminating about her partners." Still more senators laughed at that. Girdecus' features might be described by the polite as noble and imposing, but maidens didn't cry themselves to sleep for the lack of his attentions.

Girdecus himself was sitting at his customary bench, scowling at Arturus, who had only been elevated to the Senate two years earlier, just before Emperor Balto had died. Arturus had enjoyed an illustrious career in the military with a legion that was almost fanatically loyal to him and had not only defended the Empire from rebellion along the Minue and eventually brought the entire Transminue back into the Empire, but had also conquered Colch in the far south. Old Balto had petitioned the Senate to grant Arturus and his heirs the hereditary title, Colchicus. The Senate had gladly done so. In comparison Girdecus had never been more than a tolerated centurion with an indifferent record. His nearest claim to military fame was the great, great, great grandfather who had conquered Girde and been granted the title Girdecus which because of his humble origins also became their family name. No Girdecus since then had any military accomplishments.

"I apologize for my ignorance and gross simplicity, illustrious Girdecus," Arturus continued, "but I simply do not understand. I'll admit that Baria is rich in tobacco, ivory and even some high quality gemstones, but surely there must be some reason you want to attack that land. Oh wait, I forgot the gold. Is that it? Do you really want that gold? I'll admit there's quite a bit of gold in Baria, but there's much more in Drombra, better gemstones too."

As always, Locius Armenius Flacco stood behind Girdecus. Flacco was Girdecus' chief aide. If there was any reason Girdecus himself had never been censured by the Senate or even expelled from that august body it was Flacco. Girdecus was powerful but Flacco was competent. Together they were a formidable team. Flacco wasn't quite scowling. Arturus wasn't really certain how to read him. Although not of senatorial rank himself, Flacco had years more experience of politics at this level than Arturus did and rarely let his anger show, unlike Girdecus. No, Flacco was a cool and calculating man. Arturus privately felt Flacco didn't care what cause he was serving so long as he did it well. As long as he was in the pay of Girdecus, Flacco would do everything he could to further Girdecus' fortunes and, thereby his own.

Arturus continued his oration. In it he continued to taunt and poke fun at Girdecus, the man who had been his *bete noire* almost since he had first set foot in the Senate. But eventually he had to stop making jokes and clever insults and actually get down to serious business. Ironically, he had already touched on the true reasons behind Girdecus' proposal to declare war on Baria. Emperor Lusius really did want to control the gold, gems, tobacco and ivory that came from there. But it was more than that. Bringing Baria into the Empire would put a wedge between Nimbria and Drombra. If the conquest of Baria was decisive enough Drombra would fall in short order and Nimbria, economically isolated, would soon join the Empire with barely a whimper. After that the absorption of Maxform would only be a matter of time. But it all hinged on the easy conquest of Baria and that was by no means a foregone conclusion.

"Perhaps the noble Girdecus is not fully aware of the military resources available to Her Barian Majesty? Please allow me to describe them. Baria prides herself on being a peaceful kingdom. This is a concept that is often misunderstood by civilians. The only peaceful realms in this world are those with armies large enough and powerful enough to defeat all potential enemies. Don't believe me? Look at the legions of our beloved Cilbe. Do we not take pride in being such a peaceful land?"

"We have all heard of the fabled Amazon Legion of Baria. Perhaps some of us are confused by the term 'legion.' My friends and fellow Cilbens, the Amazon Legion is actually the size of three of our Cilben legions and don't fall to the temptation to dismiss these thousands of warriors merely because they are women! The Amazon Legion has never been defeated in battle and there is not an experienced soldier in any army who doesn't respect them." *Fear them is more accurate*, Arturus thought to himself, *but no one here would believe that!* "And the Amazons are only a bit less than half of Baria's fighting forces. The cavalry is every bit as able as our own and their engineers nearly as clever."

Arturus looked around to see how his arguments were being received. Many of the Senators, those who had served in the Legions in their youth, were nodding. There were none of the catcalls from his opponents as there might have been had the Emperor himself not been present. For the first time since he had started speaking, Arturus glanced at Emperor Lusius, seated on the imperial bench. Lusius' face was stiff and emotionless. When dealing with Arturus that wasn't unusual. Less than two years earlier, when old Balto had died, Arturus had been on an inspection tour of the Legions and happened to be visiting the Twelfth, the legion he had once commanded, when word of Balto's death had come. The Twelfth Legion's Officers immediately declared their allegiance to Arturus should he wish to claim the imperial throne and the soldiers began chanting his name. Arturus had declined immediately and scolded the men for their presumption, but word of this near revolt had reached Cilbe and Lusius immediately suspected Arturus of some involved plot and that his refusal was really the first step toward usurping the throne. That if Arturus had wanted to be Emperor he would have simply marched the Twelfth Legion into Cilbe at any time while he was a general, was not something the paranoid Lusius was prepared to believe. As Arturus continued, he noticed Lusius looking over at Girdecus. Something passed between them, but he couldn't decipher what it was.

"Senators, you might ask if we could win in Baria. I say, 'Yes, we could!' In the entire world, there is no army greater in might than the massed Legions of Cilbe. But what would be the cost and what would we gain?"

"It would cost us thousands of lives. We would spill the sacred blood of Jube's beloved people. We would spend hundreds of thousands of gold rounds on the mechanism of war that would be better spent to the benefit of Cilben citizens. We would gain nothing we do not already have by negotiation!"

Arturus had surprised everyone when he was the ambassador to Arberoa and had shown that his negotiation abilities matched those he had demonstrated in the military. While there he had brokered treaties that had been so favorable to the Empire that conquest of that region was completely unnecessary. During his short tenure in the Senate, he had consistently come out in favor of treaties over conquest.

"Cilbens," he began his conclusion, "as ever, we are left with a choice. We can go to war or continue to abide by the agreements that have benefited us all. War will be costly and benefit only a few. War threatens to destroy our economy and pauper many of us." He didn't like bringing personal gain or loss into his argument, but knew it was a chord that would ring most clearly in the hearts of those senators who needed to be convinced. "But by maintaining the status quo we shall all prosper. War and we prove ourselves treacherous and greedy!" This too was open to debate, but Girdecus had already spoken the other side of the argument. "Seek peace and we prove ourselves the honorable men I know in my heart we all are."

"Jube and Sellae!" Arturus called out to the city's patron god and goddess, in the traditional form for closing a Senatorial oration. "We beseech you to guide us with your wisdom, protect the lives and fortunes of the people of your city and empire and overwhelm all the enemies of good men, the foes of the Empire, the robbers of Cilbe, men bound together by a treaty and infamous alliance of crimes, dead and alive, with eternal punishments!"

He had cribbed those closing lines from a great historical orator, but the members of the Senate did not care about that. It was something they all did from time to time. Some senators had never spoken an original word in all their time in the Senate. It was fashionable and good form to plagiarize the ancients. Nearly all the senators applauded politely; Arturus' friends and supporters were quite enthusiastic. Even Emperor Lusius, his face stony, clapped his hands together lightly. Girdecus, however, did not, but then Arturus would have been very surprised if he had.

“You caused quite a commotion this afternoon, Arturus,” a voice said behind him a few minutes later as he entered the Forum.

“Glad you enjoyed it, Acelius,” Arturus replied dryly.

“Oh, I did, I did!” Senator Acelius assured his friend. “It is a speech I will never forget and I’ll tell you who else won’t forget it.”

“Girdecus, of course.”

“Oh, well him too,” Acelius agreed, “but I was referring to our beloved Emperor.” It was customary not to say anything in public that could be construed as negative against the Emperor. Too many good people had been arrested on charges of treason because of foolish, but otherwise harmless, remarks. Using the term “beloved” in an ironic tone had become fashionable in Arturus’ circles. “I’m sure every one of your words is firmly engraved in his memory. That was a very brave speech you made today, my friend.”

“It didn’t seem that way to me,” Arturus told him. “I just told it the way I see it.”

Acelius replied, “You’re wrong about what could happen to you. You do realize that you have placed yourself firmly in the way of Lusius’ plans, don’t you?”

“That was the point, Acelius. You told me so yourself.”

“Uh, yes, I suppose it was, but you might have been a bit more subtle about it. You’ve managed to outrage both Girdecus and Lusius today.”

“Neither of them have any love for me,” Arturus pointed out quickly.

“No, but until now you’ve only been a minor irritant. Your oration today is most likely going to sway the neutral senators our way and when the vote goes against Girdecus and the Emperor, who do you think they are going to blame?”

“Me, of course. And they’ll be right,” Arturus replied after thinking it through for a moment. “Look, Acelius, I knew I was making enemies when I did it. Well, in truth I was just reinforcing old animosities, but I still knew what I was doing at the time. It was something one of us had to do. The job just happened to fall to me.”

“And you still say it wasn’t courageous?” Acelius laughed. Arturus laughed too, then suggested they go relax in the public baths.

On the following day the Senate voted overwhelmingly against the declaration of war on Baria. The Emperor shrugged that defeat off and promptly requested a number of honors to be voted for his friends, which he got. As a whole, the Senate decided that was what Lusius wanted after all and forgot about it. It was nearly a year later before any repercussions began to be felt.

Arturus was working at the desk in the “garden office,” a central area of his house exposed to the elements, when Acelius found him. Cilben houses were built with central courtyards or gardens to help keep the inner rooms cool in the warm sub-tropical climate. Arturus had a large awning installed in one corner of the garden area so he could work there in good weather, and in Cilbe, the weather was pleasant most of the time.

“Well, the other sandal has dropped at last,” Acelius told Arturus.

Arturus looked up from the papers on his desk. “You are going to explain that, aren’t you?”

Acelius rolled his dark brown eyes and sent a silent prayer skyward before replying. “I’ve just heard from Gaius Lycus.”

“Lusius’ secretary?” Arturus asked. “What did he want?”

“Lycus is my secret spy in the Imperial Palace,” Acelius told him.

“I didn’t know you had a secret spy there, Acelius.”

“If I had told you, it wouldn’t have been a secret anymore. Lycus has been funneling information to me for years.”

“It’s nice to have a friend at the top,” Arturus laughed. Lycus was actually a freedman, formerly a slave of Emperor Balto.

“It comes in handy,” Acelius commented. “Like now when I have a chance to save your life.”

Arturus was suddenly serious. “What have you heard?”

“Lusius doesn’t like you very much.”

“That’s not news. What else?”

“He intends to accuse you of treason before the Senate when we meet next week.”

“Treason? On what evidence?”

“He doesn’t really need evidence, you know that. He’ll trot out a few of your slaves...”

“I don’t keep slaves,” Arturus cut in. “Never have. My father didn’t either”

“Really? How ever do you manage?”

“I pay my servants. It costs the same in the long run and I never have liked the notion of owning a person. But I suppose he could use one of my servants just as easily, couldn’t he?”

“Well, the legal ramifications of torturing a freedman... They are freedmen aren’t they?”

“Some are women,” Arturus replied, “and at least half are second generation.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Acelius shrugged that off. “If they aren’t slaves and if it comes out publicly that he had them tortured for their testimony he’s likely to be facing a commoner rebellion. But then that’s easy to avoid, he’ll just have them killed as soon as the trial is over.”

“So what are you saying? Should I try running for the Barian border or just hop a ship bound for Arberoa?”

“Neither. Lycus told me that Lusius would refrain from making the charge if you would retire from the Senate.”

“He told you that, did he?”

“What’s wrong, Arturus?” Acelius asked.

“That’s some secret spy you have there. Not only does he ferret out secrets, but is able to make deals for you as well?”

Acelius’ eyes widened. “Lusius knows, doesn’t he?” Arturus nodded. “Then I’m likely to be his next target.”

“More likely he’ll use this to muzzle you in some way,” Arturus opined. “He’ll wait for some major concession he wants from you.”

“And once he gets that, he’ll go for more until I refuse. By that time I’d better be in Ond.”

“Ond? Sounds like an odd choice.”

“My uncle is ambassador there and getting ready to retire. This may be a good time to start pulling strings and try to get his post next year. Well, first we need to save your hide, then we’ll work on mine. Should I let Lusius know you’ll retire?”

“I haven’t seen my estate on the other side of the bay in over a year and Maite is very nice this time of year,” Arturus mused.

“Your place there is very nice any time of year,” Acelius replied.

“You’ll have to come visit,” Arturus invited his friend.

“At least until I move to Ond,” Acelius sighed.

A week later Arturus requested time to address the Senate. Girdecus, the Senate Leader, was only too happy to grant it to him and in fact moved him to the top of the list, just after the opening invocation had been made and auspices taken. Emperor Lusius was there, holding a small scroll with bright red painted rollers in his hands. The red rollers were only used by the Emperor on legal documents in capital cases. Arturus knew his name was on that scroll, just in case he failed to retire

His retirement speech was brief but eloquent. He made no accusations, gave no excuses, just stated his desire to retire from public life. On the surface it was a quiet defeat, but in fact it was a fighting retreat. Arturus had spent the week preparing on several levels for his retirement. He would sell his home in Cilbe and move to the family estate in Maite, but would also stay in touch with the latest happenings in the city. He also hired workmen for certain additions to his country manor, which Acelius noted when he visited a few months later.

“Interesting changes you’ve made here,” he said by way of greeting. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a country house with earthworks and a moat around it.”

“Moat?” Arturus asked, feigning innocence. “Are you referring to my water garden?”

“Arturus, it would take a legion to get into this house if you shut the gates.”

“Why yes, that was the idea,” Arturus laughed.

“But... Why?”

“Let’s just say I like my privacy. It gave me something to do while waiting.”

“Waiting for what?”

“For you to bring the bad news, my friend. That is why you’re here, isn’t it?”

“Well, now that you mention it, yes, but I’d thought we could relax a bit first.”

“You relax, I’ll tell you the news,” Artur replied quietly. “Girdecus has continued to whisper his poison into Lusius’ ear, not that it was all that necessary. Lusius has just been marking time until he could finish what he started a few months ago.”

“Actually it’s been Flacco who’s been doing the whispering,” Acelius commented.

“Yes, of course. Girdecus decides, but it’s Flacco who does all the work. Just as well for Girdecus. If it was the other way around they’d be the ones having this conversation. Meanwhile Girdecus has been making a series of orations in the Senate and the Forum denouncing an as yet unnamed retired general who has been clandestinely plotting to usurp the imperial throne. And, of course, while he may not have mentioned me by name, his description of this foul villain who plots to kill our beloved Emperor and the entire Senate is such that none can doubt that he has me in mind.”

“You know all that and you’re just sitting here in Maite?”

“Hardly, old friend. You may have noticed that my daughters are married off into powerful families. Surprisingly they also love their husbands, I’d hoped for that, but it was more important they be safe. And my son, Colchicus, will be formally adopted by Marcus Hulus Petro. I don’t think I can protect him much better than that.”

“True enough. Even Lusius can’t touch Petro. So you knew this was coming?”

“It wasn’t hard to foresee.”

“And, oh prophet, did you foresee Lusius sending a contingent of the Imperial Guards with an order to see you commit suicide or else die at their hands?”

Artur stared at Acelius. “So soon?”

“You did see it coming?”

“I didn’t think he’d move so quickly. How long do I have?”

“They won’t come until after Rotonalia. The guards would kill the Emperor themselves if he sent them here on the war god’s holy day.”

“Two days then. I might be able to get on a ship.”

“Don’t try it, the harbor is being watched and all ships are being searched carefully before the harbormaster will allow them to sail. The boat I came on across the bay on couldn’t have smuggled a grain of sand. Don’t try going to Baria either. They expect that.”

“Where then? The Barbarian Kingdoms?”

“That’s a possibility, but I was thinking you might do well in the Thimdra States.”

“They’re all but clients of the Empire,” Arturus pointed out. “I doubt I’d be safe there very long.”

“You may not need to stay there very long. But we have a mutual friend in Wahton on the border with the Parch.”

“Really? Who?”

“You remember Clortius Tallician Vaenar?”

“Clortius? My old quartermaster? Is that where he ended up? Well, I’m not too surprised. He would prefer the quiet of the far reaches of the Empire to living here in her heart. He’ll be able to advise me, will he?”

“If he can’t, I don’t know who can. Well, I need to get back to the city. My official story was I was just going out to sail around the bay. You need to pack and so do I.”

“You got that posting to Ond?”

“I did. Lusius isn’t happy about it, but it gets me out of the capitol, maybe permanently. Look me up if you happen to get down there.”

“I will. Safe journey, old friend,” Arturus clasped his arm warmly.

“You too, old friend,” Acelius returned.

The Thimdra States

One

The sun beat down on the Parch mercilessly. Here, near the western edge of the great desert, bleached dunes dominated the landscape. The relative humidity was close to zero and the temperatures, while hot enough to cook eggs on the few exposed rocks, still had quite a way to go before they reached the day’s peak. Nothing lived in this part of the desert. It was too hot and dry. It was only much deeper, at the desert’s heart that life flourished and that was a special case, artificially maintained. It was said that it was impossible to walk across the Parch and survive. That wasn’t quite true, but the few who had managed the feat weren’t the kind to brag about it.

Artur the Southlander and Gaenor of Narmouth walked through the vast expanse of sand and rocks with a slow but deliberate pace. The going through the sand was tiresome and they needed to stop and drink water frequently, but aside from that they were in far better health than most would have credited.

“This isn’t the short way out of the Parch is it?” Gaenor asked sharply as they stopped once more to drink their fill from the canteens they carried.

Artur replied. “If we were just going back to Narmouth, we could have retraced our steps to Fronor then crossed Gostrina to Mishanda, but we have more important business and we promised our Vieri friends.”

“I know,” Gaenor agreed, “and I don’t regret that promise. It’s just that I thought traveling would be easier this time around.”

“What do you mean? We’re still walking aren’t we? We certainly weren’t by this time on the way in.”

“Yes, that’s true, I just thought it wouldn’t be such a struggle. I guess I should have known better,” she decided. “Also I was expecting the clouds we saw from the Village to extend all the way to the edge of the desert, but they petered out after the first fifty miles or so. That would have made it easier. Still, I can’t complain. It’s hot and uncomfortable, but we’re both healthy and have as much water as we can drink.”

“And we are both adepts this time around and not surviving on spells stored up in amulets,” Artur told her. “We both have perpetual health spells in fine working order. All told we’re doing very well indeed.”

“True,” she agreed again. “I think all this heat must be getting to me. I think I’m imagining things.”

Artur stopped and turned to face her. “What sort of things?” he asked seriously. “Hallucinations?”

“No, I don’t think so,” she replied uncertainly. “It just that I keep thinking we’re being followed.”

Artur looked around them carefully. “I don’t see anyone,” he announced at last.

“I didn’t either,” Gaenor told him. “But whenever I start to relax I get the feeling I’m being watched. Could the Temi still be tracking us?”

The Temi were a quasi-legal group of people who lived in and served the Cilben Empire. They were most commonly used as assassins, but they had a strict and unwavering code of honor that few non-Temi fully understood. While they were in Firdan attending the coronation, the Temi of the Ridec Clan had been hired to kill Artur. Even with magic, it was a miracle and amazing luck combined that he had survived.

“Not likely,” Artur replied. “They gave us up for dead four days after we entered the Parch. Actually I think they gave us up for dead sooner, or Leracus’ final challenge would have been even longer.”

Leracus was the Chief of the Ridec Clan. After over a dozen of his finest warriors had been killed in what the Temi saw as fair combat, it fell to him to personally challenge Artur. Normally it would have been a contest of arms; the prize was the leadership of the clan. In this case however, Leracus noted that Artur and Gaenor were bound and determined to enter the Parch. No one in the Temi’s living memory had ever survived more than three days in the Parch and Artur was in poor and worsening health as he entered. Leracus told them that if they survived more than four days he would agree they had met his

challenge and won. It had been two and a half months. If Leracus' word was good and Artur was certain it was, the Temi would sing of them forever.

"We survived four days easily" Gaenor recalled, "but we wouldn't have made our way back out again if it hadn't been for the Vieri."

The Vieri were an ancient, magical folk who lived deep in the Parch. Many years earlier they had rescued Artur when he had foolishly entered the Parch while attempting to escape capture and death at the hands of the Cilben Imperial Guards. Two months ago they had rescued him again along with Gaenor as they sought their assistance. Artur's command of magic had been destroyed, and their only source of life-sustaining water lay in amulets that stored spells. The spells, however, had not been as effective as Artur had hoped and his declining health had contributed to their slow progress.

But the Vieri had known they were coming and had come to meet them. Both were nursed back to health in the Vieri's Village. Part of the Vieri's cure was to initiate them as adepts so their own powers would serve to help speed their recoveries. This was the basis of the perpetual health spell they both enjoyed.

"We're going to have to climb this line of dunes, Gae," Artur told her a few minutes later. "There's no easy way around and this is the way we need to go."

Gaenor sighed, drew a deep breath of the dry desert air and said, "If we must, let's get it over with," and started climbing the dune face. Five minutes later they were at the top. "Artur, look! We're at the edge!"

"Why, so we are," Artur replied with a chuckle. Sure enough they could see the razor sharp edge of the desert one hundred feet below them and maybe three hundred yards away. "In the distance you can see the great Minue River and if we are where I think we are that small town is Wahton. Let's get out of the Parch. Then we can take a break out where the air is normal."

"Good enough for me," Gaenor laughed and started on down the dune. The downward trek was easy. In fact it was a bit too easy and she nearly lost her balance twice, but she was soon at the bottom of the dune and headed for the edge.

"Keep an eye out for that blue lichen, Gae," Artur warned her. "You know what it looks like; Kseniya must have described it a dozen times."

"If there's any here, we should be able to step over it," Gaenor assured him.

"I know, but it's still dangerous to us. That's the stuff thionase is extracted from. Just don't touch it." Thionase was the organic poison the Temi had used on Artur to deprive him of his ability to use magic. It was no more deadly than tea to most people, but once in the bloodstream it would soon erase any trace of an adept's power. In its raw form, its effects were more random, but it could cause an adept to get sick or suffer bad burn-like sores. It was best to avoid it altogether.

As they had expected there was a thick blue line of the lichen that produces thionase, all along the outside edge of the Parch, but it was only a foot thick. Both adepts stepped carefully over and walked another two hundred feet down a steep hill before they reached a place they could rest.

"Oh!" Gaenor exclaimed. "It feels like the moisture is just soaking right into me through my skin!"

“That will pass soon enough,” Artur chuckled, “and this evening we’ll eat a real meal in Wahton. For now though some of those dried fruit bars will do, I think.”

Gaenor nodded and reached into her pack. They ate slowly, relishing the humidity all around them. Then Gaenor found herself staring back at the top of the hill where the edge of the Parch lay.

“Anything wrong, Gae?” Artur asked, following her gaze.

“I keep thinking we’re being watched, Artur,” she replied. “It must be my imagination. All that heat distortion in the desert made it look like there was movement in the distance and we can still see a bit of it from here. I’ll get over it. Ready to move on?”

“Absolutely! I don’t know about you, but I’ve been dreaming of a real bed for a change. After a real meal, of course.”

“None of that for me until I’ve had a bath,” she told him. “They do have baths in Wahton, don’t they?”

“Public ones, in fact,” Artur told her as they started walking again.

“Public? You mean there are bath houses that several families share?”

“No, there’s one large Cilben bath near the center of town that everyone uses. It’s a social occasion every afternoon. Men and women go to the baths and socialize.”

“Men and women?” Gaenor squeaked. “Together?”

“Not any more. A few hundred years ago men and women used to bathe together, but these days there are separate chambers for men and women, but everyone goes at the same time and it isn’t unusual to see a member of the opposite sex without any clothes on from time to time. No one thinks much of it though. It’s the baths, of course we’re naked.”

Gaenor thought about that then decided, “I’m too dirty to argue about it. Right now I’d bathe in the town square if I had to.”

“In the forum, you mean.”

“What’s a forum?” Gaenor asked.

“It’s the central market place. It’s also used for public meetings. It’s not entirely unlike the town square in Narmouth, but a forum is a generally busier and more crowded sort of place. Actually I recall there was an old tale of someone bathing in the Forum in Cilbe. I don’t remember the details though.

“Well, I’ll forego trying to emulate that person and settle for the slightly less public bath,” Gaenor told him.

Wahton was not a large city, by Gaenor’s standards, but Artur assured her it was the administrative center of the Transminue territory. The streets were paved with cobble stones and there was a fair amount of traffic as they approached the center of town.

“Horses,” Artur muttered as they paused to let a farmer’s wagon go by.

“Yes,” Gaenor replied sarcastically. “They’re horses. Well spotted.”

“No, I mean we should buy horses.”

“Now?”

“Before we leave town. Maybe you enjoy walking around the world, but it might be a novel experience to let someone or something else carry our packs for a while. Riding is easier on the feet too.”

“I hope I remember how to ride,” Gaenor commented. “It’s been months.”

“It’s not something you forget,” Artur replied, “but we’ll take it easy the first few days so we can get used to it again.” He noticed she was only vaguely paying attention to what he was saying. “Gae? Do you think we’re being followed again?”

“Hmm, what? Oh, no, I was just looking at what the people are wearing here. It doesn’t look Cilben at all.”

Artur looked around and saw nothing unusual. Styles had changed a bit since he was last in the Empire, the sleeves on the men’s tunicae were wider and the women’s skirts a bit shorter - about knee length - and their blouses cut differently. Most colors were pastels now instead of the vivid hues that had been fashionable, but the clothing was still visually Cilben and he said so.

“But, the pictures I’ve seen in the library...” She meant in the small library in Narmouth.

“Gae, those are very old books and even when they were new the styles in them were probably a century old. Styles change everywhere. These aren’t quite what I remember either...”

“But this looks like Cilben clothing to you?”

“Pretty much, yes. We should probably go directly to the baths,” he continued changing the subject.

“Didn’t you want to visit your friend first?”

“I hate to say it, but he may not even be alive. It’s been a very long time and even if he is, he may not still live in Wahton. Besides, if he is still here, he is likely to be in the baths at this time of day too. It’s hot and sticky and everyone wants to just relax. Most of the shops are closed and won’t open again until after dark.”

It seemed reasonable to Gaenor and soon they were at the entrance to the Wahton public baths. Gaenor waved briefly at Artur as she entered through the door to the women’s section. Looking around, she saw lots of small statues, wall carvings and floor mosaics. The mosaics fascinated her. She had heard of this art form but had never actually seen anything like them. She found she didn’t really know where to go next. Fortunately she was saved by a woman just a bit older than she was who entered shortly after.

“Hello,” the woman greeted her. She was a bit shorter than Gaenor and had wavy light brown hair. “I haven’t seen you here before. Are you new to Wahton?”

“I just arrived,” Gaenor admitted and quickly added, “My name is Gaenor and I haven’t the foggiest what to do next.”

“I’m Tallicia. Come with me, I’ll introduce you around. Are you from Gostrina?”

“Uh, no, why? Oh, I see, these clothes are Gostrinan, what’s left of them, that is.”

“They do look a bit worn out,” Tallicia admitted hesitantly.

“Well, I have other clothes, but I’m not sure if I can wear them here. They’re Firdani.”

“What’s wrong with Firdani clothing?”

“Well, nothing really,” Gaenor told her as they walked deeper into the complex and past an area where women were exercising lightly. “It’s just that I’m not sure if it would be considered decent here.”

“Why ever not?” Tallicia asked interestedly.

“You see the length of your skirt? Imagine it, oh, say a hand-span shorter.”

“Sounds interesting. Is that where you’re from? Firdan?” Tallicia asked. She waved at some of the exercising women.

“Mishanda,” Gaenor replied.

“Mishanda? Really? You speak Cilben very well! I’ve heard so much about Mishanda. Do you really build your houses with magic?”

Gaenor laughed lightly, “Hardly. We use our own two hands just like you do, or our professional builders do, anyway.”

“Oh. How disappointing. I thought all Mishandans were magicians.”

“No, there are very few adepts,” Gaenor explained, “and even fewer female ones.” She didn’t add that she was adept. Artur had explained that magic was illegal in the Cilben Empire. The penalty for practicing it could be death, so she had decided not to mention it, although the fact that she was adept did not physically bar her from the Empire, just forbid her from casting spells while here.

“Next you’ll tell me you have to grow your own food,” Tallicia complained.

“No, we buy it in the markets, although I do keep a small kitchen garden when I’m home.”

Tallicia led Gaenor into a large room. “This is the apodyterium,” she explained. From Gaenor’s knowledge of Cilben, learned on the way from Artur, she knew that meant this was a changing room. It was a brightly lit room with benches and small lockers. Other women were undressing and putting their clothing in the lockers and Tallicia indicated that Gaenor should do the same. “Did you want to exercise before bathing, Gaenor?” Tallicia asked.

“Not unless it’s required,” Gaenor replied. “I’ve been walking since shortly before daybreak. I think that’s enough exercise for today.”

“Good, I’d planned on skipping today anyway,” Tallicia confided with the air of a school girl who had willingly been talked into playing hooky. “We can go straight to the tepidarium, clean up and have a good long soak.”

“Great! I have a ton of dust to wash off,” Gaenor replied. “I think I’ll throw these clothes out though. I don’t think this dress is worth repairing anymore. Do we walk to the tepidarium naked?”

“You can if you like,” Tallicia shrugged. “Some do, but I usually wear a towel. There’s a pile of them over by the door. See?”

Gaenor looked and saw a large pile of fluffy blue and white towels. She grabbed one and emulated Tallicia wrapping it around herself. They left the dressing room and walked around the exercise area. On the far side they entered a room with a large pool of warm water.

“This is the tepidarium,” Tallicia explained. “We clean up in here. I’m told we used to do that by covering ourselves with olive oil and then scraping it off, but these days we use soap. There were bowls near the edges filled with thick liquid soap, which Tallicia demonstrated could be used on both hair and skin. A few of the women there had servants helping them, but most appeared to be friends helping each other soap up and rinse off.

“The water seems fairly clear, considering how many of us are using it,” Gaenor noted.

“It’s constantly being renewed from the caldarium,” Tallicia explained, “That’s the really hot room through that door over there. It’s important to be really clean before we go in there otherwise this water wouldn’t be as clean as it is. Oh! Here are some friends of mine. Camilla! Marcia! Over here!”

Two Cilben women waved back at Tallicia and approached. One was very tall and the other about Gaenor’s height. Both had long sand-colored hair.

“This is Gaenor,” Tallicia introduced her, “and these are Camilla,” she pointed to the taller woman, “and Marcia. They’re sisters,” she added.

Gaenor exchanged polite greetings with them. She was worried they would ask a lot of questions that Artur might not want her to answer, but evidently Camilla had some hot new gossip she was eager to share.

“Did you hear about Portulla?” Camilla asked Tallicia eagerly.

“The mayor’s wife,” Marcia explained to Gaenor.

“She tried to bleach her hair blond, like the women in Aston,” Camilla continued. “but something went wrong and it turned out green!”

“Green? You’re kidding!” Tallicia exclaimed. “Is that why she isn’t here this afternoon?”

“Probably,” Marcia replied.

“She claims she was cursed by a witch” Camilla giggled, “but I think her hair just didn’t react well with the bleach.”

“It could be a witch,” Tallicia said after giving the matter a bit of consideration.

“But who?” Marcia asked.

“If I had to guess,” Camilla replied, “I’d take a good look at Aula Cominia. She always makes me nervous, the way she glares at us.”

“Maybe,” Marcia nodded, “but I just think she doesn’t like us.”

“Or anyone else in this town,” Tallicia added.

“Well, I don’t know anyone who treats her particularly well,” Marcia pointed out, “but that is the sort of person who would take up witchcraft. Maybe she did turn Portulla’s hair green.”

“I don’t see what the problem is,” Gaenor commented. “Can’t she just dye it back?”

“Of course she can,” Tallicia agreed, “but if a witch did it, what’s to stop it from happening again?”

“Oh yes,” Camilla agreed. “Every knows witches can do that sort of thing.”

“Why bother?” Gaenor asked. “I mean considering how much work you have to do to become adept, why waste it just to exact some petty and embarrassing revenge?” The three Cilbens looked at her with uncomprehending stares so she continued. “Do you know what you have to do to become adept? It isn’t something you can just learn out of a book. Well, I guess you can learn how to cast a spell from a book, if you can find such a book, but even if you know exactly how to use the ingredients of the spell with the proper tools, ritual and incantation, nothing will happen until after you’ve been initiated. For that you need three other adepts to perform the initiation. And they don’t initiate just anybody. It takes years to learn everything you need to know and during that entire time you have to prove you won’t misuse the power when you have it.”

“How do you know all that?” Marcia asked.

“Everyone knows that,” Gaenor replied.

“Well, everyone from Mishanda, maybe,” Tallicia added. “But what if some old woman was initiated years and years ago and then settled near here. If Portulla did something to upset her, maybe she would curse her.”

“It would have to be something really big and I doubt it would be a woman. There are very, very few female adepts in the world. It is almost unheard of.”

“Why?”

Gaenor used an old dodge. “Girls,” she told them with a knowing grin, “it’s a man’s world.”

“You can say that again,” Camilla sighed. The other two nodded their agreement.

They chatted for a long while but Gaenor was not able to keep up with much of what the others talked about, being local gossip and often about matters she had little interest in, but here and there she was able to pick up a few bits of information she thought might be important.

First of all, the current Emperor, a man named Lusius was not popular, at least not here in Wahton. She wondered if that was because the frontier town was largely ignored by those in the capitol, or if he was held in high esteem elsewhere in the Cilben Empire.

Another bit of news to her involved a recent reassignment for the Ninth Legion. Sir Winniam, Mishanda's Lymphad Herald, had mentioned months earlier that the Ninth was patrolling the Transminue area around Wahton, but now they were stationed further north along the southern border of the Barbarian Kingdoms.

For the most part, however, Gaenor kept her mouth shut and just listened. She didn't think she would really learn some great mystery that way, but after the superstitious talk of witches she didn't think it would be a good idea to admit that she was adept. They had accepted her explanation readily enough, but it was probably more from politeness than belief in what she told them. Gaenor shrugged to herself; she would only be here a few days at the most.

"Gaenor?" Tallicia asked. "Why so silent?"

"No reason," Gaenor replied easily. "I just don't have much to add to the conversation."

"Oh, sorry. We shouldn't have left you out. Tell us about Mishanda."

"What do you want to know?"

Everything, it seemed. So Gaenor told them about Narmouth, carefully avoiding what she and Artur did for a living. She also mentioned some of the differences she had observed even within her own homeland describing the towns of Omath and Mirakh's landing, the Barony of Ander and the capitol city Misha. They asked questions, a lot of them, but she was able to avoid mentioning Artur's business until after they had entered the caldarium, a very hot room with equally hot water.

Finally Marcia asked directly "So what brings you to Wahton?"

Gaenor had been thinking about how to answer this question since she had met Tallicia. She didn't want to lie, but realized that Artur's legal status in the Cilben Empire might still be problematic. "My partner has business here. I came with him." That was true enough as it went.

"What sort of business?" Camilla asked interestedly.

"Well, it's his personal business, I'm not sure I should be talking too much about it, but he's looking for an old friend who we hope still lives here in Wahton."

"Maybe we can help," Tallicia said. "Who is he looking for?"

"A man named Clortius, I think."

"My grandfather?" Tallicia asked. "Why would anyone come from Mishanda looking for him?" Gaenor just shrugged. "If your Artur came in with you, they're probably talking now. Grandfather came here with me today. Uh, you aren't here to arrest him or anything?"

"Of course not!" Gaenor laughed as they soaked in the hot water. "I understand he and Artur are very old friends. Part of the reason we came this way was because they hadn't seen each other in such a long time."

"And the other part?" Tallicia pressed.

“We’re looking for something and Artur thinks your grandfather might be able to help.”

“What are you looking for?” Marcia asked.

“Uh, sorry. I don’t think Artur would appreciate it if I started blabbing about it in public.”

“I was prying,” Marcia admitted easily, then laughed and eventually said, “Sorry.”

“How much longer do we cook in here?” Gaenor asked.

“I think we’ve been here long enough,” Tallicia said at last. “Time for the frigidarium.”

“Lead the way,” Gaenor replied.

They left the hot room, quickly crossed the tepidarium and entered a cool room.

“After the caldarium it actually feels cold in here,” Gaenor observed.

“It’s cooler in here than outside,” Tallicia. “The trick here is to dunk yourself in the water as quickly as you can. Ready? Let’s go!”

All four women stepped into the cold water in the pool. Gaenor gasped at the sudden coolness directly after the hot and stayed knee deep in the pool until the others pulled her down into the water and dunked her all the way in.

“Yah!” Gaenor shrieked as she broke the surface. There were chuckles from the other women in the frigidarium and some laughter could also be heard through the walls from the men’s side of the bath. “Nua and Tasan!” she swore loudly as they all quickly got up again and once more wrapped their towels around themselves. “And this is what you do to relax?”

“It feels really good once you get over the shock, Gaenor,” Tallicia told her.

“You Cilbens are crazy!” Gaenor retorted, but took the sting out of it by smiling and then laughing. “I guess I should have figured out what was coming from the name of the room. I mean I figured we were going to cool off, but…”

“But,” Camilla interrupted, with a giggle, “you didn’t think you’d cool off so quickly, did you?”

“Not at all! Where do you find such cold water around here?”

“It’s not all that cold,” Tallicia explained, “although it’s the same temperature as it comes out of the ground so it’s cooler than the air and much colder than the caldarium. Well, let’s get dressed. I’m sure your Artur met Grandpapa on the men’s side already so unless I miss my guess you’ll be staying for dinner at least. Camilla? Marcia? Would you like to join us?”

“Love to,” Camilla responded, “but we already have plans tonight. Another evening though, okay?”

“Of course.”

Two

After dressing, Gaenor and Tallicia bid farewell to the two sisters and sat down to wait in a park-like area just outside the baths. All around them were small booths offering food and drink and the delicious smells of cooking food filled the air.

“We could eat out,” Tallicia noted, “but I know how much Grandpapa likes to entertain and we don’t often have visitors from so far away, so I’m certain he’ll want to make a long evening of it.”

“As long as it’s a long, relaxed evening, that’s fine by me,” Gaenor replied. “I’ve read that Cilbens lie down on couches to eat. Is that true?”

“Well, it’s not so much lying down as sort of leaning over to one side. Yes. Why? Do you eat standing up?”

“Only if I’m in a hurry. We generally sit upright at a table.”

“Sounds so formal and uncomfortable,” Tallicia opined.

“Different lands, different customs,” Gaenor told her. “I just hope I don’t fall asleep at the table tonight. It’s been a long day.”

“Hah! You’d hardly be the first one to do so. Just about everyone I know has done that at least once. It’s not a breach of courtesy. In fact some hosts take it as a great compliment if you feel so comfortable in their house that you can sleep at their table. Oh, here comes Grandpapa. Is that your Artur? When you said he was Grandpapa’s friend I expected him to be older.”

“Artur’s older than he looks,” Gaenor replied as she waved at them.

“So, how did you like the Cilben bath?” Artur asked her.

“Very nice, though I could lose the frigidarium,” she replied.

“Yes,” Artur laughed. “We heard you over on the men’s side.”

“I think they must have heard me back in Narmouth,” Gaenor replied ruefully. “I’ll try not to scream so loudly next time.”

“It could be worse,” Artur informed her. “I’m told the people of Aston take steam baths in the winter and then finish off by rolling in the snow.”

“You made that up,” she accused him.

“No. Really! Interesting choice of clothing,” he said noticing Gaenor had put on her Firdani togs.”

“The Gostrinan outfit was too far gone to bother with,” she replied. “I can buy another change of clothing tomorrow.”

“I’ll need some fresh clothes too. Good idea. Oh, forgive my lack of manners, this is my old friend,

Clortius Tallician Vaenar.”

Clortius really was an “old” friend too. Gaenor guessed he was over eighty years old, but while he walked with a cane, he didn’t appear to have any trouble getting around. He used the cane, she learned later, because his left knee pained him sometimes. Since he never knew when that would happen, it was best to have the cane with him whenever he was away from home. His thin white hair was kept short and he was wearing a long loose tunic of unbleached cotton that Gaenor knew was a traditional Cilben garment, although Tallicia told her later that it had been unfashionable for decades. The only bit of color on the garment was in the vertical strips of embroidery that reached from hem to hem by way of his shoulders.

“I see you have already met my granddaughter,” Clortius noted after exchanging greetings. Arturus has already told me you need a place to stay and we have plenty of room, so you’ll both stay with us. Good! Now is that really all you have with you?” he asked pointing at Gaenor’s backpack. “No shortage of canteens, either of you. I could almost believe Arturus’ claim you walked across the Parch. Well, come along.”

Tallicia held Gaenor back a bit to ask, “You walked across the Parch?”

“We didn’t have a lot of choice,” Gaenor told her dryly as they started to walk.

“But that’s impossible! At least I’ve always been told it was. How did you do it?”

Gaenor look around and decided there was no one close enough to overhear before replying. “With magic, of course. Remember what I said about how few female adepts there are?”

“You’re one, aren’t you?” Tallicia concluded.

“Yes, I am,” Gaenor admitted, “but please don’t spread it about.”

“Why not?”

“Did you hear yourself and your friends in the bath when we were discussing witches?” Gaenor asked. “You were all ready to accuse some local woman, whose only crime may well be that she isn’t very friendly, of cursing the mayor’s wife.”

“I guess we were, but you convinced us otherwise. I really never knew there was so much to magic. Never really thought about it, I guess. How many years did you study magic before you became an adept?”

“Almost six years,” Gaenor replied. “The normal time is only four years, but Narmouth is rather isolated. I mean, I love my hometown, but it’s a long way from anywhere.”

“So is Wahton,” Tallicia observed.

“I’ve been in smaller towns,” Gaenor replied. “Anyway, Artur tells me I was actually ready earlier than most adept candidates, but we were never able to find another two adepts near enough to Narmouth, so it wasn’t until the University at Misha became aware of my work in the subject that I had an invitation from them.”

“What sort of work was that?” Tallicia asked.

“I invented a system of magical notation, a way of writing out a spell in such a way that any adept could follow the instructions. Until I came up with it, the only way was to learn spells by oral teaching or very verbose written instructions, and the written ones tended to be somewhat inaccurate and therefore dangerous. The notational system by itself, might not have been much of a contribution, but because I invented it as I was learning magic, I also started working on a system of classifying spell ingredients. Anything might be used as part of a spell you see, but some ingredients don’t react well with others and other combinations react all too well. Still others do nothing at all. These combinations are well known. Well, many of them are. There’s still so much we do not know, but I wanted to know more than just which ingredients did what. I wanted to know why, so I used my notational system to organize spell ingredients into related categories. The symbols don’t really tell you how ingredients will interact, but I designed them as mnemonics and ingredients with similar properties appear similar, even if they don’t look anything alike when you handle them. Actually the real work was the paper I wrote describing the whole system complete with the dictionary of all the symbols I had created. I call it a paper, but the University of Mishanda called it a thesis and evidently published it and distributed copies to leading adepts all over the world.”

“So you’re famous!”

“Sort of, but only among a select and small group of people,” Gaenor replied.

“But you attended a university! They don’t even let women in the Academy at Cilbe.”

“Oh, I didn’t attend University. Never got there. We thought we would have time when the King summoned Artur to Misha to knight him, but other matters came up and we soon found ourselves on a ship bound for Firdan. The plan was to stop by the university when we got back, but someone hired a Temi clan to kill Artur and we had to run for it.”

“The Temi never forget,” Tallicia told her, nervously looking around as though she expected an attacking Tem to appear. “They’ll chase you forever. I’m surprised you were able to get away.”

“One way to settle such a contract is to meet the clan leader’s challenge. We did that by entering the Parch and staying there more than four days. Actually we were there over two months, until today.”

“Amazing!” Talicia gasped. “I don’t think anyone else has ever survived a Temi contract. Are you sure they aren’t still hunting you?”

“Not sure at all. I suppose we’ll know if we ever run into the Ridec clan again, but I think Leracus was dealing with us honorably.” She smiled suddenly at the memory of the brief conversation that she had with the Temi clan leader. “He called me a warrior. I was under the impression that it was the highest compliment he could pay.”

“It is, Gaenor!” Tallicia told her earnestly. “All Temi are warriors. By calling you one as well, he was acknowledging you as an equal. That isn’t something the Temi often do with outsiders. They almost never do in fact! And here is our home. Come on in.”

Clortius’ and Tallicia’s home seemed unusual to Gaenor, but looking around she noted that all the houses in this neighborhood were constructed similarly. Every house was “L” shaped with the short wing facing the street. As this street ran north and south that put the door facing east. Every house around here was two stories tall and oriented in the same direction. The wings of the houses were also only one room thick, ran all the way across the block so the back doors faced the street on the other side of the block,

and had no windows facing northward. Inside the “L” of the houses were private gardens. Because the gardens were on the south sides of the houses, there were no facing windows on the neighboring structures so each garden was entirely private. Most gardens had fences along their west edges for added privacy. Houses at the ends of each block also had fences along the south edge as well.

Tallicia informed Gaenor that this construction allowed the buildings to cool off quicker after sunset and the open gardens made life comfortable during the day. She also explained that these were essentially middle-class domiciles and that the rich usually built their houses to completely surround their gardens. Less affluent citizens usually shared a common garden space.

“Actually I’ve been using this cane since your last visit here,” Clortius was telling Artur as the two women joined them in the garden. Your legionary friends took an instant dislike to me, I’m afraid. I suppose I might have been a bit cleverer about answering their questions and told them you’d gone south, but I never was able to lie, not convincingly. So I tried keeping my mouth shut. That wasn’t a particularly smart move. They beat me pretty badly and left me with a broken leg.”

“I’m really sorry, old friend,” Artur told him. “If I’d known I would never have stopped here that night.”

“No need to apologize,” Clortius replied. “I’d do it all again if I had to. Well, maybe next time I’d try lying first,” he added with a dry chuckle. Then he turned to Tallicia, “Well, my dear, shall we eat in the garden tonight?”

“It seems a lovely night for it,” she replied. “Shall I let Normia know?”

“No need,” he responded, “She suggested it when Arturus and I arrived.”

“And if I’d said it would have been better inside?” Tallicia asked archly.

“Then I’d have asked you to tell Normia, of course, dear.”

“I suppose I should light the lanterns, though,” Tallicia concluded. “It will be dark soon.”

“Hold on a bit,” Artur requested. “I think this would be a good opportunity to demonstrate how I managed to survive in the Parch after I left here.”

“By magic you mean?” Tallicia asked.

“Have you been showing off?” he asked Gaenor.

“No not at all,” she protested. “I didn’t even mention being adept until after I knew who Tallicia was. You told me how illegal it was here.”

“Well, you’ve always been a better judge of character than I am. We’ll go with your judgment as usual. In any case, I hadn’t told Clortius yet.”

“So you’re a wizard or something now, Arturus?” Clortius asked.

“In the lands where magic is legal we use the term ‘adept,’” he replied. “Here, let me show you.” Artur walked over to one of the nearby lanterns, opened a glassy panel and pulled pieces of flint and steel out of his pouch. He made a simple gesture, put the flint and steel together in front of him and spoke a one-word incantation. In an instant the lantern was lit. He closed it up and stepped over to the next

lantern and repeated the process.

“Can you do that too?” Tallicia asked Gaenor. Gaenor nodded and went to light another lantern. A few minutes later all the lanterns in the garden were lit. “Amazing!” Tallicia breathed when Gaenor and Artur had finished. “Can you teach me how to do that?”

“I can show you what I did, but as I mentioned in the bath, it will only work for an initiated adept.”

“Oh, yes, you did say that,” Tallicia agreed, disappointed.

Dinner was a relaxed and informal affair. They relaxed around a low wooden table while Clortius’ servants, Normia and her daughter, brought out trays loaded with food and drink. It was fairly late when Artur finally got down to the business that had brought them to Wahton. He described how the rain in the Parch was just the first of major weather changes worldwide.

“The people I know there tell me they have determined that these changes are being caused by someone or something on Ichtar,” he explained.

“Ichtar?” Clortius asked.

“It’s a large island off the coast of Mishanda,” Artur informed him. “It’s reputed to be inhabited by demons, but somehow I doubt that. Still there must be something there. None of the east coast mariners willingly sail anywhere near it.”

“So how do you plan to get there?”

“I’ll worry about that problem later,” Artur replied dismissively. “Our first problem is finding other adepts who are willing to go with us to Ichtar. Gaenor and several of our friends in the Parch have come up with a spell they believe will counteract the one causing it to rain in the Parch, but it’s so complex it will require at least five adepts to cast it.”

“I still can’t believe there are really people living in the Parch,” Clortius mused. “Why would anyone want to live there?”

“Because we don’t,” Artur replied.

“And I thought only the Parchites lived there.”

“Yes, that’s right. They’re also called the Vieri,” Artur told him.

“But the Parchites are just a myth,” Clortius said uncertainly.

“Nonetheless they really exist and live in a subterranean city. Now we need to put together a team of adepts, and fairly good ones at that, to join us. It’s possible we can find all the recruits we’ll need at the University in Misha, but I figure it wouldn’t hurt to look elsewhere on our way back to Misha. I think we’re going to need adepts who are more open-minded about our craft than most are and if anyone knows of unusual adepts, I figure my old quartermaster would.”

“I may be able to help at that,” Clortius replied after thinking a bit. “Let’s see there’s a man in one of the Thimdras, Peln, I think, who calls himself a wizard and occasionally sells me magical trinkets. His name is Geteris Thannisson. I’ll find his address for you. He says he can’t sell them locally because of the laws

there, but there's nothing to stop him from exporting them, so I buy them and sell them in Baria and Maxform. That reminds me, Teliodena."

"Who?" Gaenor asked.

"Not who, lass, where," Clortius chuckled. "It's the capitol of Maxform. There's a man down there, Sarmuel the Sorcerer. I don't deal with him directly but he has an agent who buys various commodities from me in his name. He may be able to help you. I'll get you what information I can in the morning. So how long are you planning to stay in Wahton?"

"Just a few days," Artur replied. "We're operating under a deadline even if it is nearly two years."

"Maybe a bit longer," Gaenor added. "Kseniya said that was only an estimate. They weren't really sure how long we had."

"All the more reason not to take any longer than necessary. She could have been wrong in either direction; we may not even have two years."

"Point taken," Gaenor admitted, "but I did verify their findings with their own diagnostic spells and one of my own. I doubt they were wrong by more than a month or two. In any case, I think it will take us several days to prepare for the next leg of our journey. For one thing we're going to have to decide on which way to go. Peln and Maxform are in completely different directions."

"I suppose we should go south and meet this Sarmuel first. Then we can head back to Misha by way of the Thimdras and Mita."

"Mita?" Gaenor asked.

"Yes, that new school Haxmire's student founded. They should be deep into their academic year by the time we get there and they may have someone on staff who can help us."

"And we can ask Sir Gerax of Ond too," Gaenor pointed out. "I know he and I didn't get along very well while we were in Firdan, but that shouldn't stop us from asking."

"That's a good idea, but Dana is a long way out of the way to Misha," Artur commented.

"You've never heard of writing a letter?" Gaenor asked. "I understand the Cilben post is especially reliable for that sort of thing. I may have a few letters of my own to send. If nothing else, I ought to let my family know I'm alive and well. Even if Chas kept his promise to deliver our stuff to my sister Marlie, the latest she'll know is that we were headed for Gostrina."

"You're right. No need to let them worry anymore than necessary. Well, it's getting late. Too late to sit up all night planning where to go next, especially since we don't have all the information we'll need to decide which way to go."

"It's not all that late," Gaenor disagreed.

"But Grandpapa's asleep," Tallicia pointed out. Gaenor turned and saw that was indeed the case.

"And here I thought that would happen to me first," she said with a quiet laugh. "I think I'd like to stay up a bit longer though and write to Marlie, if there is somewhere I can work."

“Of course,” Tallicia told her. “You’ll find a desk in your room and tomorrow I’ll take you to the post office.”

Three

“So what made you decide to head for the Thimdras?” Tallicia asked Gaenor at breakfast a few days later.

“Well we looked at the list of items you’ve been selling to Sarmuel in Teliodena and there wasn’t anything in there to suggest he regularly casts the sort of spells we’re going to need in Ichtar.”

“I doubt we’re his only source,” Tallicia pointed out.

“Probably not. I know Artur buys from a number of vendors when we’re at home.”

“How about you. Gae?”

“Me too. I just haven’t been adept long enough to think that way. I still think of buying them for Artur to use. I’ll get over that soon enough, I’m sure.”

“I’m sure you will. Oh, I have something for you.” Tallicia handed Gaenor a leather-bound book. “I know it’s a bit heavy to carry around with you, but you have horses now and one book shouldn’t be too much extra.”

“What is it?” Gaenor asked as she reached for the volume.

“A recent history of Cilbe. I didn’t realize just who Senator Arturus was when I met him the other night, but Grandpapa filled me in. I don’t know how much Arturus has told you about his life here in the Empire...”

“Some,” Gaenor replied.

“Well, you’ll find he figures heavily in here during the period about a quarter century ago and a bit before. I thought you might like to know more about the man. Too bad this is so poorly written. Very dry. It was one of my school books when I was growing up. Well, I guess you can always use it if you have trouble sleeping.”

“Thank you. I just wish I had something to give you. Oh wait, maybe I do.” She looked through her purse and pulled out a glassine envelope. “I bought these seeds in Dana. I meant to send them to a friend in Mishanda, along with a bunch of others, but somehow this package didn’t go with the rest. As I recall, these will produce long vines with large pink flowers. They should look nice behind the pool in the southwest corner of your garden.”

“Oh, that sounds nice. Are they native to Firdan?”

“Actually I think they came from Wanlaria, but they were grown as perennials in Dana so they should do well here too.”

“Thank you!” Tallicia exclaimed and the two hugged warmly.

After breakfast, Artur and Gaenor bid farewell to Clortius and Tallicia and took the road northeast out of Wahton. There was a fair amount of traffic on the road that morning; mostly merchants bound for the Thimdra States. They greeted each other as one wagon passed another and extended the same courtesies to Artur and Gaenor. Conversations were rarely very long. It was just a sign that there was little cause for wariness on the Cilben road system. After two hours or so, Artur and Gaenor had pulled ahead of the fastest wagon and began to encounter riders headed for Wahton and points south.

“I know I don’t have to tell you this,” Artur began around mid-day when they were out of earshot of others on the road, “but I’ll say it anyway. We really need to keep quiet about being adepts especially once we enter the Thimdra States.”

“I know that,” Gaenor replied uncomfortably. “I really didn’t tell Tallicia I was adept until after I knew she was Clortius’ daughter.”

“Even so you took a chance, Gae. Not much of one, I’ll admit. Cilbens like to think they are open-minded and cosmopolitan. They aren’t of course. In actuality they are just as provincial as anyone in the world, but they like to think they aren’t, so most Cilbens would hear you say you practice magic and respond, ‘Oh, how nice for you. Good money in it, is there?’ But that still doesn’t stop a few dozen harmless old men and women from having to stand trial for witchcraft every year. The Thimdras are a different matter, however.”

“How so?”

“Cilbens consciously tell themselves that there are no witches. Some even deny magic exists, and chalk it up to foreign superstition. Deep down they don’t believe that; some individuals might, but not Cilbens when taken as a whole, but rather than be seen as superstitious by their neighbors, they pretend they believe it. Thimdrans make no bones about believing there are witches. In fact, while they are willing to buy good luck charms and other magical amulets, they distrust anyone who actually makes them.”

“But those amulets aren’t illegal or you wouldn’t have been able to sell any there yourself.”

“If you’ll remember I sold them to a Gostrinan merchant, who was actually fronting for Sir Manford in Nistor. My amulet sales diminished drastically after Manford died.”

“Now that I do know. I keep the books. Remember?”

“That you do, Gae!” Artur laughed. “Anyway, selling them in the Thimdras is perfectly legal and a good way to make money fast, I’m told. I know I made quite a bit doing that and they went through at least one other merchant before they got there, maybe even more. It’s the manufacture of those amulets, or any other form of practical magic, that is illegal.”

“That’s silly!” Gaenor protested.

“I agree, Gae. Thimdrans wouldn’t, however. In any case my point is that we need to keep our magic to ourselves while we’re in the Thimdras.”

“Are there Customs stations at the borders?” Gaenor asked.

“Indeed there are. We’ll find them at every border we pass through, unless we decide to enter the Parch

and if we do that we'll have to leave the horses behind. I lost a good animal and put it through needless agony last time I tried to ride through the Parch. I won't do it again."

"I wouldn't want to do that either, but correct me if I'm wrong. I assume that the Customs procedure we went through when we entered Gostrina is pretty much the way that sort of thing usually goes."

"You're right. That's pretty much the way it goes in most countries."

"So at one point or another someone is going to ask us what we plan to do in the Thimdras. What do you propose to tell them?"

"Same thing we did last time."

"What? That we're on our way to Es to consult with a colleague?"

"I meant we would tell the truth. In this case we are on our way to Peln because we have business with Geteris Thannisson."

"What sort of business?" Gaenor pressed.

"I rather doubt anyone will be impertinent to ask that sort of question."

"Sorry, I couldn't possibly have heard you correctly. Why wouldn't they ask?"

"Because we are Cilbens, or at least I am and you're certainly dressed like one. Trust me, no petty official in the Thimdras would ever question a Cilben too closely. The Thimdras are client states of the Empire. The Emperor allows the local monarchs to keep their crowns but at the cost of very high tribute. In many cases the Empire has chosen to conquer neighboring countries if there is enough to be gained or if the country is a client that tries to revolt like Colch did when I was in command of the 12th Legion. However, they've found that it's a lot cheaper to allow a client to maintain the trappings of independence while still collecting taxes. It doesn't stop the Empire from stationing a legion or two here either although from what Clortius told us it sounds like most of the Emperor's army is stationed near the Barbarian Kingdoms at the moment. I do wonder what's going on there, but Lusius is probably just pressuring the Barbarian kings for some trade concession."

"Sounds like a lot of trouble just for trade concessions," Gaenor noted.

"That depends on what you're trading for. Most likely it is grain. The Barbarians grow enough grain to feed both themselves and the entire empire with still more left over. The main reason Cilbe has never bothered to subjugate them is the fear that they may destroy their source of grain and without their grain the Empire would fall. Too many Cilbens would be starving."

"I never thought of it that way," Gaenor admitted. "But why are they called the 'Barbarian Kingdoms'? Are they really that backwards?"

"Not really," Artur replied. The term 'barbarian' in Shandi has primitive connotations. Puts one in mind of skin-wearing nomads. Actually the people in the north of the Barbarian Kingdoms do wear furs in cold weather, but to think of any of them as backwards is likely to get you into trouble. In Cilben the term really just means 'foreigner.' When the early Cilben Republic was just starting to expand a thousand years ago or so, the Barbarians were our closest neighbors so being the first foreigners we were aware of they got the name. Later we started using the native names of other peoples in order to differentiate. I

think the name stuck because unlike most peoples in the world they do not have a united nation in the same way we think of it. What they have is an interesting confederation of city-states. Each city has its own king, at least that's what they call them. Most are actually elected officials these days and they all meet at least twice each year to consider all the matters any other nation generally leaves up to its more centralized government."

"Doesn't sound very efficient, only meeting twice a year," Gaenor opined.

"Some of those meetings last for months and emergency meetings can be declared. It may seem odd to us, but it seems to work for them. If nothing else, keeping all those kings busy in their semi-annual convocation goes a long way toward letting the common folk go about their business. At least that is what they claim. The commoners do anyway," he finished with a grin.

"It's no crazier than what you Cilbens call a bath," Gaenor decided. "I never did get used to the frigidarium."

"But it feels so good when it's over," Artur echoed Tallicia. They both laughed and rode on. Three days later they reached the border and as Artur predicted were admitted to Wallen by a bored guard who asked a series of short yes-or-no questions.

"You were right," Gaenor admitted as they rode away from the customs station. "I don't think he really cared how we answered his questions."

"I doubt he did. You'll notice none of his questions could have had wrong answers. Our names, our business in Wallen, how long we expected to stay, I doubt we could have answered in some way that would have bothered him."

"Well we could have told him we were here to kill his king," Gaenor replied.

"Ha! More than likely he would have wanted to join us," Artur laughed.

"Thimdrans have so little respect for their monarchs?"

"No less than the average person, I guess, but they are known for their greed. It's probably an unfair stereotype, but I've never met a Thimdran who wasn't looking for an easy way to get rich. Actually if he didn't think we were Cilben citizens we would have had to bribe him to enter Wallen. The main reason he was so bored was that it would have been more than his life is worth to shake down a Cilben. What's wrong?" he asked, noticing that Gaenor was only giving him half her attention.

"Nothing," she replied automatically.

"You think we're being followed again?"

"I don't know. It's like last time, I never see anyone, but off and on since we left Wahton, I've had this feeling we're being watched. Are you sure the Temi aren't still following us?"

"I doubt it," Artur replied. "First of all, we met Leracus' challenge fairly and won. They won't be after us any longer. Also, they aren't that good. We were always able to spot them when they were stalking us. I'm not saying they couldn't stay out of sight if they wanted to, they probably could, but being seen is part of their tactics. It's intimidation. I've told you many of their targets take their own lives when they know the Temi are after them. They want to be seen. It makes their job easier."

“I guess you’re right. I’m probably just imagining this,” she said at last.

“Maybe not. We’ll both keep an eye out. I’ve never known you to imagine this sort of thing, Gae.”

She looked around again and seeing no one in hearing range asked, “Is there some magical way to be invisible?”

“Not that I’ve encountered, but you would know better than I would. If you needed to be invisible, or at least go unnoticed, how would you go about it?”

“I’ll think about that,” she replied.

A few days later they were most of the way through Candro when she brought the subject up again.

“There are several ways,” she said suddenly.

“Several ways to do what?” Artur asked. He’d been keeping an eye on a dark line of clouds approaching from the west.

“To be invisible,” she replied. “First of all you can create an illusion identical to whatever is directly behind you and hide behind it. The problem is that it would only work from one direction.”

“That could still come in handy if you had to hide,” Artur mused.

“It’s a bit involved too. I’d need a glass rod, a cup of water and at least a minute to cast the spell. If I were in a hurry that might not be fast enough. Another way would involve forming a lens of sorts that would bend light around you so you couldn’t be seen. It’s slightly better than the illusion and would work from a better range of angles, but the only way I can think to work such a thing would take even longer to set up.”

“You could implant it in an amulet,” Artur suggested.

“I could, but if I don’t hold the amulet at exactly the right angle when invoking it the lens will be off kilter and not work for me. The solution I like best is using a spell to implant the notion that there is nothing where you are. It’s a fast spell and doesn’t take much set-up. The only problem is you have to cast it for each person you want to hide from. Well, I’ll keep thinking about it.”

“Think about this, then,” Artur suggested, “If you were trying to counter such a spell, how would you do that?”

“I’ll think about it, but I suspect I would still need to know where the person hiding from me was and that could be even trickier.”

“I don’t like the look of those clouds,” Artur commented. The day had started out bright, sunny and warm, but in the last few minutes a thick line of clouds had approached from over the horizon.

“Storm front?”

“Definitely. The good news is we’ve been going easy on the horses so far so we should be able to gallop for a while. Let’s do so. Maybe we’ll find an inn.”

Riding at a gallop, there was no time for conversation so they rode on until they found themselves looking down at a small town in a tree-lined river valley. Artur signaled to Gaenor to slow down. In the distance they heard a crash of thunder.

“Don’t want to hurt the horses,” he explained, “and I think we can get down there before it starts to rain.” They rode on at a canter. By the time they were on the outskirts of the town the clouds now covered the entire sky and there was a flicker of lightning far off to the west.

“I’ve never seen it this dark in the middle of the day,” Gaenor commented. “It’s almost like night is falling.” The clouds were thick and black. They blotted out most of the daylight and inside the houses they passed they could see people lighting lanterns and candles.

“It will be a bad one,” Artur replied. He spotted a young man picking some vegetable out of the ground in the yard of a small house. Artur greeted him in a language Gaenor didn’t recognize and asked a question. The man smiled and pointed down the street and made a hooking gesture. Artur spoke again, obviously thanking him and said to Gaenor, “There’s an inn about a half a mile ahead and a couple of streets over.”

“Don’t the people here speak Cilben?” Gaenor asked.

“Everyone here speaks Cilben,” Artur replied, “but they appreciate it when you at least try to speak Thimdran. The nobles, of course, insist on using Cilben but Cilbens are an arrogant lot for the most part, especially when away from home, so they aren’t well liked by most folks here about. But if you try to speak in Thimdran they’re always friendlier. At least that’s what I found.”

“So I’d better learn Thimdran quickly,” Gaenor commented, reaching into her purse. She pulled out several items, put a couple back, then whispered an incantation while apparently fiddling with the items she still held. After a minute she put it all away again and said, “So start speaking Thimdran.”

“You like taking chances, don’t you?” Artur replied in Thimdran.

“I thought I was being subtle,” she replied in a pidgin of Cilben and Thimdran. They were now approaching a commercial district with several shops in sight. The road got a bit wider too. Gaenor suspected this was the town’s central market at least on certain days of the week. Markets were only open every day in the big cities.

“Well, I doubt anyone would have noticed, but it would have been best if you had waited until we had a room. Still in this light, I don’t think anyone could have seen what you were doing, but really, Gae, I can’t stress enough how careful we have to be here.”

“Sorry,” she replied contritely. “How much further do we have to go?”

“I think we turn right here and maybe we should pick up the pace a bit. Follow me!” They rose quickly and managed to get through the inn’s stable doors just ahead of the rain. “Good timing!” Artur exclaimed as he turned to see the torrential rain that had just barely missed dowsing them. Leaving their horses with a stableman, they carried their packs into the inn proper.

The inn was actually part of a row of attached wooden buildings and the stable was the building next door. However Artur and Gaenor were able to remain dry because the landlord had put a doorway between the two through their shared wall.

“Ah, good sir and lady,” the innkeeper greeted them, “You’re just in time for the noon meal.” The man was of medium height with mostly gray hair that still showed signs of having been black. He also sported a thick and long gray mustache, the ends of which drooped down. Gaenor learned later that this style of mustache was popular in the more northern Thimdra States. He seemed genuinely happy to see them, although the inn was far from empty when they arrived. “We have a large pot of stewed river eels today.”

“Sounds a bit heavy for lunch,” Gaenor noted.

“Thimdrans tend to make lunch their heaviest meal of the day, Gae,” Artur told her. “The eels sound good,” Artur told the man. “And a pint of pilsner, I think.”

“Very good,” the innkeeper replied, “and the lady?”

“What foods do you usually have for dinner?” Gaenor asked.

“Any number of dishes,” he replied. “Sometimes just smaller portions. Perhaps you would like some cold beef salad? We’ve prepared some for dinner.”

“What sort of beef salad?”

“Thin slices of beef mixed with various greens with my wife’s special dressing. It’s a local favorite.”

“I’ll try it,” Gaenor decided. “With tea, please.” The innkeeper nodded his acknowledgement and rushed off to fill their orders.

“The last time we were forced to take refuge from a storm at least we had Chas and Win for company,” Artur noted as they found a vacant table along an inside wall and sat down.

“I just hope this storm doesn’t last as long as that one,” Gaenor replied.

“We’ll probably be back on the road tomorrow.”

“I doubt we’ll run into Chas here in any case,” Gaenor said a minute later. “He rarely travels this far from Mishanda.”

“I thought he came to the Thimdras occasionally.”

“Medra and Landrela and he told me he’d been sent to Peln once.”

“Peln is only a few days travel from here,” Artur pointed out. “And Win gets sent all over the world. This would be a short trip for him. You know I wouldn’t be surprised to see Win come walking in that door.”

“That would be a rather long coincidence, don’t you think. Especially since the last time we saw him he was on his way to Tindi and was going much of the way over land.”

“Only as far as County Kont,” Artur disagreed. “He was delivering some bit of royal communications there and then planned to board a southbound ship from there. Otherwise what would he have been doing in Omath? To head that way anywhere outside of Mishanda from Misha one should travel the same road that goes through Ander and then turn south in Gostrina.”

"I hadn't thought of that," Gaenor admitted.

"And if he traveled the rest of the way there by ship, he could have easily been back by now or be almost anywhere in the world, so when that door opens in a minute or two..." he let the sentence hang. And in spite of herself Gaenor found she was staring at the door from the stable. Very shortly after the door did indeed open. The man who walked in was wearing clothing that might have been Mishandan in style, but he wasn't anyone they knew. "Gae, you look disappointed," Artur laughed.

She grinned a bit and replied, "You had me going there, but you have to admit it would have been an amazing coincidence."

"Stranger things have been known to happen," Artur shrugged, "and if you're going to run into an old friend in an out of the way place it makes it less of a coincidence if he happens to travel for a living like a herald."

At Artur's words, the stranger turned to look at them and then his face became a picture of surprise. "Excuse me, sir and lady," the man said, "but aren't you Sir Artur the Southlander and Miss Gaenor of Narmouth?"

"We are," Artur replied softly, but guardedly. Being recognized in an obscure inn in Candro was nearly as unlikely as running into an old friend here. "And you, sir?"

"Sir Harlo Renqueau of Dana, sir. Dolphin Vert Pursuivant to Their Royal Majesties Marnoric and Ymanya. We have not met, but I saw you when I attended the coronation a few months ago."

"Have a seat and join us," Gaenor invited him. "How are Their Majesties?"

"Thank you. They prosper and so does the kingdom, thanks to the two of you," Sir Harlo replied. "The word is the ceremony you performed was the best binding in the last couple centuries."

"Flattering," Artur admitted, "but I doubt anyone alive has seen more than one or two others."

"True enough," Sir Harlo agreed, but the previous ones have been recorded and from the descriptions this one was truly a marvel. Sir Gerax admitted to me that you performed better than he ever could have even if he had been permitted."

"That's very kind of him," Gaenor told Sir Harlo, "but I know he never approved of me."

"Are you kidding, Miss Gaenor? You're the one he praises the most, uh, no offense intended to you, Sir Artur."

"None taken," Artur assured him. "Sir Gerax was aware how little practical experience Gae had at that time. It wasn't something we made public, of course. However," he continued in a much softer voice, "I'm not sure if you're aware of the status of our profession in this land..."

"Oh, fully sir," Sir Harlo assured him in an equally soft whisper. "That's why I've been talking in such a round-about manner. So let's move on to less sensitive matters if that will make you more comfortable."

Artur nodded, but at that moment a waitress arrived with their meal. She took Sir Harlo's order for the same as Artur was having and then hurried off again.

“So what other news from Firdan?” Gaenor asked interestedly.

“Marvelous news, I hope. It hadn’t been announced by the time I left, but Her Majesty is fairly certain she is with child. It’s an excellent sign that this should happen so soon after the coronation and the kingdom is ecstatically awaiting the official announcement.”

“Excellent! Our best wishes to Their Majesties,” Artur responded.

“What does one send a baby gift for a prince or princess?” Gaenor mused.

“Something rare or expensive,” Artur responded, “preferably both.”

“We’ll have to find something rare then,” Gaenor decided.

“I was kidding. Actually if you want to send them something unique, try a typical Mishandan baby blanket.”

“Are you sure you’re not still kidding?” Gaenor asked skeptically.

“Quite serious. It’s something no one else they know is likely to send. Sir Harlo, anything else new in Firdan, or her neighbors for that matter? We haven’t been home since before the coronation.”

“I haven’t heard anything of note from Mishanda, but in Gostrina, the king is threatening to expel the Cilben embassy in protest over the incident in Firdan. Personally I don’t think it will really come to pass, but I think he hopes the Empire will make some attractive offers especially since they made some large concessions to both Firdan and Mishanda after the attacks. King Rorric has also launched an investigation concerning the University of Es.”

“Oh really?” Gaenor asked, leaning forward. “What appears to be the problem?” When they had visited the university she had been expelled from the grounds for belonging to the wrong gender.

“A long term problem, I understand, concerning a failure to distribute allocated funds to the Department of Magical Studies. The current Dean is also charged with unfair practices. The final clincher evidently came about a couple of months ago when a visiting lecturer, an adept of high repute, I hear, was ejected from the campus without due cause. The entire department resigned in protest and the departing head of department sent a copy of his resignation to the king.”

“Interesting. Now why should they expel a visiting lecturer?” Artur asked dryly. “Did you get the details?”

“Not as such, no, but... Wait a minute. Don’t tell me you were the visiting adept.”

“Actually it was Gaenor who was thrown off campus, not I, and the entire department consisted of Doctor Haxmire of Kandoe by the time we arrived there. Evidently the Dean had denied the department the right to hire new members for a while. I hadn’t been aware that there were funds involved as well.”

“It’s a university,” Sir Harlo pointed out. “Of course there were funds involved. Any activity involves money. Academic ideals are fine, but if you don’t have money to support them, they won’t appear on your class list.”

“That’s a shame,” Gaenor replied sincerely. “A school should be above such concerns.”

“Why? It’s no different anywhere else. So what brings you to the Thimdra States?”

Gaenor and Artur exchanged a quick glance and Artur replied, “We were visiting a friend in Wahton and now are headed back toward Mishanda. How about you?”

“I’m on my way to Cilbe. I’ve been assigned to the Firdani embassy there.”

“I’m surprised Firdan is still speaking to the Cilben Empire,” Gaenor commented.

“It was a near thing,” Sir Harlo admitted, “but after the Emperor paid some hefty damages and agreed to publicly censure Ambassador Martius and to send a replacement, His Royal Majesty agreed to reopen relations. But I’m surprised you don’t know about that. I understand a large share of the reparations were to go to you.”

“We’ve been out of touch,” Artur replied. “No doubt we’ll learn about it on our return to Misha.”

“No doubt.”

The remainder of the day they spent in idle conversation with Sir Harlo and teaching him the Cilben game of Maelstrom. In the morning when the storm had passed, they had breakfast together and then went their separate ways.

Four

The storm had passed just after sunset and they left the town before sunrise. Looking east in the lightening sky they could see the thinnest sliver of the larger moon, Tars, low in the lightening eastern sky.

“I’ve never seen it like that,” Gaenor noted.

“Like what?” Artur asked.

“Well, you can see the entire disk of Tars, but only a thin sliver of it is illuminated. Very strange.”

“I guess you haven’t been out before sun up very often,” Artur commented.

“Not when I had time to admire the scenery,” she replied.

“Well you can only see it like this when the conditions are right, but it’s not all that rare, really.”

“If you say so.”

“Is someone following us again?” Artur asked. Gaenor was looking over her shoulder once more as they rode.

“Not that I can see,” she replied uncertainly. “Just that funny feeling again. You know I never realized just how good the roads are in Mishanda.”

“We’re off the Cilben-built road now,” Artur explained. “It doesn’t go to Peln so we need to travel on the traditional Thimdran roads. Mud paths really. At least in Mishanda the road builders understand the concept of drainage, I don’t think any Thimdran ever thought it might be a good idea to put the low part of the road on the sides rather than down the middle.”

“So it isn’t just the wagon ruts?” Gaenor asked.

“Gae, it’s still late summer. This is supposed to be the time when the roads are in their best condition. Just be glad we bought horses to ride. We could be walking through the mud.”

“Wonderful thought.”

“What’s that smell?” Artur wondered.

“For a world traveler,” Gaenor replied, “you have some amazing holes in your experience. That’s the smell of rotting garbage. It’s a smell I’ve been noticing practically since we entered the Thimdras. It’s a lot stronger since the rain though.”

“That’s another notion the Thimdrans don’t appreciate,” Artur told her “Trash ought to be hauled far enough away from one’s house that it isn’t smelled. Ah well, we’ll be away from this town soon enough.”

“And near another one in a few hours, dear. They all smell pretty much the same and with the sun coming up today I expect the next few to be pretty ripe.”

“Well, we should be able to conclude our business here and be out of the Thimdra States in a fortnight at the outside,” Artur promised.

“Thank the gods!” Gaenor swore fervently.

When the sun came up Gaenor’s prediction achieved its full potential. They started trying to ride a bit faster through the villages and towns but midway through the next day they stopped in a town near the border of Doldo when they heard a blood-curdling scream. A moment later a woman stumbled out of a doorway. She screamed again, not quite as loudly as the first time, and then fell to the ground.

“Jube!” Artur swore, jumping off his horse and rushing to the fallen woman.

Gaenor caught the reins of Artur’s horse and quickly found a place to hitch both beasts before running to join him. “What is it, Artur?” she asked.

“It may be a form of plague that breaks out here in the Thimdras all too often for my taste.”

“Is there a cure?”

“I know of one way to effect a cure,” he replied grimly. “So do you for that matter.”

“Oh! This is that illness? The one you made all those good luck amulets for?”

Artur replied, “They also have a problem with Bubonic Plague here every few decades and they worked for that as well.” He looked around. People were starting to notice them and were approaching so he whispered his response, “Yes, I think that spell would work on this too. It can be cast directly, of course,

but that would give us away.”

“We can use it to bless something common, like an herbal tea,” Gaenor suggested.

“Good idea. Stay back!” he shouted to the approaching people. “This is a very contagious disease. Best let only trained medical people come near.” His warning did no good at all and the people crowded around the stricken woman.

They were all talking at once, arguing mostly over what should be done next, so Gaenor took charge. “You and you,” she said pointing at a pair of men. “Lift her gently and bring her back into her house.” The others made way for the two men and Artur and Gaenor led them into the house.

The house was one of a line of row houses that Gaenor decided were typical of Thimdran architecture. It was built entirely of wood and two stories tall. The outside walls of this house were painted a light blue, but up and down the row each house was painted a different pale color, mostly shades of blue, green and yellow, but here and there one could see a pink one as well.

Inside they encountered a thick, evil smell. Gaenor’s nose wrinkled in disgust. This was far worse than the garbage smells she had nearly acclimated to. This was the smell of disease.

The walls inside were plastered white with natural wood baseboards and some painted trim where the walls met the ceiling. The plaster of the ceilings had been molded into a repeating geometric pattern that Gaenor found made the all white expanse far more interesting. The furniture was designed with plain lines but decorated with intricate wooden inlays and the floors were made of wooden planks set on the diagonal to the direction of the front hall.

However, all was not neat and organized. Two chairs in a sitting room had been knocked over as had a vase full of flowers all of which now lay on the floor in a puddle of water. Surprisingly the vase had survived the fall.

“Pardon me, my lady,” one of the men who had helped carry the woman inside, “but Mistress Romena doesn’t live alone. Her husband should be around somewhere.” Just after those words passed his lips, there were the sounds of something hard falling upstairs and then some softer sounds of something moving and a great moan.

She ran with the man upstairs and found another man thrashing about on the floor of a bedroom. He had evidently lost the contents of his stomach all over the floor and the stench in the room was horrendous. Gaenor rushed to open the window then turned and called “Artur! Up here. Hurry. What’s his name?” she asked the man who had come up the stairs with her, “and yours too, for that matter?”

“Uh, I’m Morliam. His name is Frewric,” he replied. Steps could be heard approaching.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Gaenor of Narmouth. Oh there you are Artur. Another victim, it seems. Morliam, why don’t you check for anyone in the other rooms while Artur looks at Frewric?” Morliam nodded, happy to get out of the bile-scented room. “Anything you can do?” she asked Artur after Morliam left.

“We can cast the spell directly, if we work quickly. This is definitely the plague so common around here, see those dark purple splotches. I suspect he was exposed first. Oh, I sent someone for the local healer.” he replied softly. “You know the ingredients. Do you have them in your bag?”

“No, all that stuff is packed deeply away in one of the saddle bags. I’ve only kept a few small items in my purse since we crossed out of the Empire. I’ll get them.”

“Better yet, see if you can use the kitchen to enchant some tea as we discussed. Be careful, though.”

Gaenor nodded and ran out the door. Outside there was a crowd forming. She reached into the saddle bag and pulled out a flat leather case and rushed back inside again. She found no one in the kitchen and she opened the case and started pulling out spell tools. *Good thing*, she thought, *that almost none of these items look particularly magical*. She knew that some adepts preferred to use spell tools that had been designed to look mystical to the layman. The rod of rose quartz Sir Gerax had given Artur in Dana was such a tool. While the tool he normally used was a plain rod of perfectly transparent stone, this one was carved with a series of faces running spirally down its length. The workmanship impressed Gaenor; quartz was incredibly hard to carve. Fortunately it wasn’t something she needed now. It was more useful for divination magic.

Instead she pulled out a small piece of ash wood, two silver coins, a phial of distilled alcohol and a set of wooden slats that she put together to form a small box. She looked around the kitchen and found a canister of tea from Gostrina, if the label was accurate. Then she went to work.

The first thing she did was to light a fire in the stove and to put a kettle, already filled with water, on to boil.

Next she filled the wooden box with tea, closed it and put her right hand on the box. She quietly muttered an incantation that identified her intention that the spell she was about to cast would be placed on the contents of the box, this invocation lead directly into the amulet spell, part of which involved placing the two coins on top of the box and a much longer incantation, during which she picked up the piece of ash and made some symbolic passes with it. By the time that was finished she put the wood down, picked up the two coins and opened the box again. The amulet spell was cast. Now she could cast Artur’s spell that should cure the illness the people here were suffering from and it would use the tea inside the box as an amulet. The version of the spell Gaenor had used set the spell trigger as the act of drinking the tea. Finally she set out casting the real spell. It was more incantation than ritual, using the ash again, this time as a symbol for life. The spell however went on to further identify that life as the killing disease itself. Finally she picked up the alcohol, identified it as an antiseptic and put a drop of it on the wooden piece. As she did so, all the items involved in the spell, including herself, began to glow a bright and vivid red. She put the wood and alcohol down on the counter she was working on, quickly reached over to the box and closed the lid again. The glowing stopped abruptly, telling her she had completed the spell and locked it up in the amulet. She put away all the spell tools except the box, which she emptied back into the tea canister and stirred the tea up well. She knew even one leaf would be sufficient to cure the disease, so mixing it up with what was left in the canister would spread the beneficial effects rather than diluting them. Then she dismantled the box and put it away and after a few moments of thought took an empty phial out of the leather case and filled it with tea. It would help if they had to treat more victims.

By then the water in the kettle was boiling so she found a tea pot and put a few spoonfuls of tea in it, then filled it with hot water and let the mixture steep while she searched the cabinets for tea cups. She also found a wide wooden serving platter on which she put several tea cups then went back to the front room.

When she got there Mistress Romena who had passed out in the street was coming around, so she gave her a cup of the tea and told her, “Drink this. It will make you feel better.” She also insisted the three people sitting around her have some as well. When she was certain they had all had at least one sip, she took the rest upstairs. Artur and Morliam had undressed Frewric, cleaned him off and moved him to

another room. Gaenor gave a cup to Morliam and helped Artur get some down Frewric's throat. There was only one cup left so she gave it to Artur, who took a sip before handing it back to her. Gaenor drank what was left and put the tray down.

"Mistress Romena seems to have come to," she told Artur.

"Good," he replied. "She may not actually have been infected yet. She may simply have fainted after finding her husband so sick."

"Where is he?" they heard a man say from the stairway.

"Must be the healer," Artur guessed. "Over here!"

The door opened and they saw a tall, very thin, completely bald man carrying a large leather bag. His clothes were entirely black, which Gaenor guessed had to be hot and uncomfortable here in the subtropics.

"Who in Jiub's name are you?" he demanded in the local dialect.

"Strangers," Artur responded dryly in Cilben. The healer's eyes widened a bit. "We were just passing through when we heard this man's wife scream. I hope you don't mind if we stopped to try to help."

"Uh, no, your lordship. Of course not."

"Good, now perhaps you can look at your patient here. We cleaned him up a bit and tried to make him comfortable. Miss Gaenor there made some tea that we hoped might help. Would you like some?"

"Tea? No that wouldn't make any difference, although getting him to drink fluids couldn't hurt, I suppose. Oh, this is bad."

"What's wrong?" Gaenor asked.

"This man isn't likely to survive the night. By the time these purple bruises appear, it's usually too late to do much of anything. Nine out of ten who reach this stage die. Still, nothing to do but try to make him comfortable. He'll be running a high fever," the healer said conversationally and reached out a hand to touch Frewric's forehead. "Hmm, he is warm, but not as hot as I'd expect. Keep an eye on him and use cold compresses if his fever gets worse. I should look at his wife, although she didn't seem too bad when I arrived." He left the room.

"Frewric's fever is better isn't it?" Gaenor noted.

"Yes, the... uh tea works quickly," Artur replied after glancing at Morliam.

"Maybe I should find a place to stay tonight," Gaenor suggested.

"Good idea," Artur agreed, making his reply in Shandi. "They will be less likely to try to cheat you on the price."

"Really?"

"Oh yes. They're like Gostrinans like that. Women here aren't allowed to have their own money so on

those occasions they have to buy something, most business men give them the best deal they can because they know they'll only be beaten if they get cheated. When a man does business with another man, however, everything is subject to bargaining."

"Then why have you been making all the arrangements every night?"

"Sometimes I enjoy haggling, Gae."

Five

Artur and Gaenor returned the next day to see how Frewric and Romena were doing. "I'm feeling much better, thank you," Romena told them. "So is Frewric. Healer Mithael is with him now, but he's looking much better."

"Good!" Gaenor said enthusiastically. A few minutes later the healer came back down the stairs.

"You're back are you?" he asked suspiciously and without any preamble. "Just what did you give my patient."

"Just a cup of tea," Artur replied.

"Well he seems to be nearly recovered now. That must have been some great tea. Do you have any more?"

"A little," Gaenor admitted. "But it's just normal Gostrinan black tea."

"Well, I have more patients I'd like to try it on, if you don't mind."

"Of course, but you surely don't think tea has suddenly gained some hitherto unknown curative powers, do you?" Artur asked.

"Let's find out, shall we?"

He led them to another house a few blocks away. Here there were nearly two dozen sick people all showing the dark purple bruises of the disease. They entered one house on which quarantine signs had been attached. Inside the stench was incredible, but Artur and Gaenor made their way to the kitchen and used the small bottle of tea to make a large pot.

"That's all the tea we have," Artur pointed out, "although I see some more on the shelf here. Should we have Gaenor brew some more, do you think?"

"Yes, very well," Mithael decided. "She may do that while you and I bring what we have so far to the patients."

As soon as she was alone in the room, Gaenor took out her spell tools again and enchanted the entire canister of tea. For a moment, while everything was glowing she thought she saw the kitchen door move out of the corner of her eye, but when she looked up there was no sign of movement so she chalked it up to nervousness and completed the spell, replenished her small supply of enchanted tea and made another large pot.

“Amazing!” Mithael said an hour later after they had finished bringing tea to all the nearby plague victims. “I hadn’t realized how much magic could do.”

“How?” both Artur and Gaenor started asking.

“Please don’t insult my intelligence!” Mithael replied. “Tea? Well that was a good way to spread a magical cure, I suppose. It would fool most people, but I trained at the Academy in Cilbe. I know full well what natural medicines will do and how quickly they work. Don’t worry, I won’t denounce you as witches, but you probably should be moving on before some superstitious fool starts crying, ‘Witch.’”

“Thank you,” Artur replied and shook the man’s hand.

Gaenor thanked him too and added, “You’ll find that all the tea in this can will be efficacious no matter how much you dilute it. So long as you have at least one leaf per pot.”

“That should go a long way,” Mithael commented. “Thank you. What about the can in Mistress Romena’s and Master Frewric’s house?”

“That’s already a bit diluted. I only treated about half of it and then mixed it back in. I didn’t think of using the canister itself as a container for the spell until I got here., but this should be more than enough for everyone in town. And you can always put a drop of the infusion in a large batch of some medicine you might normally use. The magic doesn’t really care about that you see.”

“So it’s qualitative, not quantitative?” Mithael asked.

“In this case, yes,” Gaenor replied. “Some spells are quantitative, but as it happens this isn’t one of them. Careful use of this tea should keep you going for years. After that...”

“Here,” Artur offered. “Give me that notebook of yours.” Mithael handed a small booklet to Artur. “This is our home address in Mishanda. If you ever need more tea, just write.”

“Or anything else you want to use as a carrying agent,” Gaenor told him. “It doesn’t need to be tea. That was just what I had to work with. Our original plan was to use an exotic herbal infusion.” Mithael nodded and a few minutes later they were back on the street.

“Artur,” Gaenor said as soon as they started riding away, “We’re being watched, and this time I don’t mean some mysterious feeling. Look at the people around us.”

She was right. Dozens of people along both sides of the street were staring at them. Until now no one had paid them any attention as they rode through the streets of various Thimdran towns.

“It doesn’t look good,” Artur agreed.

“I didn’t mention it earlier, but when I was enchanting the tea today, I thought I saw the kitchen door move a bit. When I looked it seemed normal again and when nothing happened I decided it was just my imagination like all those times I thought we were being followed.”

“Hmm, it looks like this time you weren’t imagining it. Just keep riding nice and easy. Maybe if we keep moving they’ll let us pass.”

"I doubt it," Gaenor said tightly. "Look ahead. We seem to have an unwelcoming committee."

"Did you say 'unwelcoming committee?'" Artur laughed softly. "Well, I guess that's what they are at that. All right. Let's keep moving at this pace, but when I give the word, we'll get these beasts to gallop for all they are worth. Ready?"

"Whenever you are."

The crowd had built up to one hundred and there was an ominous muttering coming from them. They also started closing in on the two riders. Suddenly Artur shouted, "Now!" and they both rode off as fast as their horses could carry them.

The sound from the crowds grew from a mutter to a scream and several men came close to pulling them down off their mounts. They rode for several blocks with the mob running behind them.

Suddenly Artur had the mental picture of turning at the next block. There was no one in sight, so he and Gaenor made the turn. Another mental image suggested they ride up an alley between a row of houses and another row of similarly built, although smaller carriage houses. A door opened in front of them and a red-haired girl waved them in. They rode in and dismounted.

"Thank you," Gaenor said to the girl, who was just closing the wide doors.

The girl nodded and found something for them to rub their horses down with.

"I'm Gaenor and this is Artur," Gaenor introduced themselves. The girl smiled and held up a silencing finger to her lips. Outside they heard the sound of horses riding up the alley followed by the footsteps of a crowd of people.

Quietly together in the darkened carriage house Gaenor, Artur and the girl rubbed down the beasts. After the sounds outside disappeared the girl slipped out of the carriage house and soon returned with some fodder for the horses. Then she beckoned to Artur and Gaenor and led them to the house just across the alley.

They entered directly into the kitchen. Unlike the other Thimdran houses Gaenor had been inside of, this one was immaculately clean and the only odor was the smell of a stew cooking on the stove. There was an older woman in the kitchen, her dark red hair shot with gray.

"Verika?" she asked the girl. "Oh, this is what you meant. That was very dangerous," she tried to scold the girl. "Ah well, if the crowd thought they were witches, I can understand why you would want to help them." Then she turned to face Artur and Gaenor. "Hello. Welcome to our home. I am Gerynda of Medra and this is my daughter Verika. You may have noticed that she cannot speak."

"Gaenor of Narmouth and this is Artur the Southlander," Gaenor replied. "I did notice, but she communicates in another way, doesn't she?"

Gerynda looked very nervous. "You won't tell?"

"We won't," Artur assured her. "You won't turn us in, will you?"

"Of course not," Gerynda said instantly. "Verika speaks in pictures, sort of."

“You mean she can send a picture directly into someone’s mind?” Gaenor asked. Gerynda nodded.

“Fascinating!” Artur declared. “A projective telepath. We used to discuss such things at the Academy, but so far as I know, there aren’t any recorded cases of one. Verika? Would you send me a picture.” And instantly he got a picture of a field of bright yellow flowers. “Thank you. They’re lovely. That is a beautiful way to communicate.” Verika smiled.

“Verika can only speak pictures to one person at a time, though,” her mother explained.

“Such a pity,” Artur replied.

“Maybe not really,” Gerynda replied. “Our neighbors would see it as witchcraft. We’ve had to move a few times because people discovered our secret. It usually happens because Verika tries to help someone, but she’s a good girl and still tries anyway. Why don’t we go to the dining room? Midday meal is almost ready and you won’t be able to leave until it gets dark anyway.”

Gaenor helped Verika set the table and Gerynda gave the pot of mutton stew to Artur to carry. She carried in a tray bearing a large loaf of a thick-crust rye bread two carafes of beverages, four cups and a bowl filled with a green salad.

“I’m sorry I don’t have much in the way of variety to offer,” Gerynda told them, “but we weren’t expecting company. I think we have more than enough for the four of us, however.”

“I’m sure this will be fine,” Artur told her.

Gaenor nodded her agreement and added, “It smells wonderful!”

“We have wine and fruit juice. Please help yourselves. So tell me,” Gerynda asked as they sat down, “what did you do that so upset my kind, understanding and generous neighbors?”

Between bites Gaenor explained about the plague and how they had enchanted a supply of tea with a health spell that would cure the plague.

“Ah yes. I thought it might be something like that. You shouldn’t have done so while anyone could see you,” Gerynda advised.

“I didn’t know I was being watched,” Gaenor admitted ruefully.

“Well, the miraculous cure by itself would have been enough to make people curious. It’s a good thing you’ll be leaving or they’d blame you for every misfortune that’s occurred for the last twenty years. Verika and I have been through that and all she can do is speak in pictures. It’s not like she is capable of reading minds, well, not very well.”

“So she does read minds?” Gaenor asked.

Gerynda replied, “She sees the same sort of mental pictures she projects.”

“What an interesting alternative to speaking,” Gaenor commented, “and considering that she is mute...” she broke off suddenly because Verika looked disturbed. At first Gaenor was afraid they had upset the girl by talking about her that way but it appeared the girl was staring at something in the corner of the dining room. “Verika? What is it?” she asked.

In response Verika pointed and projected a picture of a Vari sitting on the floor in the corner. Gaenor recognized the Vari immediately. “Cornellya? What are you doing here? And why can’t we see you?” As she watched, the mental image of Artur’s godchild stood up quickly and started for the door. “Don’t run off!” Gaenor told her, getting up to stand between the door and her friend.

Seeing she was found out, Cornellya became visible for all to see. She was young for a Vari adult, being a few years younger than Gaenor, although that was difficult for some one not born to the Vieri to tell since all but the very oldest Vieri had smooth dark skin and straight black hair. Her long pointed ears protruded slightly through her hair, but her delicately formed dark, almond-shaped eyes looked very worried.

“What are you doing here?” Gaenor asked wonderingly. Artur asked her the same thing but in his case it was a demand. The last time they had seen her, she was waving goodbye as they left the Vieri village at the center of the Parch.

“I followed you,” Cornellya admitted.

“Why?” Gaenor asked.

“I’m going to Ichtar with you,” she replied.

“You certainly are not!” Artur told her firmly. Cornellya looked rebellious so he continued. “Do you have any idea how dangerous it is for you here? Didn’t you see the trouble we got in and you aren’t even human. The people here would come after you on sight!”

“They didn’t see me,” Cornellya pointed out and added, “You didn’t either.”

“Verika did though, didn’t she?” Artur countered.

“She saw my mind.”

“Yes she did. What if someone else has that ability and thinks you’re a monster? Cornellya, you’re my goddaughter and I love you, but it is far too dangerous for you here. When we leave here tonight we’re taking you directly to the border of the Parch and you are going home.”

Cornellya continued to look rebellious and more than a little hurt.

“Promise me you’ll go back to the Parch,” he demanded. She glared at him. “Promise or I’ll drag you all the way back myself. Do your parents know you are here or Ksenya? I didn’t think so. Now I’ll have your word or we’ll leave right now and I don’t care who tries to stop us.”

That got Cornellya’s attention. In spite of her stubbornness she understood how dangerous it would be for Artur and Gaenor to go back outside just now. “I’ll go back to the Parch,” said at last. She looked miserable to have to say that, but Artur just nodded and returned to the table.

“Are you hungry, dear?” Gerynda asked Cornellya. Cornellya nodded shyly. “I’ll get you a plate. Verika, darling, please set another place for our guest.”

Verika got up and fetched another plate and spoon, while Gaenor made room on her couch for Cornellya to sit and Gerynda went back to the kitchen to get another cup.

“How have you been managing to eat before this?” Gaenor asked.

“A little here, a little there,” Cornellya replied. “A little hunting and once I sneaked a little from your saddle bags, but mostly I would wait until everyone was asleep and just sneak into the kitchen where ever you were staying.”

“Were you always so close at hand?” Gaenor asked as Gerynda returned and served Cornellya.

“Sometimes, especially when we were in a town or city. I didn’t want to lose you. Mostly, though, I stayed back a ways. The spell I used is good but it has its weaknesses and if you look carefully you can see when I’m moving.”

“Ah ha!” Gaenor exclaimed suddenly. “I thought I was going crazy, thinking we were being followed.”

“Yes,” Cornellya nodded. “I thought you saw me several times. The biggest mistake I made was to follow you into the bath in Wahton. The water looked so good that I got in too, but the water and the steam upset the spell. They made me partially visible and I had to get back out in a hurry. Fortunately nobody caught me there.”

“It was a bit steamy in the tepidarium anyway,” Gaenor pointed out. “You would have been hard to see anyway.”

“You took too many chances,” Artur told her sternly.

“Yes, I did,” she agreed readily, “but I won’t make those mistakes again.” Artur looked at her harshly and she added, “I’m going back to the Parch, remember?”

“So long as you remember that,” he replied.

They finished their meal and after cleaning up they sat or reclined together in the dining room. Verika and Cornellya were mutually fascinated with each other and were reclining together on one of the dining couches just looking into each other’s eyes.

“Gaenor?” Cornellya asked, without taking her eyes off Verika, “do you have a piece of quartz?”

“Artur has a rose quartz rod. Why?” Gaenor responded.

“What about a musical instrument?”

“Are you kidding? Where would I keep it?”

“Nevermind,” Cornellya replied distractedly, “a blade of fresh grass would serve. I also need a cup of water, a pinch of dust and a flame; a firebrand or a candle.”

“What are you planning on doing?”

“Wait and see,” Cornellya said with a smile.

“Here, I’ll help you,” Gerynda said and together she and Gaenor went into the kitchen. “Maybe I’d better go outside for you. Where is that quartz rod you spoke of?” Gaenor told her which saddle bag it

was in. "Okay. Why don't you fill a cup from that pitcher there and there are some candles in that drawer."

"What about the dust?" Gaenor asked.

"I should be able to find some in the carriage house." Gerynda replied and then went out the back door.

Gaenor picked up a cup and filled it as Gerynda had suggested from a large ceramic pitcher. Then she rummaged through the drawers Gerynda had pointed at and found the candles on the second try. She chose a fat white one and picked up the cup just as Gerynda returned with Artur's and Gaenor's spell implements, a long blade of grass and a pottery shard with some dirt on it. Together they returned to the dining room and place the items on the table for Cornellya who was still smiling at Verika.

Finally, Cornellya broke her locked gaze with Verika and considered the tools before her. She picked them up and rearranged them a bit then considered the rose quartz rod.

"Pretty," she said. "Are there special properties for pink quartz?"

"It's used in divination mostly," Gaenor told her. "Very powerful for that."

"Good!" Cornellya replied. "Just what I wanted. I've never seen pink quartz before." Then she started singing in the Old Tongue. Singing wasn't necessary, Gaenor knew, but the Vieri usually sang their spells. Gaenor found it lovely and was only sorry that her own voice was not as pretty as the Vieri's or she would have tried singing her spells as well. Artur had told her repeatedly that she did have a nice singing voice but as he could not carry a tune in the proverbial bucket, she failed to believe him.

When Cornellya finished singing she put the quartz rod down and said, "Yes. That's what I thought." Then she cast a long and involved spell using the ancient four elements; water, earth, air and fire, using her own breath for the air. In many ways it was similar to the binding spell Artur and Gaenor had cast on the king and queen of Firdan, but the intent and content of the spell were very different even if the form was nearly the same. Just as in the binding spell, the adept and subject were enveloped in a bright aura that changed color as each element was used. When she was done with the four elements, however, Cornellya and Verika were still encased in a vivid purple aura. It was then that Cornellya picked up the blade of grass and used it as a reed between her thumbs as she clasped her own hands together. She blew across the blade of grass and it made a sort of squawking noise. She was able to change the pitch of that sound and somehow managed to make the sound into a haunting, alien-sounding melody. She continued to play as the aura slowly faded and she did not stop until it had disappeared entirely.

"It think that may have been one of the greatest spells I have had the honor of casting," Cornellya said as she put the blade of grass down.

"What did you do?" Gerynda asked curiously, but before any of the adepts could answer her some strange hoarse sounds came from Verika's mouth.

"Gently, carefully," Cornellya told the girl, with a serene smile. "You need to learn how to speak now. It will take a while, but I think you'll manage. Start just by enunciating sounds." She demonstrated by half singing, "Ah... Oh... Ooo..." Verika tried to duplicate the sounds with only partial success. "Very good," Cornellya told her. "It will take a lot of practice, but you'll need to go slowly so you don't hurt yourself."

"She'll be able to speak now?" Gerynda asked, amazed.

“With training and practice, yes,” Cornellya replied. “She already knows the language, that’s the hard part. But now she needs to learn how to make the sounds. The rest will need patience on both of your parts, of course, but she’ll be speaking before you know it.”

“Oh gods bless! How can we thank you?” Gerynda asked, tears flowing from her eyes.

“It is I who should thank you,” Cornellya replied, “for your hospitality, generosity and understanding. There are few in this land who would take the three of us in,” she indicated Artur and Gaenor with a gesture, “the way you have. It was the least I could do to repay you.”

“But, now we may never need to run away from our neighbors again. Your gift is priceless.”

“As is your own,” Cornellya told her. “The Way insists that I give within my ability just as you have given within your own.”

“So she may never need to speak in pictures again?”

“No, she should never stop that. It is a gift and one should never cast a gift aside.”

Six

Gerynda fed them one more time after the sun had set and they rested until it was nearly midnight to make sure the streets were dark and that most people would be home. Gerynda gave them directions for the fastest way out of the east end of town and she and Verika bade them farewell. Verika tried to say, “Goodbye,” but her vocals skills were still rudimentary and it sounded more like “Koo bah.” Still, it was understandable and it delighted her mother.

Cornellya rode behind Gaenor and a few minutes later they were out of the small town and headed due east. Artur set a hard pace and they passed through two other villages before the sun rose. Around noon, Artur came to a halt in a small forested area. Gaenor came up beside him.

“Are we taking a break?” she asked.

“The horses need a rest,” he replied. “Let’s pull off the road here and we can rest until nightfall.”

“We do not have to travel at night,” Cornellya told him. “I can go unnoticed if you want to sleep at an inn.”

“We are not going to take the chance,” Artur retorted. “You must be used to sleeping outside by now.”

“I am used to sleeping in barns and stables by now, godfather,” she told him tartly. “It was very nice sleeping on a bed this afternoon.”

“Well, by tomorrow you can start getting used to sleeping in the desert again.”

“You sound angry,” she noted accusingly.

“I am angry,” he admitted. “Right now we’re heading away from where we are trying to go because you

decided to play ‘Follow the Leader.’”

“You don’t have to go with me all the way back to the Parch. I walked here and I can walk back.”

“I have a responsibility to make sure you get home safely.”

“And you think I’m going to walk straight to the village from here? If I go nearly exactly south, well, a degree or two to the east actually, I’ll be headed straight for the village and traveling across nearly half the total length of the Parch. Even a Vari can’t do that unprotected without risk! My best bet for getting home safely is to head back to Wahton and then to the village or else cross the short axis of the desert to Gostrina until I’m as close to home as I can get.”

“You have a point,” he admitted. “But if you parallel the edge of the desert you can always duck back in for safety if you are seen. So I’ll still see you to the edge anyway.”

It was late the next day when they finally got to the edge of the Parch. Cornellya hugged Gaenor warmly, kissed Artur on the cheek and then headed toward the desert.

“Watch out for the blue lichen,” Artur warned her.

“I know, godfather. I know,” she told him wearily. She walked to the edge, shrugged and then stepped back into the great desert. After a few more paces, she turned and waved to them and then continued to walk away.

“So are we going to go now?” Gaenor prompted Artur.

“No, we’re going to watch until she is completely out of sight. Then we will ride hard for an hour or two to make sure she can’t just turn around and follow us again.”

“If you say so.”

“You don’t agree?” Artur asked.

“Oh, I agree she’ll be safer at home, I just don’t think she won’t be able to find us if she wants to. That is one determined Vari there.”

“Then we’ll just have to make it harder to follow us than it is worth to her.”

“Sorry,” Gaenor told him a few minutes later.

“What for?” Artur asked.

“I can’t think of any spell that will instantly transport us halfway across the world in an instant. Because that’s what I think it would take to keep Cornellya from being able to follow us.”

“Maybe,” Artur chuckled and gave her a hug. “That’s why I was being so harsh to her. I wanted to make sure she realized this is not some school outing we’re on. Someday we’ll go back to the village and I’ll apologize to her. In the meantime I’ll know she is safe and sound.”

“All right,” she agreed.

Another twenty minutes later Artur decided that Cornellya was far enough away and they remounted and rode northwest.

"I wonder if maybe we should have brought Verika with us," Artur wondered the next day as they rode toward the Doldo border.

"Where? To Ichtar?" Gaenor asked.

"Her ability as a projective telepath might turn out to be an important asset."

"It cuts both ways, dear," Gaenor pointed out. "The ability could also give us away at a key moment. Remember this is the only way she has ever communicated. It's going to be instinctive to her for a long time to come. But I'll admit that Verika's another one I'd like to meet again. I think she's going to grow up to be a remarkable woman. Artur? What's wrong?"

Artur had ridden close to the side of the road where a broadside had been tacked to a nearby tree.

"Maybe we should head back to the Parch ourselves," he said distractedly.

"Why? What does that say?" Gaenor asked as she dismounted to get closer to the page of thick paper. She read it and commented, "It's nice to be wanted."

"Funny, Gae," Artur replied seriously. "I really didn't expect the people of that town to take us so seriously. Chase us down in town and burn us, yes that would be typical, but posting broadsides to the trees and offering a reward for us..."

"And they aren't even offering all that much for us. It's rather insulting, isn't it?" she asked.

"Around here that's a fairly high reward. I've seen posters for murders that didn't post that high a reward."

"Life is cheap in the Thimdra States," Gaenor noted. "It's not a very good likeness. We may not be recognized."

"It's not a great work of art, Gae, but I'd recognize you from the sketch."

"You're right, of course, but we don't want to head back toward the Parch, though I'll admit we already know that no one is watching that border, but it's too far out of the way and we've backtracked enough already."

"We can't go through customs. We're close enough to the border that they must have posted some of these there too."

"We'll just have to think like smugglers," Gaenor told him brightly.

"I am happy to say I know absolutely nothing about smuggling and I really hope you don't either," he replied stiffly.

"Oh, Artur!" she laughed. "I love you dearly, but sometimes you are just too upright. Of course I've never been a smuggler, nor has anyone I know, but the basics aren't all that hard to deduce. The idea is to sneak something into or out of somewhere without getting caught. Now sometimes that's done with a

hidden compartment.”

“Gae, my horse doesn’t have a false bottom I can hide in. At least I hope not,” he concluded unable to keep a straight face.

“Mine might,” Gaenor replied laughing. “It would explain where she keeps putting all those oats. Seriously though, the alternative is not cross the border where there is a customs booth.”

“The border between Candro and Doldo isn’t a very long one,” Artur informed her. “There are customs booths on every road that crosses it.”

“Which argues that there must be a lot a smuggling going on,” Gaenor concluded “All we need to do is figure out where they cross over when they don’t want to be seen.”

“Not quite. If there is a regular smuggler’s route then customs will know about it and even patrol it occasionally, but you’re close. We need to figure out where we could sneak across if we had to.”

“You mean if we were wanted to be tried as witches?”

“Yes, that will do for a hypothetical situation,” Gaenor laughed again. Then she reached for the poster.

“What are you doing?” Artur asked her.

“Souvenir,” she replied simply as she gently pried it away from the tree’s trunk.

“Gae, it’s a wanted poster, not a portrait done by a street artist on the Great Bridge of Misha.”

“I don’t have one of those either,” Gaenor replied. “And it will be a great conversation piece. I can’t wait until Marlie sees it!” She took the paper and placed it carefully in the leather case that held their spell tools, that being the only place she could keep it flat.

They slept that night in a copse a league further on rather than risking staying at an inn. The next day they rode parallel to the border until late afternoon when they found what looked like a narrow path going through the woods toward the border.

“Let’s try this,” Artur suggested. It may only lead to someone’s house, but it will be near the border so maybe we can sneak across here.”

“Looks good,” agreed Gaenor. “And I can see wheel tracks here, so we know wagons or carriages or something come through here sometimes, at least.”

They rode down the road for a mile until they came to the edge of the forest at the top of a hill overlooking a series of fields. The sun was just setting and Artur suggested they wait there until after dark.

“We’ll have the moon until after midnight,” he told her. “That should be enough light to see by until we get back on the road.”

“Where is the road?” Gaenor asked. “Back to the east?”

“No, off to the northwest. See that hill on the horizon. It may be something else but that break in the

trees looks like a road to me.”

“Me too,” she agreed.

There were footsteps close behind them. They turned to see a man standing near by. He was tall and had dark-skin, long curly black hair and dark brown eyes. He was dressed in a Cilben style tunic but his wide leather belt and boots had come from other lands. They were of a style entirely unknown to Gaenor.

“Ah!” the man said jovially, although the friendliness did not quite reach his eyes. “Fellow travelers? Is this your first time through the Doldo Pass?”

“You call this a pass?” Artur asked, a smile at the corner of his mouth.

“We all call it that. It’s a name that serves to stand for the area,” the man shrugged. “When you meet a traveler and talk about the Doldo Pass, he’ll know where you mean. Tomasi Kaguru of Maxform,” he introduced himself, offering his hand.

“Artur the Southlander,” Artur replied, grasping Tomasi’s hand. Tomasi pulled him to his feet. “And this is Gaenor of Narmouth.”

“And the prettiest traveler I’ve met to be sure,” Tomasi nodded offering his hand to Gaenor as well, although she stood up on her own before shaking it. “But you’re no Southlander,” he said to Artur. “Southlanders are as nearly as dark-skinned as I am. You look more like a Cilben to me.”

“I was born in Cilbe,” Artur admitted, “but when I settled down in Mishanda the locals thought I was from Pahn or Sorvohn and the sobriquet stuck.”

“So your name must have originally been Arturus, eh?” Tomasi concluded. Artur nodded. “There was once a great general named Arturus in the Empire, I’m told. Seems like half the young men there are named Arturus these days. Must have been quite a man. Quite a man. I imagine your father named you with him in mind, eh?”

Artur shrugged and said “Something like that.”

“Mishanda, eh?” Tomasi continued. “The mystical land of opportunity, I hear. The roads are paved with gold and adepts fly through the skies, right?”

“Not quite,” Gaenor laughed. “The roads outside the cities and towns aren’t paved at all, and I’ve never seen an adept fly at all.”

“Next you’ll be telling me the Great Bridge of Misha is nothing but a plank of wood across a small brook,” Tomasi replied sourly, then thought of what Gaenor had said, “Ah, but you’ve seen adepts!”

“A few,” Gaenor admitted, somewhat distracted as she tried to work out a flying spell.

“You’re adept!” Tomasi shouted. “Both of you. That’s why you’re using the Doldo Pass.”

“Shh!” Gaenor tried to quiet him.

“Oh, don’t worry about that. Travelers don’t turn each other over. And there’s no one close enough to

hear anyway and even if there was he'd be too busy trying to stay hidden until after dark. Those posters don't do either of you justice, you know, but I guess they're close enough."

"You keep saying 'travelers,'" Gaenor made it a question.

"Some prefer to say traders," Tomasi replied. "The self-deluded call themselves 'merchant princes,' and customs agents from Aston to Nundro call us smugglers, but in Maxforn we use the word traveler, though we don't just mean people who have something to sell. So we will 'travel' together for a bit. I in my wagon and you as scouts on horseback. It's a fair plan. I like it," he finished.

"You've been through this pass before then?" Artur asked.

"Of course," Tomasi replied. "It is simple as can be. You'll see."

Artur and Gaenor were ready to move as soon as it was fully dark but Tomasi held them back.

"Not yet, my friends, not yet," he said. "Right now traffic in the pass is as heavy as in Cilbe on the Emperor's birthday. We'll wait for a while and have a light meal, oh but what am I thinking? I'll be right back." He hurried off into the woods and in a few minutes drove up in his small one-horse wagon. "There. Now we'll be ready to move, but for now..." he beckoned them to follow him around to the back of the wagon. He lifted up a large canvas that covered the entire back of the vehicle to reveal a well-finished box amid a mass of much rougher packing crates. He opened the box and pulled out a fresh loaf of bread, a wrapped wedge of cheese and a hard sausage of some sort. "This is simple fare, I'll admit, but good travel food. We'll eat better tomorrow, but for now you must try this sausage. I've carried it with me all the way from Maxforn. Keeps well in this box, don't worry. We have adepts in Maxforn too, you know. Not many and they are very expensive, but I'm very, very good and I had this box enchanted. Sometimes you have to go a long way without an inn and other times the food isn't so good, but this box keeps whatever I put in it as fresh as it was when I put it there. Here," he tore off a chunk of bread and gave it to Gaenor along with cheese and sausage, "you'll like this!" Then he gave some to Artur before serving himself.

"It's good!" Gaenor told him enthusiastically. He nodded, mouth full, and grinned.

When they were finished eating he put the leftovers back into the chest and fixed the canvas back down again.

"Look!" Tomasi said. "See those lights down there? Dondo Customs. They'll catch a few travelers and then go home for the night. Then we can slide right on through as though the pass was our private road."

"Why do they carry lanterns?" Gaenor asked. "Can't the travelers see them?"

"Not until it is too late. The grass in the valley is tall so what we can see from up here is hidden."

An hour later they saw the moving lanterns move away from the wide area Tomasi had pointed out as the most traveled pathways.

"Not yet," he told them. "There are still some of them out there. You'll see."

He was proven right when nearly another hour later that they saw more lanterns being lit and then moving away. Just to be safe, they waited another hour and then finally started down the slope.

“Yes,” Tomasi said about halfway down, mostly to himself, Gaenor thought, “it should be a safe passage now.”

They spread out so that Artur and Gaenor rode ahead of Tomasi and somewhat to either side. The wagon creaked quite loudly and Artur worried that it might give them away. He rode back to tell Tomasi, but the man just shrugged. “Wagons creak,” he replied. “It’s the nature of the things. Why else do you think we waited so long? If we were walking the Doldo Pass, we could have done it in broad daylight. And if Tars was full that might have been the only time we would have done it. They stay out all night sometimes during a full moon, but he’ll set soon and it will be very dark indeed.”

“Will it be safe for us to travel without light?” Artur asked.

“When that happens, I’ll light a lantern myself and you and the girl can move in closer. It won’t be too much longer after that before we’ll reach the road, then it will just be a short jaunt to an inn where we can get rooms for the night.”

“Can’t say I look forward to waking the landlord this late,” Artur commented.

“Not to worry. He plays host to travelers on a regular basis. He’ll still be up when we get there.”

Much to Artur’s surprise, Tomasi’s predictions turned out to be entirely accurate and sometime after midnight they found the inn.

The inn was not part of a town or village but was pretty much a settlement all its own. It was similar to inns Artur and Gaenor had stayed at in Mishanda in that it was a collection of buildings, but the construction was typically Thimdran; all wood and the buildings were all attached.

It was larger than Artur would have expected in such a remote location. It might be frequented by the nearby farmers, but more likely its primary income came from men like Tomasi. Artur made a mental note to have Gaenor ward their room and wondered just how bad the food and drink would be.

It turned out he didn’t need to worry on that count. They feasted on an excellent roast of lamb with fresh steamed vegetables and potatoes. Tomasi was so happy about having accomplished yet another successful crossing of the Dondo pass that he bought a bottle of a dark red wine from North Medra.

After the late meal, Artur and Gaenor went to sleep, although the taproom looked like it would be active for hours yet.

Seven

“There you are!” Tomasi called as Artur and Gaenor entered the dining room around midmorning. “Were you trying to sleep the day away?”

“Have you even been to sleep?” Gaenor asked.

“Sleep? I must have at one point or another,” Tomasi replied.

“Don’t listen to him,” a passing waitress told her. “he went to sleep last night right after you two did and just woke up ahead of you.”

“It’s a sad thing,” Tomasi said theatrically, “when the love of your life betrays you.”

“Hah!” the waitress laughed mercilessly. “Kahwah?” she asked Artur and Gaenor.

“Black, please,” Artur replied.

“Tea?” Gaenor asked.

“We have a little,” the waitress replied, turning toward the kitchen and added over her shoulder, “I’ll bring you a pot.”

“I recommend the omelets,” Tomasi told Artur and Gaenor. “They are the specialty of the house. Best in all the Thimdras and the Thimdras are known for omelets.”

They took his advice and when the waitress returned it was omelets all around. Artur and Tomasi got theirs with cheese and bits of a spicy local sausage, but Gaenor decided on cheese with onions and green peppers.

“So where are you off to next?” Tomasi asked as they ate.

“We’re on our way to Peln,” Artur replied, “then we’ll probably head back to Mishanda.”

“Ah,” Tomasi replied with obvious sadness, “Then we’ll be parting company soon. I’m bound for Rolta this trip. There’s a fork in the road just a mile or so to the north. I’ll be going right and you left. But what business do two adepts have in Peln?”

“Shh!” Artur hissed. “A little louder maybe. Not everyone heard you.”

“Nobody in this inn cares about that sort of thing,” Tomasi said dismissively.

“We’ll keep that quiet anyway, if you please, just in case,” Artur said firmly.

“As you will, traveler. As you will. But you didn’t answer my question.”

“We’re going to consult another adept,” Artur replied softly after looking carefully around.

“In Peln? What would he be doing in Peln?”

“Hiding, I would think,” Artur replied.

“No doubt! Now if you were headed for Kimn, that I would give more credit to.”

“Kimn?” Gaenor asked. “Why there?”

“Well, I’ve not been there myself, but I’ve heard they use magic there like we drink beer.”

“And you heard that the streets of Misha were paved with gold too,” Gaenor pointed out.”

“Hmm. Point taken,” Tomasi admitted. “Still I’ve heard more than once that the folks of Kimn use magic in everyday life. I think that’s why the Thimdrans hold them in such low esteem. So if you don’t find what

you're looking for in Peln, you might try a voyage on the Thimdra Sea."

"We'll keep it in mind," Artur told him. "Thank you, Tomasi."

Tomasi shrugged, "It's the least I can do for a pair of fellow travelers."

After breakfast, they rode with Tomasi until they reached the fork where the road to Peln split off from the highway that went on to Rolta and Medra.

"Good travels!" Tomasi called in farewell.

"You too, Tomasi Kaguru!" Gaenor called back.

A few minutes later Gaenor asked, "This is a major road? I've seen cow paths in Mishanda that were better thought out." The highway was wide and straight. This road, no different from the back roads they had been forced to travel, was barely wide enough for two wagons to pass in most places. Here and there the road was only wide enough for one, in fact. From what Gaenor could see, there didn't appear to be any reason for the road becoming that narrow, it just did. In other places the road became wide enough for several wagons to ride side by side, but only because in wet weather the road had become muddy and wagons had been forced to drive around mud holes. It was drier now but the ruts had never entirely smoothed out. In still more places the road had traveled over soft earth that had been worn down over the years, leaving dirt cliffs twenty and thirty feet high on either side of the road.

"No argument. The highway we were on was built by Cilben engineers. I don't think this road was built at all. Most likely it just happened."

"Many of the Mishandan country roads just happened too," Gaenor pointed out.

"Perhaps, but those roads have been intentionally improved and maintained over the years. Sure, the roads get muddy in the spring when the snow melts, but then there are people who go out and get the roads back in shape. On the major roads it's the kingdom's responsibility to maintain them, but on more local roads the landowners handle that. Do you remember Mahk of Palernos?"

"The young lord whose horse threw him when he stepped in that pothole outside the house in Wahton," Gaenor replied, "which indirectly started all this whole adventure."

"That's the one," Artur nodded. "Technically the house isn't in Wahton. We're just outside the town's limits so that land belongs to me. The responsibility to repair the road there was mine so naturally it was also my responsibility to make amends. If I hadn't been adept, I'm sure the case would have ended up in court with me the loser, but adepts are given special consideration in Mishanda and young Mahk was so pleased that he didn't have to destroy the horse that instead I came off, in his mind at least, as a savior. Hmm, maybe this is my punishment."

"What?"

"For not filling that hole when it first happened," Artur clarified.

“Oh come now. It hasn’t been so bad,” Gaenor replied, completely overlooking the fact that they had almost died several times. “You got to see your old friend Clortius.”

“We’re not done yet, Gae. We’ve just started really. Let’s see how we feel about it in a year or two. Anyway, the roads. In the Thimdras, once you get away from the towns, there is no one who takes responsibility for road maintenance.”

“Except for the highway,” Gaenor added.

“Yes. That’s maintained by the Empire. It’s part of the treaty that makes the Thimdrans client states. Actually, if you think about it, the whole area is a bit slipslod. Compare the average Thimdran town we’ve been in to Merahk’s Landing after the storm last spring.”

“Merahk’s Landing smelled better,” Gaenor opined.

“Indeed it did. I’m not sure if your average rustic Mishandan understands that many diseases breed in garbage, but they certainly understand that the garbage smells bad and take pains to keep it far from their homes. Here, it’s something they’ve decided they can get used to.”

“Gerynda’s home was quite clean,” Gaenor pointed out.

“Yes it was,” he agreed. “Quite unusual for a Thimdran. Still, I suppose there must be exceptions. I wonder what part of the Thimdra States she grew up in.”

“Does it make a difference?” Gaenor asked.

“I’m not sure, but if it was one of the towns on the border of the Cilben Empire or maybe up near Aston, the local attitudes toward garbage she grew up with could well be very different.”

“Or maybe she just likes the smell of a clean house,” Gaenor suggested.

They moved slowly through Doldo after several days of wet weather set in that afternoon. However, while their travel speed was cut in half, it was otherwise uneventful and a week later as the rain ceased and the skies cleared, they arrived in Peln.

Peln was the smallest of the Thimdra states and held only one large city that went by the same name. Peln the city stood proudly on the shore of the Thimdra Sea. It was also the biggest commercial port in the Thimdra States. As they rode down into the town, they could see the masts of a dozen small ships in the harbor. These ships were not as large as the ocean-going vessels Gaenor was used to seeing, but they were larger than the fishing schooners that regularly landed at Narmouth.

“So that’s the Thimdra Sea,” Gaenor said, looking out across the vast expanse of water. “Is it really salt water? The air doesn’t smell like it is.”

“No,” Artur replied. “It’s fresh water, fed by run-off from the mountains of Aston and melt water from the polar ice cap mostly, but I think it’s called a sea because it is so large.”

“I’ve seen it on maps. Seems a bit large to be called a lake,” Gaenor agreed.

“It is at that. So should we find a place to stay first or go find Clortius’ adept?”

“An inn first,” Gaenor replied without hesitation. “Peln looks like a big city and I imagine we’ll have a time finding this man. As I recall his name is Geterix?”

“Geteris.” Artur corrected her pronunciation. “Geteris Thannisson. What Clortius couldn’t be absolutely certain of was where we would find him. Clortius buys from him through an agent, but he thought that we would find him in the harbor district.”

“Then we should definitely find an inn first. That may take some time too and if we don’t find Geteris Thannisson right away, we’ll need a good central location to base a search from.”

“All right. I’ll be guided by your wisdom,” Artur laughed.

They continued on into town and after asking several passersby, they took the recommendation of a peace officer and got a room at an inn with a green lion on its sign just off the Central Market. The inn was similar in construction to the one they had stayed at to escape the storm in Wallen and most others in the Thimdra States, just another building in a long row of buildings, but it was larger and grander than the others. One difference was that buildings in this part of town were twice as tall as any construction they had observed in the Thimdras so far and the blocks were larger so the building went deeper away from the streets. The inn had two large dining rooms and a separate bar room which fascinated Gaenor and the upper three floors were filled with bedrooms for guests. The upper floors were covered with cherry wood planks but the ground floor was all mosaics in the classical Cilben style and the walls were covered in vivid naturalistic murals on assorted themes. Their room was on the fourth floor, but while the long climb up the stairs was more than either Gaenor or Artur were used to, it also had a private bath which was a luxury Gaenor had not experienced elsewhere in their travels.

She convinced Artur they could put off looking for Master Geteris until morning and spent the hour before dinner soaking in the tub until the hot water had gone lukewarm at best. Then it was early to bed for Gaenor for whom the large featherbed called with the voice of a siren. Artur stayed up late in the bar room, drinking beer, playing darts and talking to others, trying to find Geteris by word of mouth.

“Any luck?” Gaenor asked the next morning.

“Too much luck, I think. I found five men who knew who I was talking about and got five different sets of directions.”

“Maybe we’re too close to Medra,” Gaenor suggested.

“What?”

“Remember how Chas told us the national sport of Medra was giving bad directions to strangers? You may have been talking to a bunch of Medrans.”

“I suppose they might have been winding me up at that,” Artur considered.

“That’s why I asked the inn-keeper’s wife,” she told him, then described the information she had gotten. “It’s not an actual street address, but it is in the Harbor District like Clortius told us. Does that match up to any of the directions you got last night?”

“No, but I’m tempted to try it first anyway. The inn’s hostess is less likely to give us bad information than the patrons.”

“It would cut into her business,” Gaenor agreed.

It was a long walk down hill to the harbor and shop windows proved to be distractions along the way. “Gae, we can stay an extra day or two and go shopping if you want, but first let’s find this Geteris character.”

“Just looking,” Gaenor replied with a chuckle, “but shopping sounds like fun. And we need to think about a wedding present for Ibbet.”

“Pawlen likely hasn’t even proposed yet,” Artur protested, “and I’m not certain we can afford an acceptable present for the future queen of Mishanda. It’s not like you can present her with a set of new cookware.”

“That’s why we need to start looking now,” Gaenor countered. “I just wish I’d thought of this back in Wahton, or Dana for that matter.”

“Or you could just make her something, something very special.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, but I’m sure you’ll think of something. Well, this is Water Street, can’t be too much further.”

“That depends on how far we need to go to find North Water Street,” Gaenor replied. However it turned out that North Water was more of a convention than an official street name and everything north of Main Street was North Water and everything to the south was South Water. A few minutes later they found a sign that read “Geteris Thannisson, Purveyor of Exotic Goods.”

“That was almost too easy,” Artur commented.

“Purveyor of Exotic Goods?” Gaenor asked. “Doesn’t sound like... uh... what we’re looking for.”

“It’s a Thimdran euphemism for magic.”

“I thought magic was illegal here.”

“No, merely practicing magic is illegal. The use of magical items produced elsewhere is perfectly legal, although it isn’t at all respectable, so they use words like ‘exotic.’ The average Thimdran is embarrassed to be seen going into a shop like this, which may account for why Geteris is down here in the Harbor District.”

“Why is that? A better chance to sell to foreigners?”

“Exactly. Well, we aren’t accomplishing anything here on the sidewalk. Let’s go in.”

Geteris’ shop was a cluttered and dusty affair with all sorts of arcane-looking artifacts on the walls and in display cases. It was also dark, the only available light coming in through the dirty glass windows that faced the street. A bell rang as they opened and closed the door and Geteris entered from the back room. He was a short, portly man who wore a dirty gray robe unlike anything Gaenor had seen in life, but thought it might be similar to the get-ups described in the fairy tales she had grown up hearing.

“Yes? May I help you?” he asked in an oily voice.

“Geteris Thannisson?” Artur asked. The man nodded. “I was sent here by my friend Clortius Tallician Vaenar in Wahton.”

“Ah! Is Clortius ready for another shipment?”

“Not exactly,” Arturus replied, “but we’re looking for adepts and...”

“Shh!” Geteris hushed him, suddenly stricken with panic. “Do you know what could happen to me if my neighbors thought I did more than sell these things?”

“Then you are adept, good!”

“Not good!” Geteris shouted instantly. “And I am not an adept!”

“Then why?”

“I tell my foreign customers I produce all my own amulets, talismans and charms because it allows me to charge a premium price. As a mere reseller I wouldn’t get half what I charge and that would put me out of business.”

“Terrific,” Artur commented sourly.

“Artur,” Gaenor called. “Did you look at these amulets?”

“What? Oh, Jube!” Artur swore, but was interrupted by Geteris going into his sales pitch.

“Ah! The Lady has a discerning eye! Yes, these comprise the core of my entire business. They are the finest luck charms in the world, produced by the wizards of Es.”

“Actually these come from Mishanda,” Gaenor informed him.

“I assure you, these are Gostrinan in manufacture,” Geteris told her.

“I guarantee you they are not. You see, I know the adept who enchanted them.” Her glance at Artur spoke volumes.

“You?” Geteris asked Artur.

“I’m afraid so,” he replied, staring at the display of wooden artifacts.

“But the man I bought them from told me they came from Es.”

“A brown-haired man named Giraud?” Artur asked. Geteris nodded. “I think he may have been from Es,” Artur explained, “but he was actually an agent for a gentleman merchant in Nistor who died a few years ago. I haven’t seen Giraud since. Actually I always wondered why he didn’t go into business for himself. Maybe he found another source or went into some other business. Anyway, I used some small wooden carvings by a local artisan in Narmouth for the bodies of the amulets and those aren’t good luck charms. Not really.”

“There’s no such thing as a good luck charm,” Gaenor added.

“So these are all fakes?” Geteris asked. “I always did wonder...”

“Oh they’re really enchanted,” Artur assured the man, “but not for luck. This bunch here is enchanted with a generalize health spell. Very effective against plague. Did you buy the so-called love potions too?”

“I did, but ran out of them long ago,” Geteris told him sadly. “Any chance of getting some more? Direct from the source and all?”

“Don’t bother,” Artur told him. “No magic can compel love. It was just a mild stimulant. I used to sell it as a spring tonic in Mishanda. It’s something I learned how to make in Cilbe.”

“I know the stuff you mean. Thought it smelled familiar, but it wasn’t enchanted at all?”

“Why bother?” Artur countered. “These charms work well enough though and if you sell them for what they are, they may sell better.” At that moment someone else, a teenaged boy came into the shop, looked around and saw Gaenor and Artur, blanched and left just as quickly.

“I get a lot of that,” Geteris commented. “People, especially kids, feel ashamed to have to turn to magic for help in whatever they do.”

“Sorry,” Artur apologized. “We’re getting in the way of your business. Perhaps we should get out of your way.”

“He’ll be back,” Geteris replied, shaking his head. “It’s possible he might have lost his nerve even if you hadn’t been here.”

“If you aren’t adept,” Gaenor tried another approach, “Maybe you can direct us toward others.”

“I wish I could. You two are the first adepts I’ve ever met knowingly. Until today I thought all my wares came from Gostrina. Still that’s not all bad. Mishandan magic is more highly prized, probably because it comes from so much further away. No, I only deal with agents and other merchants who buy from adepts, or maybe from others who buy more directly. I don’t suppose we could come to a private arrangement...”

They stayed there the rest of the morning discussing Geteris’ business needs and eventually gave him their home address.”

“It may be a year or two before we get home,” Artur explained, “or maybe just a few months, but once we get there, we’ll be glad to create whatever charms are within our capabilities.”

“Excellent!” Geteris exclaimed. “You can count on hearing from me.”

“Oh! One more thing,” Gaenor began, “Do you know anything about adepts on Kimn?”

“Kimn? Not really. There are all sorts of stories about the witches of Kimn, but whoever they really are, they rarely trade with anyone in the Thimdras. Try asking someone in or from Aston or Barbaria, they could tell you something true. All I could offer are fairy tales.”

They left a few minutes later. During their slightly late midday meal Artur started chuckling suddenly.

“What’s so funny?” Gaenor asked.

“All that searching just to find the adept who was supplying Clortius. I never expected to learn it was me.”

“I think you may have flooded the market,” Gaenor noted. She continued at Artur’s puzzled look, “It’s been years since you sold any of those trinkets, but he still has a fair number in stock.”

“Not compared to the number I sold,” Artur replied. “When his source dried up I suspect he raised the prices on my amulets. That’s why he still has some in stock. We’ll probably be hearing from him again.”

“I thought you didn’t care for that side of the business.”

“It’s a bit less objectionable now that I’ve been able to talk to the end seller and tell him the truth about the amulets.”

“All right,” Gaenor agreed. “It’s not like it takes much time to run off a batch and I worked out a way to mass-produce them years ago.”

“You did?”

“It was not a big deal, just a matter of applying the Law of Sympathy in a different way. At the time we didn’t have an application for it. It’s nice to know it wasn’t a waste of my time, though. So where do we go next?”

“Well, this afternoon, and tomorrow maybe, I figure I ought to make good on my promise to take you shopping. Peln may be the best place to do that in the Thimdras and if you’re still looking for unusual plants for Ibbet, I understand there’s an interesting nursery on the way out of town.”

“When did you learn that?” Gaenor asked.

“This morning, while you were talking to our hostess, I was talking to our host.”

Gaenor’s eyes widened a bit just before she lowered them and whispered, “Thank you.”

“After that, of course,” Artur continued, “we need to move on. I had thought of going to Kimn to follow that lead Tomasi gave us, but after talking to Geteris, I think it sounds like a long shot.”

“I tend to agree,” Gaenor nodded. “And we shouldn’t go chasing every story we come across or we’ll never get started and that...”

“...would be disaster,” Artur finished for her. “Yes. Besides we ought to be able to put a team of five adepts together in Misha.”

“And maybe find someone in Mita too,” Gaenor added. “It is on the way back to Mishanda after all.”

“The school in Mita is new and only has Doctor Haxmire and his former student on the faculty.”

“It’s been a few months and the school’s founder had been looking for other adepts. By now they may have several.”

“We’ll see,” Artur said. “And even they may have others to recommend to us. Five adepts, hmm?”

“That shouldn’t be so hard to accomplish,” Gaenor scoffed. “You and I make two. We only need three others.”

“We’ll see,” Artur repeated. “I wouldn’t mind having a few extras on our team. What we’re proposing to do is very dangerous and I’d hate to get there and find we were one adept short.”

Mita

One

Gaenor said she was ready to continue on the next morning, but Artur insisted they take an extra day off to relax.

“Gae, we’ve been on the move a long time now and have an even longer road ahead of us. One more day won’t make a difference either way, so we’ll take a day off, maybe have a picnic on the city commons if you don’t feel like doing any more shopping. Then tomorrow morning we’ll have a nice leisurely breakfast and hit the road once more. Next stop will be Mita on the far side of Gostrina.”

Gaenor agreed, secretly happy not to have to do anything in particular for a change. In the end they did do a bit of shopping. Although it was mostly window shopping, Gaenor found a book full of recipes from Cilbe that fascinated her. Artur promised to help her with the unique Cilben system of measures when it came time to try some of the recipes out.

Finally, they left Peln the next day after stopping at the plant nursery Artur had mentioned. There Gaenor spent well over an hour considering plants until Artur pointed out they had no way to safely transport a living plant, so instead she bought seeds for a number of exotic flowers and sealed them up in a special pouch she had enchanted the previous evening so they would stay fresh until she could deliver them in Ander, although she confided to Artur that she had purchased extra packets of two of them for their own house in Narmouth.

“I’m surprised you didn’t buy anything for Lady Relle,” Artur commented later that day when at last the City of Peln was entirely out of sight.

“That’s because I bought her a gift in Wahton. We were there for several days after all, and Tallisia and her friends showed me around.”

“So what did you choose for Relle?”

“I bought several yards of silk in that astonishing shade of purple that seems to be so popular there. I think it will go well with her hair and eyes.”

“It’s called Noble Purple,” he informed her.

“Really, then that makes it especially appropriate. Why is it called that?”

“There was a time, a few centuries ago when it was very rare. The source of the dye was a secret of the natives of the Menawii Islands, a small tropical archipelago far out in the Ocean Sea. It was later learned that the dye was made from the inner shell of a certain type of clam.”

“Like a quahog?” Gaenor asked, mentioning a type of clam she was familiar with.

“It’s a similar species, although you may have noticed that the purple color has a bit more red in it than quahog shells do. Anyway, when it was still a secret, it was so expensive that only the very rich could afford it and Cilbens, being what they are, made it illegal to wear anything of that color unless you were of a certain rank.”

“What a silly idea!” Gaenor laughed.

“It gets sillier, Gae. Soon it was decided that rank should be used to determine just how much of the color one could wear. Members of the Equestrian rank, what Mishandans call knights, could wear stripes of a certain width while senators could wear wider stripes. The Emperor, of course, could wear as much as he wanted. Any way all that ended centuries ago, but it continues to be a very popular color and cloth that color still costs more than any other.”

“Is it more expensive to produce than any other.”

“Not especially. Saffron yellow is more expensive to dye, but not as popular so the finished product doesn’t command as great a price.”

“Hmm, I’ll bet saffron yellow would go well with the Noble Purple.”

“You’ve been traveling too long, Gae!” Artur laughed. “It’s a popular combination in some parts, but not exactly in keeping with Mishandan fashion, not that I’ve noticed anyway. The people in Archatu are particularly fond of that color combination possibly because they grow so much saffron there.”

They left Peln and traveled through Landrela without incident. The weather stayed fair and the road remained passable. The local geography had metamorphosed from the extended coastal plain on the eastern edge of the Thimdra Sea to wide rolling hills. Commercial crops also switched from grape vines and root crops to fields of barley and wheat with the occasional dairy farm.

Temperatures for the last week or so had cooled off to what Gaenor thought of as nice and comfortable, but as they traveled the days were growing constantly warmer and more humid.

Their second day in Rolta, they stopped early when they reached the junction of the road to Gostrina and the Cilben highway that ran the length of the Thimdra States. There was a large caravansary there and Artur knew they would not reach the next inn on the Gostrina Road before nightfall.

“I’m just as glad to stop,” Gaenor admitted as they approached the junction of the two roads. “The way the weather has turned so sticky I miss the bath in Wahton.”

“You’re in luck then,” Artur told her jovially. “There’s a Cilben bath here at Junction.”

“Is that the name of this town?” Gaenor asked.

“It’s not a town,” Artur replied. “Not really. What we have here is a collection of businesses mostly

based on servicing travelers. The greatest part of it is the caravansary itself, but other merchants have set up shop there as well. I've met merchants who have stopped there, sold all their wares and bought entirely different ones for their trip back home, without ever having to deal with individual shopkeepers like our friend, Geteris. I wouldn't be surprised to meet Tomasi while we're here, he did say he was bound for Rolta and this may have been his destination. On the other hand, it's quite likely that he has been here and gone already."

"It might be nice to see him again," Gaenor noted.

"I wouldn't mind seeing him again, but then I also wouldn't mind not seeing him again, Gae. He's not the most trustworthy man I've met."

"He seemed pretty open," Gaenor disagreed.

"For a smuggler and probable thief, he was friendly enough," Artur retorted, "but that wasn't what bothered me. After serving in the Senate I know the difference between a noble and a pickpocket can be quantified by the amount of money in his wallet. What did bother me was that he is the sort of fellow who talks and talks and talks but rarely ever actually says something.

"There are two easy ways to keep your business private. One is to remain silent and the other is to distract others from it by talking about almost anything else. Tomasi uses that second method."

"He didn't have to help us through the Doldo Pass," Gaenor pointed out.

"No he didn't," Artur admitted, "and like you, I appreciated his assistance, although it was a fair trade. We acted as lookouts for him. Had we been stopped by customs agents, he may well have managed to get away.

"It's a fallacy that there is honor among thieves, but I think that Tomasi is an honorable man by his own lights. The trick in dealing with him, of course is staying in an area in which his sense of honor coincides with your own. However, there are worse characters in the world and we were lucky he was the one who found us. Another man might have used us for decoys or turned us in after we were in Doldo."

As they approached the caravansary, Gaenor spotted a tall pole festooned with bronze medallions and a long red pennon near the top, blowing in the stiff breeze. The very top of the pole was decorated with a wreath of oak leaves within which was a symbol she knew was for the Cilben number twenty-three.

"What's that?" she asked Artur.

"That," he replied tightly, "is the standard of the Cilben Twenty-third Legion."

"Bad news?"

"Maybe not. I knew they were stationed here in the Thimdra States, but I don't see a lot of legionaries yet. It could just be that whoever is in command is using the Junction as a headquarters. In a way it's surprising we haven't seen a lot of Cilbens here so far, but then I know a lot of men have been pulled out of the area to stand against the unrest in the Barbarian Kingdoms. Well, no helping it, let's go on in. It's not like the Emperor has an arrest warrant out for us."

It was too early to eat after they secured a room in the inn and the room was just barely big enough for them to sleep in, so Artur and Gaenor went into the tap room. Gaenor carried the thick notebook that

she kept of her magical studies, having convinced Artur that it was a safe enough activity even in the Thimdra States since it was written entirely in Shandi.

“What are you working on at the moment?” he asked, taking a small sip of the dark ale he had ordered.

“Just some interesting ideas I’ve had lately but not taken the time to write down. In a sense all this riding around has been really good because I’ve had a lot of time to think and what I’ve come to realize is just how little I really know about,” she hesitated and looked around before whispering, “magic.”

Artur laughed. “If there’s a true expert in this world, Gae. You’re it.”

“Hardly!” she disagreed. “There are any number of... people in the Village who know more than I do and then there are many who have gone on to do post-graduate work that I’ll never have the time to read.”

“I’ll give you the fact that the wise among the Vieri have some centuries of experience over you, but didn’t you notice how closely they listened to you when you started discussing theory with them. For all their experience, you taught them things they never knew. You may have learned some new tricks from them, but they learned so much more from you.” Gaenor looked skeptical. “You don’t believe me? My master, Borritt, Kseniya’s mate, told me the subject was static in the Village. Until you arrived there had been no new advancements in the field for over a millennium. By the time we left the members of their Council of the Wise were going without sleep in their studies of your new ideas. I’ve never seen them so excited and I lived with them for two years. I’m surprised Kseniya was able to break away from her studies long enough to see us off. That may be why Cornellya was able to sneak off after us. I doubt she could have if the others hadn’t been so distracted.”

“I’m not so sure she decided to follow us on her own, Artur,” Gaenor said thoughtfully, “but even if she had, who would have stopped her if she insisted on going?”

“The laws of their society aren’t the same as our own, but you could be right. As for the post-graduate adepts, don’t be so sure they know more than you do. Your thesis shook up their world too. Remember what Haxmire told you? He thought your work was post-doctoral. They may know things you do not, but your own work, being creative, will keep them struggling to keep up for decades.”

“If that’s the case, none of us know very much,” Gaenor replied at last. “Just look at a few of the ideas I’ve written down so far.” She handed the notebook over to him. There were two pages of hastily written notes, as though she couldn’t wait to get it all down on paper. “I never even thought of this stuff before and yet it’s so basic.”

“Basic? Gae, I’ll admit that I can barely follow this. Oh, it looks good enough, but I don’t see what practical applications we can make of it.”

“Neither do I yet,” Gaenor admitted, “but it’s a basic property of magic and from this I’m seeing so many other properties that naturally follow. We’ll need to prove it all by experimentation of course, but... Artur? Do you know those men?”

Artur followed her gaze and saw a pair of Cilben decurions staring at him. He raised his glass toward them, but they quickly averted their gaze and studiously finished their drinks. Two minutes later, they got up and left the tap room.

“That doesn’t look good,” Gaenor worried.

“Let’s remain calm,” Artur told her. “We only think they know me. For all we know they think I’m some spy from the Barbarian Kingdoms.”

“That could be worse,” Gaenor pointed out.”

“Not really. I can prove who I am easily enough and even if they really did recognize us there isn’t a lot they can do. I told you before there’s no warrant on us so the worst that can happen is Girdecus and his son will learn we still live. They will eventually anyway, so why worry about it?”

“They could hire the Temi against us again,” Gaenor suggested.

“No, actually they could not,” Artur told her confidently. “The Temi will not accept any job that goes against our interests ever again, at least they won’t if Leracus keeps his word and I believe he will. Honor is the most important commodity among the Temi. He won’t go against his word under any circumstance.”

“Leracus only speaks for the Ridec clan,” Gaenor pointed out. “Will his word be honored by the other Temi clans?”

“There are only two such clans among the Temi,” Artur told her. “There are the Ridecs and the Dectar. They aren’t really clans the way you might think of them. A more accurate word in Shandi is sodality. Basically, the way their society works is that a Ridec may not marry another Ridec, nor may a Dectar marry another Dectar, in the same way you would never marry a brother. Ridecs marry Dectars and vice versa.”

“They never marry outside the Temi?”

“They might,” Artur allowed. “I don’t know enough about them to say, but suffice to say that anything Leracus promises will be honored by the chief of the Dectar clan as well and by extension by all Temi. Of course, I suppose it is always possible that Leracus has not yet spoken to the Dectar chief yet, but neither of those decurions were Temi, so it’s a moot point.”

“How do you know they aren’t Temi?”

“Temi are not allowed in the Legions. Their existence in the Empire is quasi-legal at best.”

“Yes. I remember you told me that in Dana. So could they be arrested on sight in the Empire?”

“No, but neither are they allowed to become citizens either. They are at best resident aliens within the Empire, officially, that is.”

“And unofficially?” Gaenor prompted him.

“Unofficially they are every bit a part of Cilben society. They are the ones who are called on to do the dirty jobs that Cilben honor will not allow citizens to think about seriously. It’s a strange irony. Cilbens often stand on their honor, using it to justify all sorts of actions. The Temi live by theirs. I once heard that it is a Temi proverb that a Tem without honor is dead. I never found out if that was literal and if so whether he killed himself or the others did it for him.”

They were interrupted at that moment when a young Cilben legionary strode up to their table and saluted

in the cross-chest Cilben manner.

“Senator,” the young man began, “General Oportus Narsian Gracco sends his compliments and invites you and your lady to dine with him this evening.”

Artur replied, “Please tell General Oportus?” he paused to see if he guessed which name the general used.

“General Narsian, sir,” the soldier corrected him politely.

“General Narsian, then,” Artur repeated with a nod. “Please tell him we will be delighted to join him this evening. What time did he have in mind?”

“At sunset, sir.”

“Oh good,” Gaenor said, folding up her notebook. “I have just time enough for a trip to the bath.”

“If you like, sir, lady, I would be happy to escort you to the General’s quarters.”

“Why don’t you meet us both at the bath, then,” Artur suggested. The legionary nodded and saluted Artur once more before walking off.

“Who is this General Narsian?” Gaenor asked as they both headed toward the local bath.

“I’ve never met him, but I know his family. Equestrian rank, well respected, or were while I was in Cilbe. Some of them may have been promoted to the Senate since I left, I understand there’s been a large turn-around since Emperor Lusius ascended to the throne.”

“Why is he inviting us to dinner, then?”

“Boredom, probably.” He replied. “We’re out in the middle of nowhere and I am technically of senatorial rank. Are you worried? Don’t be. Narsian may be an exception, but his family was never particularly friendly with the Girdecans. They didn’t go out of their way to be at odds with them either, but that was only good sense.”

“So you think he just wants to entertain a Cilben notable?” Gaenor asked. “I don’t know, those decurions seemed rather excited when they were watching us.”

“Not to worry. We have a certain advantage they are not aware of. Just keep a couple key spell tools with you tonight if you’re nervous.”

“Heh,” she chuckled, “I always do.”

“I know.”

General Oportus Narsian Gracco made his headquarters at the Junction in a large square canvas campaign tent. The tent was made of sand-colored cloth, trimmed with dark blue and red. It had a long,

segmented ridge pole connected to vertical poles that had also been built to come apart into manageable lengths with still more vertical poles, only man-high, along the perimeter of the tent's roof. Walls could completely enclose the structure but in the warm weather, walls could be dropped for better ventilation. When Artur and Gaenor arrived three sides of the tent had been raised for the evening leaving the side facing them open. One quarter of the tent had been walled off internally and Gaenor decided that must be where General Narsian slept.

A table had been set for six and three officers were obviously talking shop with the general.

"Senator Arturus," the general turned to greet him. "Thank you for accepting my invitation." He held out his hand and Artur reached forth and they grasped each other's wrists. "And this must be Miss Gaenor of Mishanda. Delighted to meet you." He held his hand out to Gaenor but to her surprise, instead of grasping her wrist, he kissed her hand. It was a gesture that had gone out of style in Mishanda long ago.

"You've heard of me?" she asked.

"Your fame precedes you, my dear," Narsian replied smoothly without really answering the question. He introduced his officers and continued, "Please, let's all be seated. I apologize for not having proper couches. I fear we'll be forced to dine upright like the barbarians."

"Speaking as a barbarian, I assure you it isn't all that bad," Gaenor replied, unable to completely hide a grin. "I'm sure Artur will get used to it in another few decades."

The setting may not have been classic Cilben, but the food was. The first course consisted of ground meat seasoned with lemon juice, pepper and pine nuts and then rolled up in a little piece of bread. They were not entirely unlike what Gaenor might have called a meat roll at home, although both the bread and the seasonings were quite different and these were actually much smaller, only a few bites per piece. They were an excellent appetizer and were served with a slightly sweet sparkling white wine. The wine remained on the table when bowls of melon pieces were brought out. The melon was mixed with small amounts of pepper, a touch of a very salty fish sauce, vinegar, honey and parsley.

Once their palates had been cleansed, they were served a sort of fish and leek stew with a dry white wine, and then a green salad and a spicy dish with thin strips of rare beef in some sort of pepper sauce.

It was during the salad course that Artur finally asked, "To what stroke of luck do we owe the honor of dining with you, general?" It wasn't quite the formula that would have been used in Cilbe, but he knew that the formalities were kept informal when out of the capital city. However, since General Narsian had invited him to dinner using military formula and fed them foods with the taste of home, he felt such a formal complement would capture both the informality of the frontier while giving them all a taste of home in the pleasantries as well.

"Amazingly," Narsian replied, "I was about to ask you by what great stroke of luck do I have the honor of inviting such an illustrious hero of the Empire to dinner." Everyone waited for Artur's answer.

"Well, as it happens I'm just passing through on my way to points east."

"Senator," one of the younger officers said, "I intend no offense, but there were rumors recently that you were dead."

Artur stalled for a few seconds by asking, "Your name again?"

“Urgillus Casperon Vasro, sir.”

“Any relation to Thallius?”

“My father, sir.” He seemed pleased that Artur knew his father’s name.

“Excellent,” Artur replied. “He was a fine officer. How is he these days?”

“He is well, sir. Needs a cane to get around since he was thrown from his horse a few years back, but otherwise he is quite well.”

“Please give him my regards when you next see him,” Artur said warmly before answering the question. “I suppose I could ask in return, whether these rumors are the same ones that might have been heard a couple decades ago or so, whether they were new ones that no doubt followed the rumors I was actually still alive. And I suppose you’ll eventually ask about that and will probably be too polite to ask why after all these years I look so young.”

“We’ve heard you had taken up the practice of magic in Gostrina,” another of the young men put in.

“No, not in Gostrina and I didn’t really have a choice in the matter. You may or may not have heard about why I had to leave the Empire. The reasons don’t matter and we won’t discuss them at this time and place, but I tried something very stupid. Gentlemen, if you ever find yourself running for your lives, don’t try running into the Parch to lose your pursuers. You will lose anyone with a brain who is trying to catch you, but only because it is certain death to try it. I didn’t have a former senator to advise me, so I tried just that.”

“But you lived,” General Narsian pointed out.

“Through no fault of my own, though. I was found by a very powerful adept and the spell used to heal me is what keeps me looking so young.”

“So all we need to do to remain young,” Narsian concluded, “is to go to the Parch and be found by a wizard?”

“Sounds easy, doesn’t it?” Artur laughed.

“Not really, these men may not have been in the Parch but I have. I spent an hour in there once and was thirsty for days after. I imagine the chance of being found before getting mummified is slim at best.”

“And getting found by someone who both can and will heal you is slimmer still.”

“Thank you, but I’ll pass,” Narsian laughed. “I’d have a better chance finding the Fountain of Youth in the Johians!”

While they were all laughing the next course, a large beef roast with garlic buds was served with a robust red wine. The talk around the table turned to speculation on the situation in the Barbarian Kingdoms.

“Arturus, have you heard anything about that?” Narsian asked.

“Probably not as much as you have. I know the Ninth Legion has been pulled out of the Transminue area and moved to the southern border with the Barbarians, but other than that, just that there is some

unrest there. I haven't even heard what the problem is this time."

"There are conflicting reports on that as well," Narsian admitted. "All of it rumor. I could make a few educated guesses, of course, but I don't really know enough to say for sure."

After dessert had been served and they were sitting back, sipping a sweet Gostrinan cordial and smoking small clay pipes filled with Barian tobacco, the young officer Urgillus brought the subject back to his original question.

"Senator, is it true that someone had hired the Temi to assassinate you?"

"Yes that is true," Artur replied.

"Who?"

"Just like the general said about the situation among the Barbarians," Artur said after a moment's consideration, "I could make an educated guess, but it would just be a guess. The Temi don't tell their victims who hired them."

"They don't?" Urgillus asked.

"Well they didn't tell me," Artur replied.

"But we've always heard that the Temi never fail."

"They're only human, Urgillus," Artur replied. "Even Gaenor here defeated some of them."

"Really?" the young man looked at Gaenor with a mixture of awe and fear.

"Well, gentlemen," Narsian said a few minutes later, "I'm afraid we'll have to call an end to tonight's dinner. I know you three will be taking your men out on patrol first thing in the morning and it would do nothing for their morale if you were to show up with bloodshot eyes and no sleep." The three officers got up and said their farewells, but Narsian held Artur and Gaenor back after they had left the tent. "We need to talk," he told them.

"All right," Artur replied and sat back down and refilled his pipe.

"Was that really all you know about what's going on in the Barbarians?" Narsian asked very quietly.

"I'm afraid so," Artur apologized and he lit the tobacco. "Why?"

"From what I can tell the Emperor is stirring up trouble for no good reason there. You have to admit that his reign has been rather lackluster so far."

"That isn't necessarily a bad thing, you know. The economy is always more stable in times of peace."

"Well, I think Lusius is looking for a war. He's made a lot of speeches against the Barbarians over the last few years but the Senate has always voted against war. Lately there have been reports of border incidents, but my sources tell me they've been provoked by Cilbens. I'm not afraid of doing my duty, but I'm also not in favor of going to war when there is no need. You've never been a friend of the current Emperor, so I had hoped you might know something and be willing to talk about it. You really don't?"

“I really don’t,” Artur confirmed.

“Ah well. Have you been in Cilbe?”

“No, Wahton is the closest I got. I didn’t think it would be a good idea to go to the capital without reason.”

“Probably wise. Your old friend Girdecus returned a month or so ago. I understand he had a heart attack in Mishanda. I wonder what Flacco will do without Girdecus to hide behind.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry on his behalf,” Artur chuckled. “Flacco may well have been the brains behind Girdecus all these years. He probably has half a dozen plans all ready to go.”

“Hah! He probably does at that.” He paused a moment then went ahead, “All that’s left is to get to the reason I invited you tonight, senator.”

“And what would that be?” Artur asked, suddenly on guard.

“Miss Gaenor noticed from the start that I knew who the two of you were. Actually, sir, recognizing you wasn’t all that hard, there are still quite a few houses in Cilbe with statues of you. Your appearance, whatever explanation you care to make for it, hasn’t changed.”

“Those things always embarrassed me,” Artur muttered.

“Statues?” Gaenor asked.

“Another time, Gae. Please,” Artur responded.

Narsian chuckled. “I wouldn’t have needed them anyway.” He got up and walked to a small desk against the wall of the tent, opened a drawer and took out a paper packet. He opened it as he walked back to the table, pulled out the contents and put them on the table. He took the top several sheets and handed them to Artur. “You’ve still got powerful enemies in the Empire.”

“So I see,” Artur replied, glancing through the papers. “Cilben military intelligence?”

“My uncle is a senator. Some of his people intercepted this information and made copies. Knowing I was on the frontier he thought it might be of interest to me. At the time I received it, I never dreamed I’d actually meet you.”

“Your uncle?” Artur asked. “Would that be Moricus Narsius Venito?” Narsian nodded. “Good man, the head of the Narsian house as I recall. Nice to hear he made it to the Senate. So his people have someone inside Girdecus’ organization? Interesting, this document, that is,” he clarified. “Very nice likenesses.” Someone had drawn portraits of Artur and Gaenor. He picked up the sheet and showed it to Gaenor.

“Better than the last one we saw,” she commented.

“That must be this one,” Narsian said holding up a copy of the Doldan wanted poster.

“Your own intelligence network is very much on the ball as well, general,” Artur noted.

“One tries,” Narsian replied. I doubt I have to ask why the Doldans were looking for you.”

“We were helping cure the plague in a village and got caught at it,” Gaenor said.

“No good deed unpunished? Yes. It happens. Well, it isn’t my job to send you back to them. Hell, it wouldn’t be even if we were in Doldo right now. Where my tent stands is Cilben territory and unless I catch you practicing witchcraft, I don’t care what the locals in some other country say. And even if I do catch you, well let’s just say I hold by the traditional definition of witchcraft. If no one is hurt, it isn’t witchcraft, otherwise we’d have to arrest anyone who ever read the auspices. As it happens this report identifies you both as adept in the mystic arts, isn’t that how Mishandans put it?”

“We usually just say adept,” Gaenor replied.

“All right. The papers say you’re adept, but there are no charges made. Be silly to do so, no one has seen you do magic in the Empire so why should we care what you do in Mishanda?”

“This report is only current to the time we left Misha,” Artur commented. “Was there any reason Moricus thought we might be headed this way?”

“There was a personal letter I had from him as well. It mentioned the incidents surrounding the Firdani coronation and that you had last been seen in Gostrina, headed westward. I doubt he expected you would get this far, but if you did, he felt we owed you a favor.”

“A favor?” Artur asked. “Why?”

“Perhaps you don’t recall the incident, but Uncle Moricus reminds me of a time when he was young and inadvertently got caught politically between you and Senator Girdecus. Not a good position for one in the Equestrian order, you’ll agree. He tells me that you guided him away from that trouble and promised to shield him from Girdecus’ machinations.”

“Sounds like he was able to shield himself well enough, but yes, I do recall the incident. It was no big deal, I just stopped him from doing something foolish.”

“He tells it differently,” General Narsian replied. “Anyway the main reason I invited you to dinner was so we could talk privately.”

“You didn’t need to do it over dinner,” Gaenor pointed out.

“You’re probably right but it was safer this way. You see, If I merely ask you to come to my office, it’s always a possibility someone in the camp might see fit to spy on us. A tent isn’t the most private place to talk and if I were to set guards to insure my privacy such a spy might conclude that I was indulging in some sort of political intrigue with you. They might even conclude that our meeting was prearranged. By inviting you to dinner with the three centurions, there was nothing private about it. We had witnesses...”

“If our relative ages had been reversed, I’d have called them chaperons,” Artur chuckled.

“Just so,” Narsian agreed. “So instead of some conspiracy, I’m just a Cilben General playing host to a visiting notable. Someone might ask what you are doing here, but it would be more suspicious if I didn’t have dinner with you. Anyway the point was just to let you know that your old enemies know you’re still alive and they more or less know where to find you.”

“According to this we live in Misha,” said Gaenor, reading the report. “It also says we often visit the royal palace.”

“This is in error?” Narsian asked.

“It depends on your definition of ‘live’ and ‘often,’” Artur cut in quickly. “We move about quite a bit so aren’t in Misha often enough to suit us.” Gaenor carefully kept her face from showing surprise at Artur’s words.

“Ah, I see what you mean. A similar report would state I live in Cilbe and have been known to frequent the Emperor’s palace. I haven’t been there in years actually. Well, it’s getting late and I imagine you’ll want an early start in the morning.”

“I’m afraid so. It was a pleasure meeting you,” Artur told him as they clasped hands once more.

Two

“Statues?” Gaenor asked again the next morning as they road away from the Junction.

“It’s an old Cilben custom; a particularly successful general will be voted triumphal ornaments by the senate. By law only the Emperor or a member of his family may be voted what is called a full triumph with celebrations of various sorts lasting anything from a day to a week, but the Emperor may choose to allow a recipient of triumphal ornaments to celebrate a full triumph. After the conquest of Colch, Emperor Balto decreed a full triumph in my honor. The triumphal procession wound through the streets of Cilbe for hours and the whole time I stood on an ancient chariot with a slave holding a golden wreath of oak over my head and whispering to not forget I was merely mortal. There were athletic games in my honor and races. If we still had gladiatorial combat, there would have been that as well. And a feast was declared during which everyone in the city was fed at the Emperor’s expense. There were plays, both serious and satirical, fireworks, concerts; all manners of entertainment.

“It is fashionable to erect statues of triumphal honorees, and anyone trying to be in the Emperor’s favor will do just that. Sometimes they’ll do it even if they can’t afford it. They mostly are mounted on the eaves over the fronts of houses, although some find their homes in gardens, especially after the celebrations are over. The statues vary in size of course. Some are quite small, most are about half height, but some are life-sized, more or less.”

“More or less?” Gaenor asked.

“The bodies of the full sized statues are sold without head, so the owner can change heads as fashion dictates. Naturally not every man is the same height, nor built the same. The heads may be mine, but the bodies aren’t.”

“So when Narsian said that there were still houses with your statues...”

“It means that many people did not replace the statues of me after I was forced to leave the Empire. Quite brave of them, really; the current Emperor has never liked me. Most people took down my statues just after his ascendance to the imperial throne. It’s a greater honor that those few statues are still standing than the fact they were ever erected in the first place.”

"I didn't see any such statues in Wahton," Gaenor pointed out.

"Fortunately it's a custom kept strictly within Cilbe city. No, that's not entirely true. Outside of Cilbe such statues are much fewer and farther between but they do exist. You probably saw some of them in the bath at Wahton. The gods alone know who they were. By the time such a statue gets that far away from the imperial city, it could be anything from a year to a century or two old. We didn't get into the gardens of some of the more affluent people in Wahton either. There were probably a number of those statues in private gardens that we just didn't see. Some of the people with those statues may never have known who they represented too, not that it matters much. Except for the facial features they all look alike anyway."

You were uncharacteristically quiet last night," Artur remarked a little while later. "Any problem?"

"No, the lot of you were a bunch of soldiers talking shop. I just didn't have a lot to add to the conversation."

"Sorry about that."

"Don't be," she replied firmly. "You were enjoying yourself and that made me feel good. You should know by now that I don't need to be the center of attention all the time."

"I know that, but you usually try to be part of whatever group we're in."

"I usually know something about the subject being discussed. Last night I didn't and it didn't seem to make much sense to me to voice an opinion about strategy and tactics when I've no experience in them."

Late the next day they were passing through a small village close to the Gostrinan border when Artur asked, "Should we stop here for the night, Gae?"

"No, let's move on to the next town."

"That will be just over the border. I doubt we can get there before dark."

"We can ride an hour or so after sunset if we need to," Gaenor replied.

"Why, Gae? What's the hurry?"

"Humor me," she fired back, but not without a chuckle. "I have my reasons."

"If you say so," Artur shrugged. "Looks like it's going to be a clear night."

"Possibly a windy one as well," Gaenor noted.

"The wind will calm down around sunset," Artur informed her.

"How can you tell?"

"We're only ten leagues or so north of the Parch," he replied. "The hot air in the Parch rises all day, pulling more air in from the surrounding territory. At night it all cools off and reverses the flow. By midnight it is likely to be breezy in the opposite direction. Then after sunrise the cycle starts all over again. Of course some days are windier than others; this is about as windy as it gets from that effect. Of course

it will be dark tonight. The moon won't rise for quite a while yet."

"We can still keep riding," Gaenor insisted. "it won't be as dark as all that."

Artur shrugged and they kept riding. The sun had set half an hour earlier when they reached the Rolta customs station. It was manned by two officers, but only one bothered to come out to greet them. He asked their names and how long they had been in Rolta in a bored tone of voice. Then before they could finish answering he waved them on.

"I wonder why he even bothered to ask," Gaenor commented as they rode away.

"No doubt he has a regulation that requires him to ask, but none that requires him to make any note of the answers. Or maybe he figured that we couldn't be smuggling enough to be worth the bother."

"Or else he really doesn't care?" Gaenor suggested.

"That too, possibly."

A minute later they arrived at another station and were met by three smartly dressed Gostrinan agents. They came out and asked Artur and Gaenor to dismount. One, obviously the ranking officer, asked their names, origins, destinations, what they intended to do there and how long they expected to stay in Gostrina. They'd been through Gostrinan customs before and none of this was a surprise. The other two agents searched their saddle bags while the other was questioning them but were careful to do so only while either Artur or Gaenor was watching them. Gaenor had learned that many customs officers were open to bribery, but the honesty of Gostrinan customs was legendary.

"We'll need you to fill out some forms, please," he requested. "Can you read Gostri?"

"We can," Artur and Gaenor said as one.

"Very good," he replied. "Would you please step into the station? We have a pot of qahwah on, if you like."

"Thank you," Artur said. "That sounds good."

They filled out a pair of fairly simple forms and sipped at small cups of dark roasted Sorvohnian qahwah, the spiced coffee beverage that had gained a following last time they had been in Gostrina.

"You're not planning to ride all night, are you?" the chief officer asked after they'd finished the forms.

"No," Gaenor replied. "We figure on stopping at the next inn."

"Good. The road through the hills to the east of here can be treacherous at night and the next inn is just a few hundred yards up the road. I think you'll like it. The chief cook is Sorvohnian. Very unusual in these parts. I often spend my off hours there. The food is excellent and the inn keeper is accustomed to late arrivals. I might ask why you rode on so late, though?" he asked just as they finished their qahwah.

"Just wanted to get out of the Thimdra States," Gaenor told him with a slight smile.

"Ah! Now that I understand," he laughed. "The weather ahead of you has been fine lately and the roads are in excellent condition," he reported, "but it has been raining to the north and the Trina is fuller than

normal for this time of year. I doubt there will be flooding but keep an eye on the weather as you approach. If the bridge on this road is out, there's a ferry about eight leagues down river that will, no doubt, still be in operation. Safe journey!"

They thanked him for his report and kind wishes, then stood up. He escorted them back outside to their horses. Before Gaenor remounted, she reached into one of the saddle bags and pulled out a couple spell tools. From horseback she took them, made a dramatic gesture while reciting a simple incantation and through her right arm skyward. Immediately a ball of fire shot skyward and then burst into a thousand pieces like a sky rocket might.

"Now why did you do that, Gae?" Artur asked. The customs officers who had followed them out of the station applauded and laughed.

"Because this is Gostrina and I can do it here," she replied. Then she threw her head back and laughed cheerfully. Artur realized that she had been under a lot of tension while in the Thimdra States and wondered why he had not noticed earlier.

Strange, he thought, *that she has become so used to being adept so soon after her initiation.*

The inn was almost wholly unremarkable save for the Sorvohnian cuisine, which Gaenor decided would account for the Customsmen's taste for qahwah. Artur lingered over his qahwah at breakfast, but by mid-morning they were on their way once more.

They spent most of that day riding up and down the hills that were an off-shoot of a mountain range that ran from Mishanda to the far side of Aston, but they managed to reach the plains that make up the majority of Gostrina by nightfall. A few days later they found themselves on the banks of the River Trina.

"That customs man was right," Artur noted as they got their first glimpse of the river. "It's definitely flooded." Ahead they could see the long, sturdy stone bridge that normally spanned the river but the high water had it completely surrounded.

"So do we head on south to the ferry?" Gaenor asked.

"Let's get a closer look at the bridge," Artur suggested. "Maybe it isn't as bad as it looks from here."

As they approached the edge of the swollen river Gaenor commented, "Looks to be about fifty yards to the start of the bridge."

"Agreed," Artur nodded, "but I don't think it's very deep. Let me see how close to the bridge I can get."

"Artur, bridges can collapse when flooded like this."

"I don't think so. If you'll notice the water isn't up to the bottom of the bridge's arches and it isn't rushing through abnormally fast. One built like this should be able to stand up to water levels this high. Stay here, until I wave you forward."

Before she could protest he rode into the water. As he predicted the water was never really all that deep. The water level never quite reached his knees then gradually got lower and lower until he was on the bridge itself. He dismounted and led the horse forward.

When he reached the middle of the long bridge Gaenor got an odd, but familiar feeling that she was being watched again. Looking around she saw no one but was certain Cornellya was with them again.

“All right,” she said in a normal speaking voice. “I know you’re out there.”

“Actually I’m right here,” Cornellya said from just beside her.

“I can’t see you,” Gaenor said, unnecessarily.

“That’s because I’m not moving. I’ll wave my arms.” When she did Gaenor could make out a strange distortion in the scenery, not unlike that seen when viewing distant objects on a hot day. “I’m going to need a ride across the river,” Cornellya told her. “I don’t know how to swim.”

“I’m not surprised. You grew up in the middle of a desert. You’re supposed to be back in the Village,” Gaenor pointed out.

“No, I’m supposed to be with you. You’re going to need me on Ichtar even if Artur doesn’t want to admit it.”

“Why? The spell we need only requires five adepts.”

“That’s true, but the more you have the better and stronger the spell will be.” Cornellya retorted. “And it will be even better if a Vari is one of the adepts.”

I don’t see how,” Gaenor replied. “One adept is much the same as another for this sort of thing.”

“And now you know all there is to the Way?” Cornellya asked archly.

“You know I do not,” Gaenor protested. “I don’t think I’ll ever know everything. Does anyone?”

“The wise say that the more you learn the more you realize how little you really know.”

“That sounds familiar. Well, Artur’s nearly at the end of the bridge now. If you’re coming, you’d better get up behind me.” She reached down and felt Cornellya’s hand clasping her own. Hoping she was actually helping, she pulled the Vari up and felt her find a seat on the back of the saddle. “This saddle isn’t built for two,” Gaenor commented.

“I’ll get off again of the far side,” Cornellya promised. “I don’t think Godfather Arturus is ready for me yet.”

“I’m not sure I am anymore either,” Gaenor said resignedly.

Cornellya laughed. “Oh, of course you are. You didn’t try to send me home now did you? Oh look. Godfather is signaling us forward.”

Artur had successfully reached the far side of the river so they rode slowly out into the water. Gaenor’s horse was a little smaller than Artur’s and the water came up just above her and Cornellya’s knees. Soon they were on the bridge, but instead of dismounting, Gaenor urged the horse forward.

“Shouldn’t we be leading your horse?” Cornellya asked.

“You’re the one who doesn’t want Artur to know you are here,” Gaenor pointed out. “He’ll be a bit suspicious if I help an invisible Vari back up before we wade across the other side of the river. In fact you’d better stay with me until we stop for a rest.”

“Good idea,” Cornellya agreed. “It will give us time to talk.”

“While Artur is listening? Not a good idea. You’ll have to go back to following us, but keep in touch when you can.”

There was a small town on the other side of the river. Houses too near the river were flooded, but the riders were able to continue on the road until it rose, once more out of the water.

“It’s time we took a break,” Artur pointed out. “There should be several places to eat here.”

They found a small restaurant where they were able to eat a light meal. Gaenor managed to order an extra salad, a few pieces of chicken and some bread which she brought out for Cornellya while Artur was using the outhouse, behind the establishment.

“Thank you, I haven’t had much civilized food since we left the Village,” Cornellya said when Gaenor found her.

“I can’t stay here,” Gaenor told her. “Artur will be back soon enough. Will you be all right?”

“I have been so far. I do look forward to being able to travel openly with you though.”

“I’m not sure how openly that will be even then. Remember, most people have never seen an actual Vari.”

“Then maybe they won’t have any preconceived notions,” Cornellya replied.

“Then they’ll make those notions up on the fly then. Trust me.”

Gaenor rushed back inside and got there just before Artur rejoined her. Then they got back on their horses and continued their journey.

Three

Gaenor didn’t see Cornellya again while they were in Gostrina, but she did feel the Vari’s presence every once in a while. Northern Gostrina was noted for its wheat production, although there were also vineyards every so often. Gaenor asked and learned that the region produced some fine white wines.

The remainder of the trip to Mita was uneventful except for a small incident that happened when they were staying overnight in the city of Fasri. Fasri was the first major city they had seen since Peln. Like many Gostrinan cities, the primary building material was red brick, except for the pyramid temple to Nauo, which, as in all Gostrinan Cities and even the larger towns, was faced with pure white marble with the cap stone and edges covered with gold leaf. Gaenor always felt these temples were far too ostentatious even though Nauo was the same as her own chief diety, Nua.

They stayed an extra day in Fasri when Gaenor discovered that the city had an entire district devoted to

jewelry. In the end, however, she decided not to buy any finished pieces, although she found a fair-sized amethyst crystal, some raw opal and a few other gem stones she felt would be worth adding to her collection of spell tools. Some she didn't have an immediate use for, not being a part of any spell she was acquainted with, but she knew everything that exists has properties that may be exploited in the practice of magic, so these would give her something to study in her off moments. Also she would be spending much of her time soon conferring with other adepts; they might know of uses for these items.

They were debating the possible uses of jade when they heard a man say, "Arturus? This is a surprise."

Turning they saw Locius Armenius Flacco. He was dressed in a typical Cilben tunica, but wore Mishandan trousers underneath. He was puffing on an ornately carved pipe as he approached.

"Flacco," Artur replied with a nod. "I thought you were back in Cilbe."

"With Girdecus and Junior? No, I had other business here in the East to wrap up first. You heard they were expelled from their ambassadorial posts?"

"Their Majesties informed us of their intentions," Artur replied, "but we weren't able to stick around to see them do it."

"Yes, so I heard. That does raise the question; how did you manage to escape the Temi?"

"It wasn't easy," Artur informed him.

"I dare say. Actually, I'd have said it was impossible. Martius is going to want a refund."

"I doubt he'll get one."

"Oh really? Why not?" Flacco asked. "I don't know for certain, but I imagine he signed the usual assassination contract."

"He forgot to read the fine print," Gaenor retorted.

"His father wouldn't have made that error," Artur added.

"I doubt he's very pleased with his son," Flacco laughed. "Emperor Lusius was quite put out when they were expelled. And they weren't the only ones. Wanlaria and Gostrina didn't quite expel the Cilben legations there, but they did sue for damages and given Lusius' other problems, they'll probably get them. Firdan has rejected any olive branch we've tried to offer and Aston broke off the negotiations to establish relations. Mishanda is talking to us, sort of, but making such demands on Firdan's behalf that it is likely to pauper the Empire."

"So where was Martius reassigned? Quinor?"

"He ought to be. Honestly, I don't know what Lusius plans for him. He won't demand that Martius fall on his sword, but I'm sure Martius will wish he was dead by the time Lusius is done with him."

"Sending the Temi after me wasn't his brightest move," Artur commented.

"Actually, it may really have been his brightest move. That's the frightening thing."

“I’ve been away, remember,” Artur replied. “Has Junior, as you call him, not been living up to Girdecus’ expectations?”

“Oh, Arturus, you have no idea!” Flacco sighed. “That man hasn’t got the brains Jube gave geese. The stories I could tell you, but if I did we’d still be here in Gostrina when I finished telling them ten years from now. I’d call him a moron, but it would be an insult to morons the world over. So what brings you to Fasri?”

“Just passing through,” Artur replied. “And you?”

“The same. I don’t suppose you’re headed west. We could travel together.”

“No,” Artur returned, “Sorry. We’re on our way back east.”

“A pity,” Flacco murmured. “How about dinner this evening. I discovered a Sorvohnian restaurant here just last night.”

“All right,” Artur agreed, to Gaenor’s surprise. “Where and when? We’ll meet you there.”

“Capital!” Flacco exclaimed and gave them directions and suggested a time.

“Why did you agree to dine with him?” Gaenor asked after Flacco had moved on.

“Curiosity, mostly,” Artur admitted.

“But isn’t he an enemy of yours?”

“No, he is an ally of an enemy, and I can’t say I trust him, not as long as he is still with Girdecus, but he isn’t an enemy by himself. But even if he was, in Cilbe it isn’t uncommon to socialize with one’s enemies.”

“You Cilbens are crazy,” Gaenor replied, but without much heat.

“So you’ve said.”

“I noticed that neither of you really said much.”

“I think he told me more than I told him,” Artur acknowledged.

“What, about the king’s reaction to the assassination attempts?” Gaenor asked.

“That, yes, but it wasn’t anything we needed to know nor that we wouldn’t have found out soon enough. No, what he let slip was that it was Martius Girdecus Ralba who hired the Temi. That’s something we might never have known for sure.”

“I got the impression he thought we already knew.”

“Maybe he did, but if so, it’s the first real mistake I’ve ever known him to make. I suspected it might have been Martius, but he also might have had one of his friends or retainers do it for him. If I had known it was Martius back in Dana I’d have simply killed him and ended the contract right then and there. But I don’t think it was a mistake. I suspect he is getting ready to divorce himself from the Girdecans. When Girdecus dies, Flacco is going to change his colors and right now he is considering his options. It should

be an entertaining dinner.”

“There is a downside, you know,” Gaenor pointed out.

“Oh? What?” Artur asked.

“All your enemies are going to know you’re alive.”

“I think they would have known soon anyway,” Artur shrugged. “We haven’t exactly been hiding.”

“Up until now we’ve been dealing with friends of yours or people who felt they owed you something for the most part. Maybe you respect Flacco, but not only is he not a friend, he is in the camp of our enemies.”

“It couldn’t be helped,” Artur replied. “He saw us first. So we may as well see if we can extract any further information out of him.”

“Well, I think we should get a piece of jade,” Gaenor said decisively.

“Jade?”

“Before Flacco found us, we were discussing jade, remember?”

“Okay. But for the jade, let’s pick a carved specimen if we can find a nice one.”

“I’m willing,” Gaenor replied, “but why? Odds are the carving won’t matter in most spells.”

“No, but it looks nicer, and if we never find a use for it in magic, at least we’ll have a nice piece of jade. Are there any other materials you want to pick up? Don’t be afraid to duplicate some of our tools. You need to build up your own spell kit and what few duplicates we have were left in Narmouth.”

“Maybe some small slips of various metals,” Gaenor decided, “and at least a dozen of copper. We have several spells that consume it, after all, and I have a few ideas involving multiple pieces. For most of the purposes silver would do as well, but it’s much more expensive.”

They continued shopping until it was time to meet Flacco at the restaurant. The dinner was a study in Cilben behavior with both Artur and Flacco verbally fencing in an urbane and polite manner. Both men pumping each other for information while trying not to give up any themselves. Gaenor found herself wishing Cornellya was with them, then she would have had someone to talk to while the two men were having fun sparring with each other. They didn’t even notice when she pulled a notebook out of her bag and started working on her latest project again.

She put the piece of amethyst crystal on the table in front of her and considered it. She knew that rose quartz was used often in divinatory spells and wondered if amethyst could be so used as well. It was another form of quartz, after all, but she didn’t know any divinatory spells of that sort. Clear quartz, she knew was used to assist in the focusing of energies. It was a common feature in her spells when accuracy was essential, but she knew none of the other colored quartzes accomplished that as well as the clear variety except in specialized applications. She briefly considered an experiment with the crystal then quickly decided against it, wondering why she even considered it. Magical experiments were dangerous. She almost never used an ingredient she didn’t understand the properties of. There was no telling what results she might get. Had Artur known what could be done with amethyst he probably would have had a

piece in his spell kit. It was possible that the stone was unknown to the Vieri. She made a mental note to ask Cornellya about it when she got the chance and instantly made a list of the day's acquisitions so she would remember to consult with the adepts of Mita and Misha.

After two hours she excused herself, leaving the two men to continue their verbal match. Fasri's streets were gently lit with gas lamps and there were still a few people out although by now all the shops were closed for the night. The hostel they had found a room at was almost half a mile away, although on nearly a straight line.

As Gaenor walked, the streets became gradually emptier until she saw no one near her. After another block she became aware of footsteps behind her. She tried turning at the next corner but whoever was there, about half of a block back, was following her. As she turned again, she saw the person behind her was a tall man, although she was unable to make out any other features on him. He didn't seem to be in a hurry, but he was definitely walking faster than she was. She turned again before realizing she had just taken her third left turn in a row; she was walking around the block. Before the man could turn the corner, she reached into her purse and tried to bring out the right combination of spell tools. Specifically, she was looking for her flint and steel, but with all the semi-precious gemstones she had purchased that day along with the strips of copper and assorted other objects, she had trouble finding the right pieces. The man behind her continued to follow and he was getting closer. While the streets were lighted, gas lights are not particularly bright and their color is yellow so she had trouble telling exactly what she held in her hands.

As she turned left once more, the man was only about thirty feet behind her. She got the tools in each hand and started incanting a bright light spell. Her intention was to temporarily blind her follower, enabling her to get away. Then as he came around the corner, she turned and cast the spell. Immediately an aura of bright green light surrounded her and then expanded outward. In its glare she saw the man was wearing the uniform of a local policeman and he was carrying a lantern. The aura continued to expand outward for half a minute until it faded away.

"Are you all right, miss?" the policeman asked, continuing forward.

"Yes," Gaenor replied. "Just startled. How about you? Are you all right? I didn't mean to miscast the spell. No telling what happened."

"The lights," he replied in wonder. "They're all burning green now. My lantern is too! How did you do that?"

"Oh dear," Gaenor replied. "I thought you were following me."

"I was," he admitted. "A woman walking by herself at night isn't always safe, I'm sorry to say."

"I tried to cast a light spell to blind you for a few moments so I could run away, but I guess I pulled out the wrong tools. I thought I had flint and steel in my hands." She looked at the tools. "I was half right," she explained, raising her right hand. "This is the steel."

"What's in your other hand?"

"It's hard to tell in this light, but I think it's a piece of raw malachite. It's a form of copper ore and a pretty stone as well. That would explain the green color. It's also used in transformation spells and since this was a light spell, it transformed all the lights in sight to green. It's an odd effect. I'll have to document it."

“You’re an adept, miss?” the policeman asked in surprise.

“I am. I’m from Mishanda,” she added, knowing that in Gostrina women were just a step above being property and would never have been trained in magic.

“I thought you must be, miss, from your accent and all. Will the lights stay green?”

“I don’t think so,” she replied uncertainly. Then after thinking it through continued, “No, almost certainly they won’t. The effect will only last until each light is doused. When they are relit the lights will be their normal color.”

“Too bad,” he remarked after a moment. “It would have been fun to have a lantern that burned green. Well, it should stay lit long enough to show my wife. My Grandfather was an adept. He always had the most amazing presents for my cousins and me on our birthdays.” He wore a reminiscent smile.

“Miss Gaenor of Narmouth,” she introduced herself.

“Constable on Patrol Fenmire of Fasri,” he replied. “Where are you headed?” She told him. “Then may I escort you the rest of the way there? In the dark there’s no telling what color you might change the lights next,” he added with a chuckle.

Gaenor laughed politely and accepted his offer.

“My grandfather always told us it was important to keep everything in its proper place, so you could find them in a hurry,” he recalled as they walked. “I suppose this is the sort of situation he had in mind.”

“He was absolutely right,” Gaenor agreed. “I don’t normally have trouble finding the right tools, but I was shopping this afternoon and had several new items in my purse. Actually, it’s amazing anything happened at all. Most of the items in there would not have done a thing; at least I don’t think they would, although I think the hematite might have been explosive.”

“Good thing you didn’t use that one then,” Fenmire remarked.

“The hematite is a polished piece,” Gaenor replied easily. “I wasn’t so rattled that I’d have mistaken a polished stone for a raw one.”

“Are there many female adepts in Mishanda?”

“I’m the only one I know, although Artur, my partner, says he’s met one or two over the years. There aren’t many women in any of the professions in the world.”

“I hear there are in Baria,” Fenmire told her, “and in the lands to the far south too, or so I’ve been told.”

“Baria is a special case,” Gaenor replied, “but I don’t think they have many adepts, if any among them. The Southlands? Well, I don’t know for certain either way.”

“So how did you come to be walking alone tonight?” Fenmire asked after they walked a block in silence.

“Oh, Artur met an old acquaintance from Cilbe this afternoon. We had dinner with him, but they were

having so much fun verbally fencing with one another and I was getting tired, so I left them there and started back to the hostel.”

“Narmouth is a small town.” It wasn’t quite a question.

“Yes. How did you know?”

“It just sort of made sense. It’s safe to be out alone at night in small towns. The situation is different in the cities. Of course as an adept you have certain defenses the rest of us do not. Is that why you felt safe?”

“No, you had it right the first time. Narmouth is a small town and it’s always safe to walk around at night. I’ve heard about how it is in cities, of course, but I haven’t had all that much time to walk about in a city so it just didn’t occur to me there might be trouble. Well, here’s my hostel. Thank you for walking me back, Fenmire.”

“You’re very welcome, Miss Gaenor. And thank you for an interesting evening and even better story to tell back at the station house.” Fenmire nodded to her and then turned and walked away with a measured stride.

Four

Gaenor told Artur of her encounter with Fenmire as they left Fasri the next morning.

“Gae, I’m sorry! I shouldn’t have let you go back alone,” Artur apologized.

“Not to worry,” Gaenor replied. “Nothing happened, and I can take care of myself.”

“By turning the street lamps green?” he countered. “You’re just lucky you were being followed by a concerned constable.”

Gaenor tried to think of an argument to that, couldn’t and finally admitted, “Okay, I was nervous, I admit it. I need to learn from this lesson, but the lesson is not to never go out without a guardian. It’s that I should always be ready to defend myself. From now on, I won’t just store random spell tools in my purse, I’ll keep it organized so I can find the flint and steel together in a flash.”

“Maybe if you keep them in a small belt pouch of some sort,” Artur suggested, “or get a new purse with an outer pocket?”

“Maybe. I’ll think about it. I don’t wear much jewelry, maybe I can put what I need together in a ring or a bracelet.”

“You mean as an amulet?” Artur asked.

“That would do as a temporary solution,” Gaenor nodded, “but what I actually had in mind was something that contained the ingredients for a defensive spell. An amulet would need to be recharged everytime I used it. Maybe I could store several charges, but I could find myself out of stored defenses. If a ring or a bracelet contained the spell tools I want, I could just cast the spell at need, but I’ll have to think about it for a while, I can’t use the variants on flint and steel. Flint would make a reasonable stone, I

suppose. At least I've seen some nice looking pieces, but an iron ring would rust and turn my finger red or black as well. I'll need a different sort of spell. Then by the time we're in Misha I can have something made."

"Mita may have some jewelers too, you know."

"I hadn't thought of that. Well, we'll just have to see."

"Too bad you can't use that nice piece Ibbet gave you," Artur said, referring to the piece of smoky quartz she wore almost constantly. Smoky quartz was the only gem stone found in Ander barony and in an act of friendship the baron's daughter had given Gaenor a fine example in a lovely gold necklace setting.

"Yes, but smoky quartz is more useful as an energy absorbent. I don't think I could work a spell together that would use that property that would be fast enough to be an effective defense."

"So you want a defense that is actually offensive," Artur concluded.

"Yes, but I don't want to use deadly force for this spell. If I'd tried that last night I could have killed Fennire and he was just trying to help me."

"You weren't even trying a fire spell," Artur pointed out.

"And a good thing too. He would have burned with a green flame if I had. But the color of the flame wouldn't have mattered; he'd still have been dead."

"You'll need a spell that will work against multiple attackers as well," Artur pointed out.

"I hadn't thought of that, but that would be a variant of whatever spell I choose. Did you learn anything new from Flacco last night?" Gaenor asked, changing the subject.

"Not really, no. Your decision to leave was right on that count at least. He gave me a lot of information about the current political situation as of the last time he was there, but it wasn't anything particularly important, or at least wasn't to me. Emperor Lusius still has a temper and a rather petty sort of mind as well. He's condemned a lot of people to death since I left. There's still a judgment against me, but I never thought otherwise, that's why we didn't stay in Wahton very long. If the Ninth Legion hadn't been moved out we'd have left again by way of the Parch. I thought leaving before my trial was an easy decision, but evidently a lot of men thought otherwise."

"How does he stay in power then?"

"He is the Emperor. There are always those who will follow him regardless of what he does. And, of course, life is very good for those he likes. For others they tell themselves he can't last forever, so they just try to lie low and wait him out."

"Doesn't sound like a very sensible way of getting rid of him," Gaenor opined.

"Emperor is not an elected office, Gae. One doesn't go to the polls to vote against him and the senators who do vote against something he wants have a tendency to find life unliveable. The only way to get rid of him is by assassination and that is not an honorable course of action."

“So in all Cilbe there is no one who would hire the Temi to kill him?”

“The Temi would never accept the job. The cost to them, regardless of success, would be more than they could afford, assuming any survived. Everyone knows that, especially the Emperor. So it would either have to be an amateur assassination, a foreigner hired to do the job or a military coup. There have been more than a few attempts at private assassinations, and one attempted coup, but Lusius is a slippery bastard and the examples he made after those attempts have kept others from trying the same thing.”

“Delightful. Good thing we’re headed the other way.”

Just over a week later they arrived in Mita.

“Not exactly a thriving metropolis is it?” Artur noted.

Mita was a complete surprise to both Gaenor and Artur. They had been expecting a small city or a large town at least, but this was a hamlet at best, a crossroads with a double handful of buildings. At first Gaenor thought that was all there was to the village but as they got closer to the center she saw that there were several dozen private dwellings that she hadn’t seen from farther away because of the trees. The people of Mita had encouraged the growth of trees throughout their town unlike most towns in Gostrina where trees were something kept confined to parks and forests. It was an attitude Gaenor was quite at home with, but not one she expected outside of Mishanda. The buildings were built like Mishandan buildings as well with stone being the primary building material for the walls. Instead of slate for the roof shingles, however, they used ceramic. She learned later that was because there wasn’t any locally available slate, but there was plenty of clay, both red and white in color. Using those two colors, the roofers had shingled the roofs in individual patterns that Gaenor found quite attractive. However, it was obvious that Mita was not home to more than two thousand people and Gaenor wondered about the apparent local affluence until she realized that this had to be the only commercial center in this part of Gostrina so this is where the farmers a half day’s ride all around would come to sell their crops. Furthermore, it was perfectly distanced from their last overnight stop as they headed east and, she guessed, it was also the first stop for travelers coming out of Mishanda as well.

“So where do we find the school?” Artur wondered aloud.

“It’s not that big a town,” Gaenor pointed out. “We can ask around. Someone should know. Probably everyone will.”

“Unless they’re staying quiet about what they’re doing here,” Artur replied.

“Why would they do that? Magic is legal here.”

“It’s legal, yes, but some people in these small towns are very superstitious and adepts are wise not to advertise until they know how things stand. Haven’t you realized that by now?”

“So far the only place I’ve had a problem was in the Thimdra States,” she pointed out.

“You’ve been lucky. No, I take that back. We’ve been traveling along caravan routes. The people on them tend to have a more cosmopolitan outlook than those off the beaten track.”

“And this village is on the same caravan route. I doubt these villagers will be any more insular than the others.”

“We’ll see,” Artur replied, “but for now maybe we should just ask for Haxmire and his former student. What is his name anyway?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think Doctor Haxmire ever mentioned his name.”

“Oh good,” Artur replied, sounding like it was anything but. “Can’t be helped. Let’s find a room for the night and maybe there will be a sign for the school. If not we can start asking around.”

There was only one hostel in Mita, but it was a fair sized one. They stabled their horses and hired a room and then started asking their questions. Following Artur’s lead they only asked for Doctor Haxmire of Kandoe and Radnire of Es. When it turned out nobody knew their names, they tried describing them, but no one in the hostel knew them.

The next day they asked around town and over the course of the day managed to visit every shop in the small town. However, while one or two shopkeepers thought their description of Doctor Haxmire sounded familiar, none were able to help.

“Well there goes one illusion shattered,” Artur groaned as they headed back to the hostel.

“What’s that?” Gaenor asked.

“That everyone in a small town would know each other.”

“Haxmire and Radnire haven’t been here all that long,” Gaenor pointed out.

“Their arrival should have been the talk of the town,” Artur replied.

“It may well have been,” Gaenor agreed, “but that doesn’t mean anyone caught their names. We may have to ask about a school for magic after all.”

“I was coming to that conclusion for myself,” he admitted. “We can start tonight with dinner at the local pub, instead of at the hostel. The locals are more likely to know of the school.”

“It sounds sensible to me,” Gaenor agreed. “Let’s just stop by the hostel long enough to freshen up.”

“And maybe change into a warmer set of clothing,” Artur suggested. “Last night was cold.”

“We are in the mountains, dear,” Gaenor reminded him, “You have to expect that sort of thing. But you are right, we should change. It’s been months since we dressed for dinner,” she chuckled.

The sun was just setting as they approached the pub that was frequented by most of the locals. Artur decided to order dinner before they started asking nosy questions. He had already decided that he would need to buy a round for everyone in the house. He had always found it was a good way to break the ice. This time, however, it turned out to be unnecessary.

They had just started eating when two young men walked in. One of them did an almost comic double-take and called out, “Miss Gaenor? Sir Artur? You’re really here? Wonderful! Gerrod, you’ve got to meet these folks. C’mon!” He grabbed his friend’s arm and dragged him toward Artur and Gaenor’s table. Artur signaled to the waitress for two more glasses to go with the pitcher of beer already on the table.

“Radnire of Es,” Gaenor greeted the young man who had recognized them, “It’s really great to see you too! Please have a seat.”

Artur echoed her sentiments and added, “Who is your friend?”

“Sir Artur, Gaenor,” he began formally, but with his excitement still bursting through, “this is Gerrod of Mita, he’s a student at the college too. Gerrod, this is Sir Artur the Southlander and this is Miss Gaenor of Narmouth. She’s the one who wrote that book Doctor Haxmire and Master Fallendir are making us memorize.”

Gerrod groaned at the thought but Gaenor held out her hand and said, “Pleased to meet you, Gerrod. So you grew up here in Mita?”

“I did,” he confirmed.

“In fact he’s the reason why Master Fallendir of Castoe decided to start the college here. Gerrod was his first student,” Radnire informed them.

“How long have you been here, Radnire?” Gaenor asked between bites.

“A little over two weeks,” he replied. “I arrived with Doctor Haxmire just in time for the fall semester.”

“That would explain why nobody here has heard of either you or Haxmire,” Artur commented.

“We’ve been all over town asking for the two of you all day,” Gaenor explained.

“Why didn’t you just ask for the Mita College of Applied Magical Arts?” Gerrod asked, bewildered. “Or you could have just asked for ‘the magic school.’ Anyone in town would have known what you were talking about.”

Gaenor turned and cast an inquiring eye at Artur. “Yes, dear,” he said at last. “You were right.”

“About what?” Radnire asked.

“Never mind,” Gaenor replied. “So how big a school is it?”

“Not very,” Radnire admitted. “Doctor Haxmire and Master Fallendir are the only two teachers of magic, although they’re looking for a third and we have another ten classmates.”

“It’s a start,” Artur commented. “I doubt the department at the University at Es was much larger.”

“About half again, according to Doctor Haxmire,” Radnire said, “And they used to have four or five instructors at all times.”

“So,” Gaenor cut in, “are you ready to start studying magic?”

“I’ve already started,” Radnire replied with a big smile. “Doctor Haxmire has been instructing me all summer. Some of it is really exciting stuff. Can’t say I much enjoy practicing gestures and rituals though.”

“It will come,” Gaenor assured him. By this time the two younger men had already drained the pitcher of beer dry so Artur got up to order another.

“I just remembered! You two were running for your lives when you left Es. Is that all cleared up now, or are you still running?”

“It’s all settled,” Gaenor assured him.

“Oh good! I was sort of worried although Doctor Haxmire assured me that whoever was chasing you didn’t have a chance.”

“Hah!” Gaenor laughed.

“He had more faith in us than we did,” Artur told him. “It was a very near thing.”

“But you’re here! So where have you been all summer?”

Artur and Gaenor glanced at each other then Gaenor replied, “We’ll go into detail later maybe, but we eventually ended up in the Cilben Empire and came here by way of the Thimdra States.”

“So are you on your way to Misha to get initiated now?”

“We’re on our way to Misha,” Gaenor told him, “but I’m already adept. We got that accomplished along the way anyway.” She smiled at the thought even though it had been a near death experience.

“Look at her,” Gerrod marveled. “She can’t keep a straight face. Must have been an amazing experience!”

“I don’t remember so much as a moment of it,” Gaenor told them. “Neither will you. That’s just the way the initiation works. The reason I’m smiling so much is from the sheer joy of using magic, of being able at last to cast the spells I’ve designed.”

“Most adepts never devise a new spell until working on their doctorates,” Gerrod commented. “That’s what Master Fallendir says.”

“Not us,” Radnire countered. “Doctor Haxmire says that’s all going change now that Miss Gaenor has written her book.”

“Only if we can understand it,” Gerrod replied. “I don’t know how you came up with all that,” he told Gaenor.

“I didn’t think it was all that hard,” she remarked. “It all came out of my attempt to organize all the stuff Artur was teaching me.”

“Told you,” Radnire said to Gerrod. It was obviously the extension of an earlier argument.

“And there’s still so much to add to it.”

“Add?” Gerrod gasped. “But it’s so large.”

“Anything in the world can be used as a spell ingredient in theory even if we don’t know what it is. For that matter I only included *materia magica* that I knew about. I guess I hit all the basics, but at the time I wrote that I only knew as much as Artur could teach me.”

“In truth,” Artur admitted, “You had already surpassed me in your knowledge of magic and the last year before you sent the final copy to Misha my only contribution was to confirm by experiment some of the new ideas you had.”

The two other men looked at Gaenor with awe, but Gaenor simply continued. “These days I’m working on some new ideas and some old ones, but perhaps I should discuss them with Doctor Haxmire first. For all I know, these ideas are well known principles and he can direct me to a text or two.”

“I doubt it, Gae,” Artur told her. “He may be able to help you classify some of the more obscure materials, but I think you’ll find your new ideas are just as new as the ones in your thesis.”

“Actually they are just extensions of what I started in the thesis,” she said modestly.

“I’d like to hear about them,” Radnire said after finishing his third glass of beer. He poured himself a fourth. Gerrod was still working on his second and Artur and Gaenor were each nursing their first.

“Tomorrow maybe,” Gaenor told him.

“Can you do a spell here, now?” Radnire asked. He wasn’t quite slurring his words, but his gestures were becoming more expansive.

“I can, but I don’t think it would be a good idea,” Gaenor replied.

“Why not? I think it would be great fun.”

“And I think,” Artur cut in, “this is why we don’t initiate adepts until graduation. Somehow the concept of a group of adepts showing off in a local tavern is one of the most frightening things I can contemplate. On the other hand, Gae, perhaps a spell might be in order.”

“Did I hear you correctly?” Gaenor asked.

“I’m sure you did,” Artur chuckled. “Do you remember that spell you devised in Omath?”

“I do, but…” she began.

“I know,” he told her, stopping her objection. “That was for the morning after. What would you cast if you wanted such a spell now?” He was talking somewhat cryptically, but Gaenor followed his suggestion. In Omath she had devised a hangover cure; now she wanted to cure drunkenness. As Artur indirectly suggested, such a spell was a variant of the earlier one.

“You could cast it,” she pointed out.

“I could but before I did it, I’d have you double check it anyway, so you may as well do it yourself.”

Gaenor shrugged and went to work. She finished her own glass of beer then reached over for Radnire’s glass and poured what was left of it in hers.

“Hey!” Radnire protested.

“Watch and learn,” Artur instructed him.

He looked rebellious for a few seconds, but then lowered his eyes and said, “Yes, Sir Artur.”

Meanwhile Gaenor was laying out her spell tools. Actually the only ingredient for the spell she needed was the beer, but she didn’t want it to look too easy to the two adept candidates. They would soon be encouraged to devise spells from scratch and she didn’t want them to think it was something that could be done with very little forethought. As it happened, this was something Gaenor could do with very little forethought, but from Artur’s reactions she knew it was not normal for other adepts, so she made a production of preparing the spell.

Then with a flash of inspiration she noticed the candle on the table. It had been stuck into the mouth of a wine bottle and lit for them when they had been seated. She brought the bottle closer and picking up her steel and the piece of malachite she cast nearly the same light spell she had used in Fasri, modifying it only enough to confine the effect to the one flame that was in front of her. As she cast the spell the flame turned green and the candle began to burn a bit faster, confirming, as she had expected, that a green flame would burn hotter than a yellow one.

Radnire and Gerrod stared fascinatedly at the unusual flame. Around them a few people looked over and applauded softly, but Gaenor’s mind was already on the next spell; the real one she was supposed to be casting.

In Omath she had devised a spell that would liken the effects of a hangover to a glass of ale. By emptying the glass, the sufferer would also relieve himself of the hangover. This time Gaenor chose to cancel the effects of alcohol by removing it from the beer and thereby from Radnire as well. She was about to start speaking the incantation and then decided to write it down first just in case. She intended to do it in the Old Tongue, the language of the Vieri, and didn’t want to misspeak it. A minor error in this particular spell wouldn’t prove dangerous, she knew, but might prove embarrassing. She pulled out her notebook and made a few quick notes then while making several carefully timed gestures, she spoke the incantation in a clear voice. As she finished the incantation, she picked up a pewter spoon from the table, filled it with some of Radnire’s beer from her glass and then held it over the green candle flame. The small amount of beer in the spoon heated up and soon came to a boil. After a minute of boiling, Gaenor pulled it away from the flame and unthinkingly dropped the spoon into the glass.

“How do you feel?” she asked Radnire.

“Wow!” he exclaimed. “I didn’t realize I was that drunk, but I’m not anymore. That deserves another drink!” He reached for the pitcher and filled his glass once more as Gaenor gave him an exasperated stare. Then she shook her head gently, rolling her eyes toward the ceiling. Radnire took a large gulp of the foamy liquid then immediately spit it out again.

“Something’s happened to the beer,” he said. “It tastes wrong.”

Gaenor grabbed Artur’s empty glass, poured a bit of the beer from the pitcher and tasted it herself. “Oops!” she said after swallowing. “That’s the second careless error I’ve committed.”

“What did you do?” Radnire asked.

“I spoiled the beer.”

Artur commented. “I thought you did it intentionally.”

“No, I just wasn’t thinking,” Gaenor confessed.

“That’s not a good habit to get into,” Artur commented.

“I’d better watch it. And to think I used to chide you for doing the same thing.”

“I don’t get it,” Radnire admitted.

“What did you do wrong?” Gerrod asked.

“It was when I dropped the spoon into the glass at the end of the spell. In the first part of the spell I established that the beer in the glass was a symbol for all the beer that had been in the pitcher. Then when I removed some with the spoon I established that as a symbol for the portion of the beer that had been in you. Removing the alcohol from the beer in the spoon then caused the alcohol you had ingested to be removed as well. If you ever try something like that, by the way, be careful to modulate the spell to make sure that you don’t boil the beer in the person you are trying to sober up. Those actions could have done that, but the incantation specifically specified that the alcohol was to be removed, but that the heat was not to be duplicated in the subject; you. Anyway, when I boiled the beer, I changed its flavor, and when I dropped it in the glass, it changed the flavor of the beer not only in the glass but in the pitcher as well.”

“Did you affect all the beer?” Radnire asked.

“No,” Artur replied. “Look around. Nobody else thinks the beer tastes funny.”

“The sober-up spell as I performed it wouldn’t have worked well if this wasn’t the same pitcher we started with,” Gaenor continued. “But I noticed that it had been refilled. Good thing too. If I had to work with a fresh pitcher, I would have spoiled the entire keg.”

“Hey!” Gerrod said between laughs. “That sort of behavior can give adepts a bad name!”

Gaenor gave them half a smile. “Remember this when you get initiated and start casting spells on your own.”

Five

Artur and Gaenor were eating breakfast in the hostel the next morning when Doctor Haxmire walked in. Artur noticed him before Gaenor did and called out to him.

“Haxmire! Over here. It’s really good to see you again. You look years younger!”

He did too. When they had last seen the former Dean of Magic in Es he had been a defeated man in the battles of academic politics. His entire department had been gradually whittled down until he was the only professor and one without students at that. Before he slumped habitually, but now he held himself proudly upright and walked with a spring in his step. He still wore the same archaic gray robes he had in Es, but they were clean and pressed and not the wrinkled mass of cloth they had been.

“I could say the same for you, Artur,” Haxmire returned, “Only in your case I’d have to say it’s decades younger.”

"I wasn't at my best," Artur admitted. "May I buy you breakfast?"

"I've already eaten, thank you, but a cup of qahwah, perhaps," Haxmire replied. Artur ordered it for him. "I was worried those assassins might have gotten you in the end. Good to see I was wrong! And you, Gaenor," Haxmire said, turning to her, "You look as pretty as ever," he told her with a bold wink. "Young Radnir tells me you are finally adept now. And deservedly so, I must say. Congratulations! So you have been to Misha?"

"Not yet, doctor," she replied. "it was in the Parch."

"You made it then," Haxmire noted to both of them."

"That was a near thing too," Artur admitted. Then together they told him the entire story.

"That's quite some tale," Haxmire admitted at last. "And this Leracus just let you walk into the Parch? You got lucky."

"On several counts," Artur agreed.

"Yes. He should have fought you right then and there."

"I'm sure he thought the odds were longer that we'd survive in the Parch."

"If I hadn't charged those water amulets, I'd have agreed. Even then I should have made a few more."

"The trip out was considerably easier," Gaenor commented. Then she caught a glance from Artur and added, "Not that I didn't complain even then."

Haxmire laughed. "I'm sure. I doubt I'd want to make the trip. I'd do it like you did as a matter between life and death, but... Well, you're both looking very good now. Gaenor, Radnir told me about your demonstration last night. He was quite impressed and I am quite curious."

"The mistake with the beer was my fault," she admitted contritely.

"What?" Haxmire asked and then listened to her explanation. "He didn't mention that part, and I'm sure you don't need me to lecture you on taking care especially at the end of the spell. Actually my curiosity was aroused by the way you turned the candle flame green."

Gaenor blushed with embarrassment and explained about the incident in Fasri.

"Don't be too embarrassed," Haxmire told her. "Someday, perhaps I'll tell you about some of the mistakes I made when I was your age. We all do that sort of thing from time to time, especially during the first year as adepts. Sometimes I think the best breakthroughs in the last few centuries have occurred because of the mistakes of young adepts, with the obvious exception of your thesis, of course."

"Tell us about the new college," Gaenor requested. "We were coming out there this morning."

"I'll be glad to tell you, but even more I'd like to show you. The main reason I came to the hostel this morning was to invite you to stay at the College. We have plenty of room and it will save you the cost of your room here."

“That will be wonderful, doctor,” Gaenor replied.

Mita College was established on an estate just outside of town. The large fieldstone manor house served as dormitory and faculty suite, dining hall, library and even hosted a large lecture hall and several smaller classrooms. There were two barns on the estate, one of which had been converted into various sized laboratories, only two of which had been stocked so far. The other barn was still a barn, stabling horses and a few dairy cattle. There was also a large greenhouse, used mostly for the college’s kitchen garden, but Haxmire told Gaenor that they also grew quite a few plants commonly used in magic as well. There was also a mowed athletic field out behind the manor house.

“What sort of athletics?” Gaenor asked.

“There’s a Gostrinan game called ‘Kickball’ that the boys enjoy on weekends sometimes, not that we have enough for two full teams yet, but mostly we do our morning exercises out here; running, jumping, bends and stretches. That sort of thing.”

“Exercises? How unusual,” Gaenor marveled.

“We did it every morning when I was in the Legion,” Artur told her.

“That was an army,” Gaenor replied. “This is a school.”

“The idea was Fallendir’s actually,” Haxmire told them. “He served in the Gostrinan army for a few years before he came to University. I was a bit skeptical about it at first myself, but now after a couple of weeks I must say I’m feeling better than I have in years. The key of course is to start out slowly and work your way up. I’m not really pushing myself much yet but it gets the blood flowing and really wakes you up.”

“If you say so,” Gaenor replied, unbelievably.

“Gae,” Artur said, “You’re failing to realize that people in a school don’t generally have to get up with the sun to do a few hours of chores before they start their day. You normally do at least as much exercise as the men here do, just working around the house.”

“That’s sort of what I was thinking,” she replied. “Don’t they get enough exercise just keeping the school going?”

“We do have the boys work in the garden and take care of the animals. They also do their own housekeeping in the dormitory wing,” Doctor Haxmire informed them, “but the college does have a small staff for the kitchen, house and the grounds. The boys’ most important work is learning.”

“How ever did you manage to get such a lovely place for the college?” Artur asked. “And how can you afford it with only a dozen students?”

“We have a very generous patron,” Haxmire responded. “Lady Junianna Brannon has generously leased us this estate at the rate of one Gostrinan crown per annum for the next one hundred years, although she told Fallendir she intended to leave it to the school when she dies. Our non-faculty staff members are

actually her employees too. Faculty members are working for room and board this year so we can let whatever is left over from the tuitions go into a bank account. We'll start drawing salaries next year, though, because it looks like we'll be able to. We could now, but this will give the school a buffer, and we hope to have at least one more adept on the faculty next year."

"So right now the faculty is just you and Fallendir?" Gaenor asked.

"No, we have three other professors who are not adept. They're teaching a wide variety of subjects. We may not be a university but we're doing our best to give our students a well-rounded education. And, of course, we're using your thesis," he told her, "as one of the primary magic texts."

"So Radnire and Gerrod told me. I'm not sure it's complete enough for that yet."

"Of course it is," Haxmire told her.

"But it's only a start. There's so much more to add and even if it was complete it's only an extrapolation of Menandin's Principal. There's so much more to be explored. That reminds me, I've had some insights on the sympathetic and contagious principals that I need to discuss with you."

"Really? If they are as revolutionary as what you did with Menandin, the discipline of magic will never be the same."

"That's just the point," Gaenor replied. "My background isn't the usual. Artur taught me so much, but I've been working in a vacuum. For all I know, my new ideas were old a thousand years ago."

"I doubt that, Gae," Artur put in. "I may not be as knowledgeable as Doctor Haxmire here, but I have spoken to adepts all over the northern world. Your ideas are all new to me so even if some of them are well known, I think we'll find the context you put them in is novel."

"We'll see," Gaenor replied. She looked around and asked, "Where are all your students?"

"In classes," Haxmire replied

Doctor Haxmire led them to their rooms on the third floor of the east wing of the manor. It was a pleasant suite that he said they'd been holding for visiting lecturers.

"Which reminds me," he continued, "Gaenor, would you please consent to present a lecture to the school while you are here with us. You know everyone is reading your thesis. It would mean so much to all of us."

"I've never done that," she remarked. "Whatever would I talk about?"

"Talk about your thesis," Haxmire suggested.

"They're reading the thesis," she objected, "What would they get out of hearing it from me all over?"

"Talk about your recent additions, then," he replied, "or these new ideas you have about sympathy and contagion."

"Not until I've discussed them with you first," she countered.

“We have time,” he told her. “Maybe you can give a series of lectures.”

“A series?” Gaenor was near panic now. “I barely know enough to fill one lecture.”

“You underestimate yourself, my dear. And what you say doesn’t have to be all that long. I’m sure you’ll spend more time answering questions than in making whatever speeches.”

“I can answer questions, I suppose,” she considered.

“I’ll help you plan,” Haxmire promised. “If there’s one thing I can do after all these years is plan a lecture. It won’t be all that long before you can too.”

“And if this school wants to hear you speak,” Artur added, “you can bet that the University at Misha is going to be selling tickets for the same thing.” Gaenor wasn’t sure whether he was serious.

“Would you like to unpack?” Haxmire asked, “or continue the tour?”

“Oh, the tour. I can unpack anytime,” Gaenor responded immediately.

Haxmire led them back downstairs, telling them, “At the moment we have only two classes; those who started last year and those who started this year. Last year’s students are in their mathematics class this period and Fallendir is teaching the first year students ‘Introduction to Magic Theory.’ They’ll be done in half an hour or so. Then after lunch I teach a class in linguistics for the first years and the others will be studying botony. And after that I’m not really sure,”

“You’re teaching linguistics?” Gaenor asked.

“Yes. We try to discourage adept candidates from casting spells in their native tongues. Some of our incantations just sound silly, which does nothing for establishing the dignity of adepts,”

“That makes sense,” Gaenor agreed, “I don’t incant spells in Shandi and Artur doesn’t use Cilben. So what language are you teaching?”

“Most of the students are interested in Old Gostri. Being Gostrinan, it appeals to them, but I’ve also been teaching the Ondian dialect of Sothri. It had a nice musical cadence and it’s easy to compose a rhyme if that sort of thing appeals to you.

At the bottom of the stairs they turned right and they headed back into the east wing and ended up in a large room with a low stage at the far room.

“Now this is the large lecture hall which may also double as an auditorium. It used to be a ballroom. I suppose if we ever host a party here it can be used for that again.”

“Very big room,” Artur commented. “I don’t suppose you use it much yet.”

“Not yet. It can seat almost two hundred, so even with the whole school in here we still rattle around. In a few years, though, we may have more use for this room. We hope to have eighty students or better once we reach our full size.”

“That’s a lot of new adepts,” Gaenor noted.

“They wouldn’t all become adept,” Haxmire told her. “Not even all twelve of our current students will. A few won’t pass our final exams, but also a lot of students don’t want to be adept. They’re here to study with our other teachers. So far we have specialists in history, botony and geology. In time, each will be the head of a department and we’ll hire teachers for other subjects. We intend to be best known as a school of magic, but an adept needs to have a well-rounded technical and liberal education so in time we will have to become a university. That is a long time off, but this school will make history. Fallendir’s idea is to make this the most modern school in the world. We want our students to go out into the world and question everything. And instead of just teaching our students their spells by rote, we want them to be able to compose new ones and it’s your thesis, Gaenor, that is making that possible. That’s why we want you to lecture here so much. A few words from you will inspire the students and keep them working until they fully understand your new system.”

“All right,” Gaenor said at last. “I’ll talk to them. Tomorrow evening? Good. I think I’d like to sit in on one of two of the classes while I’m here too.”

“Why?” Haxmire asked, puzzled.

“I never got to attend a real college. It would be terrible to waste the opportunity now while we’re here. The class in botony should be interesting. I could stand to learn more about plants.”

“Excellent,” Haxmire nodded, “I’ll introduce you to our botanist, Master Steppan of Ginostor and the rest of the faculty, for that matter, at lunch.” At that moment a ringing bell could be heard throughout the house. “End of class period,” Haxmire explained. “Let’s go to lunch.”

Artur and Gaenor met with Haxmire and Fallendir after classes that afternoon and explained the situation going on in the Parch.

“Rain in the Parch is a serious matter,” Fallendir remarked gravely. He was a tall and very thin man with brown hair and green eyes. He did not wear the same old fashioned robes that Haxmire slumped around in, but wore a Mishandan style tunic of a dark blue cotton over gray trousers. Dressed as he was, he could well have passed for a businessman in the commercial center of Misha. They were sitting on two sides of a long table in one of the classrooms. “How certain are you that it is not of natural origin?”

“The Vieri assure us that is not the case,” Artur explained.

“Vieri,” Fallendir repeated. “I have trouble believing they really exist.”

“I could show you some,” Artur replied, “but it would involve a long trip to their Village.”

“I don’t doubt your word, Sir Artur,” Fallendir said quickly, “it’s just that it’s such a reversal of something I thought I knew.”

“Well, it’s not like you’re likely to meet one anytime soon,” Artur told him, “and I’m sure they’d be just as happy if you didn’t spread the word they actually exist.”

Privately Gaenor thought she could probably produce a vari much faster than Artur realized. She knew Cornellya was still somewhere nearby although she hadn’t sensed her presence since shortly after they

had crossed the Trina. Gaenor wondered where Cornellya was right now and decided she had probably made herself at home in the barn or might even have made herself at home on the third floor. After thinking about that she decided that Cornellya was more likely to be in the barn. There was a lower chance that way of running into someone who could see her, like Verika had.

“But how do they know the cause of that rain is ultimately on Ichtar?” Fallendir asked.

“The Vieri,” Gaenor explained, “have spells so complex they don’t even try to use them until they have a century of experience. Unlike us, they are born adept and their Council of the Wise can do things we can’t even comprehend although they almost never do anything. It seems that among the Vieri at least the more powerful an adept you become, the less magic you actually perform. They believe it is vitally important to not only know what spell to use in any case, but to not use it unless absolutely necessary.

“Anyway, they are able to trace the magical lines of force back to the source of the disturbance.”

“And that source is on Ichtar,” Falendir concluded.

“Right,” confirmed Gaenor.

“So why couldn’t they go to Ichtar and take care of the problem themselves?” Fallendir asked.

“At this moment,” Gaenor replied, “and until we cast the great spell they have entrusted us with, they are maintaining a far more complex one that is holding off the effects of the spell that is causing the change of weather patterns. They need every able vari to maintain their defense. If it fails, the change in the weather patterns will become fixed and an ice age will commence. Half the world’s landmass will be covered by ice sheets. That will force people living in the northern and southern parts of the continent to move closer to the equator.”

“It could be worse,” Fallendir noted.

“Could it? What will Gostrina do when the populations of Aston and most of Mishanda start trying to move in?” Artur asked.

“Make room, I suppose,” Fallendir replied.

“No,” Haxmire cut in. “the Asts and the Mishandans won’t merely be moving in, they’ll be invading. It will be war with a lot of death on all sides. It will go on for decades, maybe centuries and there won’t be a lot of people left by the time it is over. I too must admit that in spite of what you’ve told me I have trouble believing in Vieri.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have sent Cornellya home so soon,” Artur muttered.

“Who?” Haxmire asked.

“My godchild,” Artur replied. “She was born to the couple I stayed with while I lived among the Vieri and they asked me to name her. I named her Cornellya after my Cilben family the Cornellians and formally adopted her as a member of that family. Ironically, I had all the other Cornellians adopted out so in a sense, according to Cilben law, she and I are the only Cornellians left.”

“What about your children, Artur?” Haxmire asked. “Are they not Cornellians too?”

“By birth, they are but legally they are not. Cilben law can be strange at times.” He turned to look at Gaenor.

“What?” she asked innocently.

“Never mind. Anyway,” he continued to Haxmire and Fallendir, “she followed us out of the Parch until we caught her in the Thindra States and sent her home.”

“Actually, Verika caught her,” Gaenor corrected him.

“That’s another long story. Though one I think you’ll be interested in later.”

“So let me see if I understand what you’re telling us,” Fallendir said. “Somewhere on Ichtar who or whatever lives there have cast a spell intend on destroying the world as we know it?”

“A bit overly dramatic, but essentially correct,” confirmed Artur.

“All right, for the sake of argument let’s say we believe you. And if that’s the case I’ve never seen a truly great spell. Do you have it written down?”

“Of course,” Gaenor replied. “That’s why we stayed in the Parch so long. It took that long to compose and write it all down.”

“You composed it?” Fallendir asked.

“My contributions were minimal,” Gaenor said modestly. “The real work was accomplished by the members of the Council of the Wise. All I did was help them understand human adepts a bit better, describe some spell materials they don’t have access to and teach them my notation method.”

“That last was what really got them. Gentlemen, you should have seen it. There was a group of Vieri, nearly all nine hundred years old or more, sitting around at Gae’s feet like very young students, studying at their master’s feet.”

“It was embarrassing,” Gaenor recalled. “But Vieri will sit on the floor as comfortably as on a chair.”

“Still,” Artur continued, “it was something they had never seen, never even thought of before.”

“So might we see the spell?” Fallendir asked.

“Of course,” Gaenor replied, “I have one of the copies in here.” She slid a large yellow paper envelope across the table to Master Fallendir.

“This is just one copy?” he asked as he pulled out the enclosed sheets of paper. “There must be fifty pages of notation here!”

“Don’t exaggerate,” Gaenor chided him. “There are only forty-nine.”

“Oh good,” Fallendir tried to match Gaenor’s dry tone, with only marginal success, “a short read then.”

“Let’s see then,” Haxmire said reaching for the top few pages. “Fascinating,” he muttered a minute later. “The intricate relationships they describe...” he whispered another minute later. “And the power

involved..." he added still later. He grabbed the rest of the pages from Fallendir and started glancing through them with increasing speed and ferocity. "Magnificent!" He exclaimed as he finished his perusal of the spell. "It's like a finely woven tapestry that is hundreds of feet long. I'm going with you. I absolutely must be one of the adepts to cast this spell. Look at this passage here, Fallendir. See how it combines sympathy and contagion? Now look at this page. This section uses the object created by the other one in almost the same way. Actually it sets up an infinite regression in three dimensions; a power loop that is then used over here to charge up another part of the spell which in turn... well, look for yourself."

"It is an amazing piece of work. I wouldn't mind being involved myself, but we can't both go, the school needs us."

"True enough," Artur agreed, "but there is one thing you can do for us."

"What's that?"

"We only have two copies of the spell but will need at least five, possibly more. One for each adept."

"I can set the students to copying. How many copies would you like?"

"Ten," Artur told him. "I hope to have ten adepts in total. That will give us a backup man for each part."

"Could you make it eleven?" Gaenor requested "I'd like a neat copy of it to keep afterwards for my private collection; one that hasn't been dragged through whatever terrain we find on Ichtar."

"Might as well make it an even dozen then," Fallendir replied with a shrug. "One complete copy by each student that will leave a copy for the college library."

"Be careful that the students don't make any errors," Gaenor warned him, recalling her own recent mistakes. "I'd hate to see what might happen if even one detail was miscopied."

"I'll set up a round-robin review process that will have every student checking the copies of every other and I'll personally check each one," Fallendir assured her.

"I will too," Haxmire assured her.

"I thought you were going with them," Fallendir pointed out.

"Can't leave before the copies are ready," Haxmire returned. "That does bring up the question, however, of why the adepts and students at Misha can't do the copy work."

"They could, of course," Gaenor agreed, "but as it happens we have enough work for them to do if they agree." She pulled another thick stack of pages from the folder that had held the first spell. "This is the spell the Vieri are maintaining in the Parch. They can use some help and a group of adepts in Misha would be in an excellent location to fortify their defense. Misha is the closest major city to Ichtar. The only location that would have been better is Narmouth, but Artur and I are the only adepts from there and they'll need five to keep the spell going once it is started."

"And ten to get it started, I see," Haxmire noted looking at the second spell. "That's going to be difficult. They only have six adepts on the faculty last I heard."

“We’ll be able to help start them get it started,” Artur pointed out. “We don’t want to cast this until just before we leave for Ichtar and by then our full party should be assembled. We’ll have no trouble casting the spell in Misha. That leaves us with another problem, of course. With Doctor Haxmire, we still only number three and need at least two more adepts. Where do we find them?”

“There must be adepts available in Mishanda,” Fallendir speculated.

“And in other realms as well,” Artur agreed. The problem is we need more than just the usual adepts one finds in the average small city. You know the type I mean. They learned by rote and never went so much as one step beyond their bachelor’s degree. We need masters and doctors; adepts who have done original work and can work together as a group.”

“That last part may be a problem,” Haxmire noted thoughtfully. “When you get to this level you’ve spent a lot of time working alone. It gets to be a habit, you know.”

“Well, we can work around that,” Artur replied. “I have a bit of experience at getting strangers to work together closely. Ask any former member of the Twelfth Legion. Actually if it were five years from now I’d say we could probably use your first graduates, I think they’ll have the sort of training we need.”

“No use wishing for what we can’t have,” Gaenor commented. “We’ll ask again in Misha, but do you know anyone else we might ask to join us?”

“There’s an old classmate of mine named Faber Gerhardsson,” Fallendir suggested.

“Faber?” Haxmire asked. “The young man from Aston? Where is he these days? Jeritalon?”

“No. Last I heard he had a place in Vohn.”

“Vohn?” Gaenor asked. “Isn’t magic illegal there?”

“Normally, yes,” Fallendir replied, “but he told me he received a special Royal patent allowing him to practice in Sorvohn.”

“Doing what?” Haxmire asked.

“General practice. He figured that with no other adepts around as competition, he didn’t really need to specialize. He never did like just sticking down to one facet of magic anyway. As an accomplished generalist, I think he’d be perfectly suited to this task.”

“Sounds like he might be,” Artur agreed.

“Thinking of Aston, there’s another former student of mine,” Haxmire mentioned thoughtfully. “Geramir of Es is his name. He and his wife are doing research near Jeritalen.”

“His wife?” Gaenor asked. “A female adept?”

“Yes. He married a woman from Kimn. I understand they have a fair number of women who are adept there. I’ve never met any, but that’s what Geramir told me.”

“Kimn,” Artur repeated thoughtfully. “We met a merchant on the road who said there were a lot of adepts on Kimn and another in Peln referred to ‘the witches of Kimn.’”

“Witch is a terrible word, Artur,” Haxmire told him. “It means poisoner in Cilben, but I suppose you know that.”

“I do, but in Aston, I understand the term is used for any female magic user. The man who called them witches was from Aston originally, I think, or his family was anyway, he had an Astish name, so there may not have been the perjorative meaning a Cilben or some Thimdrans might have intended.”

“If you’re going to Aston anyway, maybe you should take a trip to Kimn anyway,” Haxmire suggested. “It sounds like they might be worth checking out.”

Six

“You have all read at least part of my thesis by now,” Gaenor told her very attentive audience the next evening after dinner. She had requested several candles and a blackboard near the podium she was expected to lecture from and the staff had provided a full box of candles and two large candelabra. The blackboard had been moved in from one of the classrooms. She had placed a short squat candle on top of her podium and lighted it. “The entire basis of that work is Menandin’s Principal, which to put it simply says that similar objects will behave similarly.

“I didn’t set out to do anything particularly revolutionary,” she continued. This part was easy. She had already said it so many times, she could tell this story while thinking about what to say next. “I was just trying to make sense of everything my teacher, Sir Artur, was telling me. The system of notation you are studying didn’t happen all at once either. At first I just made up signs for various ingredients and spell tools and gestures and everything else that goes into a spell. Then Sir Artur taught me Menandin’s Principal. Similar objects will behave similarly,” she repeated. “Well, it seemed obvious that if similar objects behaved similarly, shouldn’t the signs I use for similar objects appear similar as well?

“In time I added what I call the subtext of the notation. You don’t really need the subtext to be able to cast the spell. The mechanics of whatever spell you are casting are all spelled out without it. I’ll tell you a secret,” she told them conspiratorially, “I don’t always write out the subtext, not for a simple one-time use spell. I mean, if all I need is a crib note to follow while casting a new spell do I really need to make a note of all the properties of the tools I use? No, of course not! But if I’m working on a complex new spell I need to be able to understand every facet of what I’m trying to accomplish and I need to know how the tools I intend to use will interact. That’s when I use the subtext religiously, because if you do not take into account all the properties of the tools, ingredients and rituals you intend to use, you are going to have a disaster.

“Here let me demonstrate.” She paused and turned to the blackboard and wrote out the light spell she had attempted in Fasri although the text of the ritual was in Gostri even though she intended to use the Old Tongue. Then she turned back and picked up the steel rod she usually used in light and ignition spells. “Recently, I was walking down a city street at night by myself. It was a foolish thing to do, but then I’m only human and as foolish as anyone. Anyway, I discovered there was a man following me and I got quite nervous. When I couldn’t get away, I reached into my purse for a piece of flint and this steel here. I got the steel, but instead I picked this out.” She held up the green malachite chunk. Then she quickly cast the light spell and all the flames on the candles and lamps in the hall turned green. Her audience gasped.

“Not bad, heh? If I had used flint on that spell you’d have all been blinded for a few minutes. Now does

anyone know why I didn't just get a burst of green light when I cast the spell?" She paused in the eerie green light but nobody responded. They were still fascinated by the green lights. "Ahem! Anyone?"

"The color of the stone?" Radnire ventured when Gaenor looked at him.

"Not quite," Gaenor replied. "One can use color symbolically, but in this case the stone is green for the same reason the flame is. Malachite is a rich source of copper and is green because of the copper in it. A chemist might call malachite 'copper carbonate hydroxide.' I think malachite sounds prettier," she said as an aside and with a grin. She wrote out her notation for malachite on the blackboard beneath the symbol for flint. "Anyway copper burns with a green flame, hence the color, but the real question is why I didn't just get a burst of green light. Flint would have produced a burst of white light." She indicated the subtext beneath the flint symbol and at the subtext for malachite. "It's because malachite doesn't behave like flint. It is a metamorphite and it is used for making transformations. So the spell that should have produced light, instead transformed it. I can modify the spell like this..." She inserted a gesture symbol and the additional word "blue" into the incantation of the light spell and circled them. Then she cast the spell again with the malachite but also with the additional gesture and all the flames turned bright blue. She repeated the spell a few times, changing the flame colors again each time. Finally she made the flames white and left them that way.

"Not quite a normal flame color, is it? Well, it makes it easier to read my notes by. Okay, I got lucky on two counts. First the man who was following me was a local constable concerned for my safety and I picked up a relatively harmless spell tool. Now what might have happened had I used a quartz crystal instead? Quartz is an energy enhancer and is projective as well. The effects would have been explosive. On the other if I had pulled out a piece of ivory, nothing would have happened at all. This is not because ivory has no spell properties but because none of them are compatible with a light spell." She had been adding notations to the spell on the blackboard while talking to illustrate the properties of quartz and ivory and now she showed in the notation where the properties of ivory were incompatible.

"So when you completely notate a spell, you can see how it will work before you even cast it. But I think my thesis discusses it all in far more detail than we could go over here in a single lecture. I'll be glad to take questions on that later but for now I'd like to discuss some new ideas I've been mulling over lately.

"Even before Menandin devised his now famous principal we adepts were relying on the two basic principles of magic, sympathy and contagion. Doctor Haxmire informs me that the newer students here are still just starting to grasp these principles so I hope those of you in your second year of studies will forgive me for lecturing on a subject you know so well.

"Both the Law of Sympathy and the Law of Contagion are so old that we don't know who first formulated them. Sympathy, of course, is the magic property that allows us to perform an act locally that we want repeated remotely. For example, by lighting the candles on this candelabrum I can make those on the other light as well." She lit a single candle from the box and with a brief incantation and few mystic gestures she lit each of five candles in the candelabrum to her left. As she did so, the candles on the right ignited as well. She snuffed all the candles then returned to her lecture. Sympathy can also be used in microcosm to produce results on a larger scale. We have all heard of rain-making spells in which part of the ritual is to spill water on the ground. The act of spilling the water is a sympathetic attempt to cause water to 'spill' out of the clouds. Rain-making spells are notoriously unreliable, of course, since there are forces behind the weather that mere mortals cannot hope to bend to our wills, but when conditions are right we might 'persuade' those forces to go the way we desire. Of course, our efforts would probably be better directed if we were to build an aqueduct while waiting for those forces to become favorable, but..." She shrugged at the thought.

“Contagion is the law that tells us that two objects that have been in contact with one another remain in contact unless acted upon by an outside force.” Several students and Master Fallendir started at that pronouncement. Haxmire merely smiled; he had heard this from Gaenor earlier in the day. “Oh, I’m sorry,” Gaenor apologized. “I’m getting ahead of myself.” Actually she had blurted that out intentionally for two reasons. First to see if they were listening and then to catch their reactions. The results were all she had hoped for. “The way I was taught, and I’m sure the same for you, is that two objects that have been in contact remain in contact. True?” Most of the audience nodded. “So let’s test that.”

Once again she used the candle mounted on the podium. It was still burning with a bright white flame. Holding the steel in her hand she recited another simple incantation and touched the steel to the flame of the candle. Then she turned to the candelabrum on her left and touch the steel to the wick of the first candle. As she did so, it burst into flame with the same unnaturally bright white light. “If you were not all adepts or adept candidates I would probably have to demonstrate that this piece of steel is not hot enough to ignite these candles without magic, but I’m sure you all realize that.” Then she lighted the remaining candle in that holder.

“See?” she said. “Contagious ignition. The steel was in contact with this flame and so was able to be used to light those candles. But how about this?” she blew out the podium candle, then turned to the candles on her right and touched the steel to their wicks and nothing happened. “What happened to contagion?”

One student, Gaenor thought it might have been Radnire’s friend, Gerrod, answered, “The flame no longer exists. Therefore the link was broken!”

“Exactly,” Gaenor confirmed. “They remained in contact until acted upon by an outside force. In this case I was the outside force. I broke the contact by blowing out the candle. By the way, if you ever try that be very careful. The steel was in contact with the fire, not the candle. Had I put it down on something flammable, like this podium, it would have burst into flame. Not quite the way I want to conclude this discussion.”

“Couldn’t you have limited its ability to just candles?” a voice in the crowd asked.

“Yes, of course,” Gaenor replied. “Or I could even have limited it to just the candles on this holder or any single candle for that matter. It’s all in the incantation. Perhaps some evening we can discuss incantation construction theory. Tomorrow night if you like, though Artur and I will need to be moving on again in two or three days so if you’d like to have a seminar along those lines, better decide fast.” Gaenor surprised herself just then. She had come into the lecture hall very nervously and not particularly sure of herself. Now she was offering to do something similar again in the very near future. Suddenly she realized this was her element and she was enjoying every moment of it.

“Here’s something else I’ve been thinking about and after that I’ll take your questions. The physicists of the world tell us that matter is indestructible. You can crush it, break it up into a thousand million pieces or even burn it, but if you take all the pieces, or if burnt collect all the emitted smoke and ash and weighed it, you would have the same mass you started with; just in a different form. This is referred to as the Law of Conservation of Matter.

“Similarly, energy is indestructible. It might change from potential energy to kinetic energy or *vice versa*, but in all Creation the total amount of energy remains the same. That’s the Law of Conservation of Energy. Pretty heady stuff, I think. I’ve never been able to study that very deeply. My local library at home only owns a few basic texts on the subject. Maybe so, but where does the energy to work magic

come from?

“This is one of the great mysteries of magic. Nobody knows. In fact I asked Doctor Haxmire this very question earlier today. It seemed to me that the question was so basic that I had to be treading on a path so well worn that no writer saw fit to discuss it. But can you believe it? All these centuries, millennia really, that people have been using magic and to date no one really knows how it all works! Why is that? Because we’ve been working with symptoms but not causes. I know that if I take this steel, incant thusly...” and this time she intoned the incantation in Gostri so the attentive audience would know precisely what she was doing, “and then touch this steel to the flame of this candle...” She briefly passed the steel through the flame of one of the candelabrum candles. “...and touch the wick of this candle, it will ignite.” And it did, indeed ignite.

“But,” she continued, “why does it ignite? Where is the energy coming from to ignite the candle? The ancients thought it comes from the primordial chaos that underlies Creation. That wasn’t really much of an explanation, just a story used to explain the unexplainable. More recently we have borrowed from our contemporary physicists. Since energy can be kinetic or potential, we are taught that in the spell tools and ingredients we use there is potential mystic energy and when we cast a spell, we release that energy, making it kinetic. That sounds better and it is possible that this does explain it to an extent, but there are still facets we do not understand.

“For example, why does this steel rod and this piece of malachite have the power within them to turn the lights green, or when modified to any color of our choosing? The difference between a spell tool and a spell ingredient is that an ingredient is consumed in the working of a spell, while a tool is not. That consumption, just like the burning of this candle releases potential energy, so it is an excellent explanation for where the energy come from in a spell that uses an ingredient. But this evening I have cast no spells that used ingredients, just tools; steel and in some of them, malachite. Where did the energy come from this time?

“Well some of it may have come from the burning of the candles so in that respect we might consider the candles as spell ingredients. So we need to consider a spell that does not need any ingredient. Like this.” She blew out the candle on the podium again, picked up the steel and this time picked up a piece of flint and cast a simple ignition spell on the candle. “See, it lighted and apparently neither the flint nor the steel were consumed in the process.”

“Couldn’t the energy have come from within yourself?” Master Fallendir asked.

“That is current theory,” Gaenor acknowledged, “as we both know, but something about the explanation still gnaws at me. I could cast that ignition spell all day and my arms would grow tired and I’d probably also get terminally bored as well.” That drew some chuckles from the crowd. “But from what I have read concerning the mathematics, that doesn’t account for enough energy to light a single candle. Still more powerful spells, even those with ingredients that are consumed, appear to require more energy than can be accounted for in the potential energy chemically present in the ingredients. In short; it doesn’t add up, not completely anyway.

“It’s always possible that the calculations that have been done are in error. We are talking about estimates after all. Estimates have been known to be wrong in the past. No doubt they will again as well, but what if our estimates on that count are accurate? We have a major gap between the energy we know is being released and used and the energy we know is necessary to work a spell. So in my spare time - and you can believe me that when you walk or ride a horse for a thousand leagues or so, you have plenty of time - I think about this.

“What if all spell tools are actually ingredients, too? If so they too must be consumed but if they are being consumed it’s at a rate so small we cannot measure it at this time. And yet what sort of consumption would release such a great amount of energy and yet continue to remain undetected by any method we have to measure it by?”

“That is as far as I was able to get until this afternoon. Not too surprising since I’m just a small town girl who has never had the opportunity to attend University or even such a fine college as you have here in Mita. There are a lot of gaps in my knowledge.”

Most of the students stirred at that. Gaenor was an acknowledged genius in the field of magic. *She obviously must be, they thought, to be able to make so great an impact on the field and still be able to confess her ignorance!*

“That’s why I’ve been trying to sit in on your classes with you while I’ve been here. There’s so much to learn and even if I live a thousand years or more, I’ll never know it all, but that’s no excuse to not try.

“So this afternoon Doctor Haxmire and I were discussing this very subject. He told me that I’m not the first to wonder about this in fact. Well, I wasn’t surprised. Like I said, my education does have more than a few gaps. What did surprise me is that almost nobody has made much progress in this direction. But there is a man in the deep south, in Corinia who has an astounding hypothesis that relates. The man is not an adept, but a physical scientist, and from experience we already know that magic and science are not entirely unrelated. In fact, the more I think about it, the more I am convinced they are really two ways of studying the same thing. Anyway this man, a Doctor E. Nyima, believes, among other things, that matter and energy are really the same thing and that theoretically they can be converted back and forth. In the paper, Doctor Haxmire showed me, this is still in the very early stages of development. The paper discussed what Doctor Nyima calls a ‘Special Theory of Relativity,’ he has developed and also speculates on the nature of a general version of the theory. I couldn’t follow all the mathematics, but the implications are astounding. A very little amount of matter could be converted into an incredible amount of energy. Just how much is not known yet, but it looks like even the most conservative estimate should close the energy gap our current theories leave us.

“Naturally, I immediately wrote to Doctor Nyima about his paper and mentioned my own less well-proven ideas. I doubt I’ll tell him anything he doesn’t already know but I hope he will take the time to discuss my questions. In return I suggested several spells that might help confirm his calculations physically.

“Anyway that is just speculation at this point, but it gives you all an idea of just how exciting this field we’ve chosen is. Any questions?”

Nearly everyone’s hands went up immediately. She spent the next two hours happily answering questions and in some cases demonstrating her answers until Haxmire finally called an end to the evening session.

“Miss Gaenor will be with us for at least another two days. We can continue this tomorrow evening if she has any energy left after tonight.”

Mishanda

They stayed in Mita another three days. Each night Gaenor spoke to the assembled students and faculty although after the first night she did it in the form of a seminar with everyone seated around a long table. The subjects varied and she learned as much from the students as they did from her.

Her biggest surprise came on the day after her formal lecture when everyone came up to her, mostly in groups of twos and threes, to ask her to sign her book for them. This was the first time she saw her thesis bound in leather. She asked about that and Fallendir told her the college had paid a publisher in Es to do the job for them although he wondered why she hadn't known about it.

"We paid for the rights to do so; the University at Misha should have forwarded half of it to you."

"I haven't been home or in Misha in months," Gaenor pointed out. "The money is probably sitting and waiting for me in the Bank of Narmouth. I wonder how much I've missed in my absence. I wrote to my sister the first evening we were here, letting her know Artur and I were safe and where we had been in the last few months since we left Dana."

"I'm surprised you hadn't done so sooner," Fallendir told her.

"Up until now I've been headed toward Narmouth on the fastest possible route. Any letter I sent was as likely to be behind me as in front. A few days after we cross the border into Mishanda however, the road will fork with the northern route headed to Misha and the southern to Narmouth. As I'm headed toward Misha next this is the time to send such a letter."

The only student who hadn't yet asked Gaenor for her autograph by the time she and Artur were ready to leave was Radnire of Es. He ran up to them as they were about to mount up.

"Gaenor," he started breathlessly. "Would you?" he asked holding the book in front of her.

"Of course," she replied. "Do you have a pen and some ink handy? Mine is packed up."

"Right here," he said producing a small bottle and a steel-nibbed dip pen.

"You almost waited too long," she chided him gently. "Another few minutes and you'd have had to wait until our next visit."

"Well, you know, I just thought..." he trailed off not really explaining anything, but his embarrassed blush spoke volumes.

Gaenor smiled. "Radnire, I've known you longer than anyone else in this school. Remember?"

"Heh," he laughed nervously. "I guess you have at that."

Then Gaenor wrote a few words on the title page and signed her name. "See you next time," she told him, handing the book back.

"When will that be?" he asked curiously.

"When we've put our team together, we promised to come back for Doctor Haxmire."

“Oh yeah. Wish I could go,” he said wistfully.

“Really? I don’t want to. It’s just something I must do. Take care of yourself, Radnire.” She hugged him quickly, then she mounted her horse and rode away with Artur, leaving Radnire to watch them until they disappeared around the first bend in the road.

“That was a nice place to rest up,” Artur commented a while later after they had ridden through the town of Mita proper. “We have a lot longer trip ahead of us than I at first thought.”

“From here to Misha to Aston and Kimn and then south to Sorvohn and back again,” Gaenor noted. “Yes, it makes the distance we have traveled so far seem like almost nothing at all.”

“That isn’t an exaggeration or at least not by much,” Artur agreed. “For a while at least we’ll be in familiar territory. Are you sure you don’t want to go to Misha by way of Narmouth?”

“I’m sure I would rather do that, but once I’m back home it will be all the harder to leave again. It’s best we just keep moving.” She laughed a bit mirthlessly and added, “A body in motion remains in motion unless acted upon by an outside force. How long ago was it you taught me that?”

“A lifetime ago, I think,” Artur replied.

“Six years ago, I think,” she corrected him. “Seems like a lifetime, however.”

“I do recall how long it took me to convince you it was true though,” he chuckled. “But in all fairness, it was the last time I had to fight to get you to accept something you didn’t believe. After that, you may have questioned everything, but you didn’t reject any of it without experimental proof to back you up.”

“I’ll tell you a secret,” she replied. “I stopped challenging everything you said because Master Prendur, the Narmouth school teacher, told me you were right every time I asked him.”

“So it took two of us to convince you?”

“I needed reproducible results,” she laughed. “Seriously, the things you were teaching me were so completely out of my experience I just needed Master Prendur’s confirmation. I knew him much better than I knew you, so if he agreed with you, it must be so.”

They rode on and an hour later they reached the border of Mishanda. Gaenor was waved through customs with only a few questions, but Artur underwent an extended interrogation because of his Cilben features. In the end, however the officer in charge of the station confirmed that he was indeed a sworn knight of the realm and he was courteously passed on through.

“Some problem with Cilbens recently?” he asked the supervising officer.

“You don’t know the half of it,” the man sighed. “Every Cilben merchant who wanders in claims to be part of the Imperial legation. They’re a bunch of arrogant bastards, if you ask me.”

“You’ll get no arguments from me,” Artur replied.

“Thank you, Sir Artur. They’ve always been a bit of a problem here in customs, of course, but they have been even worse since that incident at the Firdan coronation. Did you hear about that, sir?”

Artur chuckled, "A bit. I was there at the time."

"Were you, sir? Well, when His Royal Majesty, may Nua grant him health and happiness, returned home he expelled the Cilben ambassador and his entire staff. A new ambassador showed up almost two months ago and the Cilbens are back to their old tricks, but this time the king in his wisdom passed a decree that members of the ambassadorial staff may import only as much as they might carry and that any caught engaging in commerce will be expelled after they have paid the heavy fines."

"I imagine the Emperor will have a fit when the word gets to him," Artur laughed.

"He won't have much ground to stand on if he wishes to continue with normal relations here. The new ambassador signed the treaty in the Emperor's name before King Pawlen would recognize him. Oh, he can abrogate the treaty, of course, but at the expense of dishonoring himself in all the eastern kingdoms. It wouldn't be a clever move."

"Emperor Lusius has never been known for his cleverness," Artur replied. "His treacherousness, his weasel cunning, perhaps but true cleverness? No."

"You sound like you've had some dealings with him," the officer noted.

"Not in a very long time. Though not long enough for me," Artur replied, "or him either I'll wager."

The customs officer chuckled at that. "Well, be that as it may, Sir Artur, welcome back to Mishanda."

"Thank you, sir" They shook hands and Artur finally went to join Gaenor so they could continue on.

"Is your past catching up with you?" Gaenor asked as they rode.

"You might say that. My face will always be Cilben and my former countrymen have been making nuisances of themselves again."

"Strange," Gaenor commented, "but the Cilbens I met in Wahton and even General Narsian didn't seem at all like the ones we see here in the east."

"I think they leave their manners at home," Artur replied. "Any man in my command who had behaved with the arrogance we see here would have been scrubbing floors for a year or two. You would think that an ambassador would be more careful of the men he has on his staff, but for all her faults Cilbe is still the largest state in the world and her combined military might dwarfs that of any two other kingdoms. It's only natural that her citizens might be proud and the line between pride and arrogance is a thin one."

"But if she didn't make so many enemies, she wouldn't need so many legions to defend herself," Gaenor pointed out.

"True enough. If I ever happen to be Emperor I'll have to do something about that." Artur laughed at the notion and after a moment so did Gaenor.

The next day their road reached the shore of the very long and thin Bay of Pandenda. Gaenor breathed in the salt air and sighed with thoughts of home. For the next few days they fell asleep to the sound of waves lapping the shore near the inns they stayed in, but then they reached a major fork in the road.

“Well, Gae,” Artur commented, “Last chance to take a side trip to Narmouth.”

“Don’t tempt me, dear,” she replied tiredly. “Turning away from home is hard enough.”

“Sorry,” Artur replied contritely. “So we take the north fork to Misha.”

The road wound its way up into the mountains until it found a series of long ridge lines that led them one week later to the headwaters of the River Rind. They headed down stream another two and a half days until they reached a smaller road coming up from the south.

“I believe this is our turn, Gae,” Artur told her.

“It can’t be,” Gaenor protested. “Misha is that way,” she pointed in the direction the road they were on continued.

“Yes. That is true,” Artur agreed, “but you’ve been carrying several packets of flower seeds with you since we left Dana and then you picked up more in Wahton and the Thimdras. At the moment we’re only an hour or two from their ultimate destination. We may as well stop in Ander and deliver them. If that delays us another day or two, that suits me fine. The off and on rain we’ve been traveling through this past week is tiring enough. So let’s visit our baronial friends and take the time to dry out.”

“I didn’t realize we were so close,” Gaenor admitted. “I should have, I suppose.” They turned southward and rode on.

“What I’d like to know,” Artur told her a few minutes later, “is why you didn’t send Ibbet the seeds you bought in Dana at the same time you sent most of your clothing home to Marlie. I’m sure Chas would have been glad to see they arrived safely.”

“I did, but in the confusion some of the seeds got lost at the bottom of my pack,” Gaenor confessed. “There were other things on my mind at the moment, you may recall.”

“Point taken.”

They rode through the mountainous forest, an area of mixed conifers and deciduous broadleaf trees but soon reach a broad expanse of fields for crops and dairy cattle. For another hour they threaded their way past various small farms until the slate roof of the baronial manor of Ander came into sight.

It had been a long day, but with the end of it in sight they picked up their pace and were soon at the manor house’s front gate.

Two

There was an unusual amount of activity all around the manor as they arrived. And there were a pair of guards wearing green livery stationed at the front gate.

“Your names, sir and lady?” One of the guards demanded politely of them. They gave their names, wondering about the guards. The baron had not had guards posted during their last visit and the livery of the manor servants had been a deep burgundy. “And your business here, Sir Artur?” Gaenor kept her temper in check but with difficulty. It was normal that a woman in the company of a man would be

considered of lesser importance and Artur was a knight after all, but it was still the first time in months she had not been treated equally with him. In Mita her status, in fact, had been somewhat higher than Artur's.

"We were in the neighborhood," Artur replied, "and thought we should pay our respects to our friends the baron and his heirs."

The two guards looked at each other for a moment. "We weren't told what to do in this sort of situation," the one who had been silent until now said to the other.

"One of us better run up to the house and ask, I guess," came the reply. "Might as well be me. Would you please wait here?" he said to Artur and Gaenor. It wasn't really a request. They nodded and he ducked through the gate and jogged up to the manor.

"What's going on?" Artur asked.

"I'm sorry, Sir Artur. We've been ordered not to say."

"All right," he said puzzled. He glanced at Gaenor, who shrugged in reply.

They waited at the gate for a few minutes until the guard came running back at full speed. "Let them in!" he shouted as soon as he was close enough, then panted, "It's all right!"

The other guard opened the gate and stood out of their way as they rode on by. The guard who had run up to the house stood at attention as they passed him and saluted before returning to his duty at the gate.

"That was an abrupt turn around," Artur said to Gaenor.

"Yes," she agreed, "I wonder what's up."

A baronial servant, this one in burgundy, met them as they approached the front door. "I will see to your horses, Sir Artur, Miss Gaenor," he told them, "and see that your packs arrive in your rooms."

"Thank you, Dal," Gaenor replied, remembering him from their previous visit.

The door opened as they approached and the head servant greeted them, "Welcome back, Miss Gaenor," he said warmly, "And you as well, Sir Artur. Congratulations."

"Thank you," Artur replied simply, unable to recall the man's name. He marveled, as ever, at Gaenor's ability to even remember the name of the baron's stable hand.

"It is good to see you again too, Master Nalfray," Gaenor said warmly.

"Thank you, miss. They are all in the pink garden this afternoon. This way."

They followed Master Nalfray through the house and into the garden area out back. The manor house hadn't changed in their absence, but the air inside was fresher now that the windows had been open all summer. On their last visit it had been early spring and the gardens were just barely starting to show bits of green and a few very early flowers. Now the area was in its glory. All the deciduous trees were in full and mature leaf and there were flowers everywhere. Lady Ibbet's pink garden was an area off to the right as they left the house. It was a small plot of land that had been planned as an intricate maze of paths between roses, impatiens, and other pink flowers and was completely enclosed by walls of privet. In the

center of the garden was an open area. There were a dozen people sitting there as they approached.

“Gae!” two voices called from either side. From her right Gaenor saw Lady Ibbet approaching, her arms wide and welcoming. To her left was Lady Relle, with whom Gaenor had formed a friendship during the coronation festivities in Firdan. Taken by surprise she was uncertain who to greet first and her head kept turning back and forth in confusion. Relle and Ibbet had both stopped a few feet from Gaenor and looked as though they were seeing each other for the first time. Then they both smiled and Relle gestured for Ibbet to go first.

Ibbet hugged her friend fiercely, saying, “It’s so good to see you again!” Then Relle had her turn.

“I’ve been worried sick about you, Gae,” she told her. “Why didn’t you write?”

“For a while we weren’t anywhere I could post a letter,” Gaenor explained. “And once we got back to civilization I was pretty much on my way here. Oh it’s so good to see you both. Relle? What are you doing in Ander?”

“Pretty much the same thing I was doing in Firdan,” she replied.

“Shopping?” Gaenor asked. Relle and Ibbet laughed at that.

“No, silly,” Relle replied between laughs. “Tallur and I are following the king around. We’re in his entourage.”

“King Pawlen is here?” Gaenor asked. She looked around and saw Artur was already talking to the King and Baron Rolder. “Why?”

“He is touring the kingdom to assess the repairs since the great storm this spring,” Ibbet replied.

“This was our last stop,” Relle added. The worst of the damage was at Merahk’s Landing. It was at least six weeks before they had the ferry back in service, but it’s mostly back to normal now. The biggest problem has been stone merchants overcharging for roofing slates. The people there might have done better to use thatch like the Anderites do, but Pawlen decided to tax those purveyors of slate who raised their rates over ten percent and will distribute the proceeds to those who were cheated. Many farmers lost their early crops, but the crops they’ve planted since the storm have done exceedingly well this summer. All in all, Mishanda prospers.”

“That’s good to hear,” Gaenor. “Did you happen to get to Narmouth?”

“No, the storm wasn’t all that severe there. Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry about that!” Gaenor laughed.

“Gae, why was lady Relle worried about you?” Ibbet asked. “Where have you been?”

Before Gaenor could reply, a voice boomed out, “Miss Gaenor of Narmouth, you are summoned to stand before His Majesty, Pawlen III, King of Mishanda!” Gaenor spun around to see another friend, Master Chasur Felso the Torse Herald, standing behind and slightly to the side of King Pawlen. Artur, Baron Rolder, and Lords Tallur and Tander stood on both sides of the young king. The other people in the garden looked up expectantly and started to move to the edges of the clearing. Gaenor felt a gentle push from behind her but didn’t know whether it was Relle or Ibbet who got her into motion.

As she walked forward she recalled the other half of the physical law she had quoted to Artur, "A body at rest will remain at rest unless acted upon by an outside force." A smile broke out on her face in spite of the solemn visages on the king and the men around him. Then she stood in front of the king and tried to remember how to curtsy.

"Kneel, Miss Gaenor," Pawlen told her seriously. She did so and belatedly remembered that it was not customary in Pawlen's court for one to avert his or her eyes. She lifted her head and saw the king looking back at her. "Miss Gaenor, We are seriously offended."

"Your Majesty?"

"You've been here at least a quarter of a hour and didn't see fit to say hello to Us? Some friend!" His face showed no sign of humor as he spoke.

"I'm so sorry, Your Majesty," she started, but he hushed her by placing his finger in front of his lips. She stopped immediately and saw that he was now struggling to keep a straight face.

In a much warmer voice he continued, "You have done Us two services of incalculable worth. First of all you performed the binding ceremony on Our royal cousin, Queen Ymany of Firdan and also you invented the most marvelous hangover cure. We are not sure which was more important," he added with a chuckle. "Somewhere in Misha there is a parchment with your name on it, but We are sure Sir Chasur here can either recite it from memory or at least make an attempt at faking it. Chas." As Chas began to speak, a servant approached Pawlen and handed him a finely etched saber. Paulen gave it a slow flourish before softly resting it on Gaenor's shoulder.

"Be it known to all and sundry that on this one hundred and seventeenth day of summer in the third year of Our reign We Pawlen III of Mishanda do recognize the multiple and indispensable services of Our subject, Gaenor of Narmouth, and hereby invest her in the Order of the Distaff and style her by the title Lady of the Court..." Gaenor's jaw dropped at that pronouncement. Behind her, Gaenor heard a squeal of happiness from Ibbet and a fierce, low, "Yes!" from Relle. Chas continued, "...granting her these arms, 'Gules, an oak tree fructed its trunk gorged by a crown argent.'"

"Oh my!" Relle whispered when the significance of the blazon of Gaenor's new arms registered on her.

Pawlen lifted the sword from Gaenor's shoulder and commanded, "Rise, Lady Gaenor." Gaenor was stunned and just continued to kneel, looking up at her king in disbelief. "I dare say her legs have given out on her," Pawlen chuckled as he resheathed the saber. "Allow me, my lady." He reached out his right hand and clasped hers and then pulled her gently but firmly to her feet. "Nobles, I give you, Lady Gaenor of Narmouth, First Companion of the Distaff!" and everyone in the garden cheered.

Gaenor was still somewhat in shock half an hour later after all the congratulations. Relle and Ibbet had remained almost constantly on either side of her during this time and Gaenor had a brief vision of the three of them as a single three-headed monster. Finally she had a chance to talk to Chas.

"Congratulations, Gae," he told her.

"Sir Chasur? Congratulations yourself!"

"Thank you. It happened just after we returned from Firdan. It seems that heralds are never put on the formal honors list, in Mishanda anyway, as they would know it was going to happen even before the list

was officially published. So by tradition, Mishandan heralds are ennobled by surprise. But it wasn't as large a surprise to me as it was to you, Gae."

"You knew it might happen someday, but I didn't even have a hint it was coming," she replied.

"You should have, Gae" Relle told her.

"Indeed," Chas agreed. "Don't you remember the morning you devised the hangover cure on the *Dauntless*? Pawlen wanted to knight you right there and then."

"And one duke protested that we do not knight women in Mishanda," Gaenor recalled. "I remember that."

"And do you recall His Majesty's reply? 'You don't. Perhaps We do,'" he recited in flawless imitation of the king. "Well that is just what he has done. This new title, 'Lady of the Court' is a knighthood for women and the Order of the Distaff is the new order of female knights of which you are the very first inductee. That makes you the principal knight, uh lady, of the order. Someday when there are more than just you in the order that might mean something."

"Lady of the Court?" Gaenor asked. "Why 'of the Court?'"

"It's to distinguish you from those ladies whose titles have land attached to them. Ibbet and Relle here have land, even if they cannot point to a particular plot and say it is theirs."

"I can," protested Ibbet. "We're standing on it."

"It's certainly prettier than any land I can call my own," Relle commented.

"Artur received a document with his arms painted on it," Gaenor commented.

"And you will too," Chas assured her. "You heard the king, it is in Misha."

"Yes, but heraldic is a language I do not speak. What do my arms look like? I mean I know there's an oak tree, but..."

"Oh. The field is red and the charge is a silver-colored oak tree with oversized acorns; that's what 'fructed' means, with fruit but since acorns are so small, we make them amazingly large in heraldry to make sure they show. Around the trunk is a crown, also silver."

"The tinctures of royal Firdan, I notice," Relle mentioned.

"Yes," agreed Chas. "That was by the request of Queen Ymanya, in fact."

"The use of a crown on non-royal arms is also quite unusual as well," Ibbet added.

"Practically unheard of, in fact," Chas nodded, "and when you see the emblazon of your arms, the painting that is, you'll note the crown has been made to look like the one Ymanya wears. That was also her request. The oak symbolizes power and by your power she was crowned. Understand now?"

"Yes, I do, Chas," Gaenor murmured. "Thank you. You understood all that before he explained, didn't you?" she asked both Ibbet and Relle.

“Of course,” Relle replied, smiling.

“I didn’t,” Ibbet admitted “I hadn’t been aware you had cast the binding spell. You’re adept now? Why didn’t you say?”

“I haven’t had a chance,” Gaenor replied.

“You are?” Relle and Chas asked together.

“How?” Relle demanded.

“When?” Chas asked at the same time.

“Let’s find a place to sit,” Gaenor suggested. “I’ve been riding all day until I got here and can stand getting off my feet.”

“Let’s go to the secret garden,” Ibbet suggested.

“Secret garden?” Relle asked. “By most definitions this one would qualify.”

“This one is an older garden than the pink garden,” Ibbet explained, leading the way out. “My grandmother had it built. It’s not far.”

“Another maze?” Relle asked, as they left the pink garden’s maze.

“Actually no, just a thin twisty little path so you can’t actually see inside by looking down the path. Here it is.” They had only walked a few steps away from the entrance to the pink garden but now they turned left down another inconspicuous path which curved sharply then opened up into another open space with chairs and benches amidst a profusion of greenery and some brightly colored blossoms. “This garden is a bit past its glory. You should have seen it a month ago when the day lilies were still in bloom. Please sit so Gae can tell us all that’s happened since we last saw her, and, Gae, you can start from when you last left Ander.”

They sat on the chairs and benches in a small circle and Gae described everything that had happened since she last saw Ibbet. It was slow going as she described the coronation in Firdan because Relle insisted on adding her own viewpoint to the story. Ibbet became very pale when Gaenor describe their encounters with the Temi and even Relle stopped trying to contribute when Gaenor described the long trek to the border of the Parch. However, when she described what had happened in Gendri even Ibbet couldn’t help but interrupt her.

“Gae! You actually tried to fight the assassin? How could you?” she asked.

“You’re absolutely crazy, Gae!” Relle told her. “Of course that’s probably why I like you so much.”

Gaenor caught Ibbet looking at Relle appraisingly again, but replied, “I think I was a bit crazy. Then anyway. Artur said later that the Tem didn’t have a chance. That’s not quite true, of course. I came at him so hard and fast that he was put on the defensive. The fact I had never held a sword so he couldn’t predict what I might do next kept him there, until I tripped and fell.” Ibbet and Relle gasped.

Chas, however, said, “All right, Gae, don’t keep us in suspense. We can see you’re alive and well.”

“Artur used a defensive amulet to kill the Tem. He was nearly powerless by then, but amulets will work for anyone. Relle knows that. How did you enjoy the glowing lights, by the way?”

“I waited until we were back in Misha then used the spell to shock Tallur at dinner one evening. Fun!” she replied. “But keep talking. What happened next?”

Gaenor told them of their last meeting with Leracus and of what he had said.

“I don’t understand,” Ibbet admitted. “Why did he just let you go?”

“You’ve never been inside the Parch, Ibbet. Leracus honestly thought Artur would have a better chance of survival, even in his condition at the time, if he were to challenge Leracus personally. If we hadn’t had all those water spells stored up in amulets we would have been dead a day or two later. As it is, it was a very near thing.”

She went on to describe the Vieri and their village. She told them about Cornellya and Kseniya and all the other Vieri she had met and how she had discovered she was now adept, then described their journey back out of the Parch. She told them about everything that had happened in Wahton and the Thimdra States. About Verika and how they had caught Cornellya following them. She described their journey across Gostrina and how Cornellya had sat behind her as she crossed the flood-swollen Trina. She mentioned her mishap in Fasri and the lecture in Mita.

“Not a whole lot happened after we crossed the border until we arrived here,” Gaenor concluded. “So what’s been happening since I left?”

“You first, dear,” Relle told Ibbet.

“All right, it’s been a lovely summer. The farmers have done well since we chased the lomorgs back into the mountains. I spent a month or so helping the villagers re-thatch their roofs.”

“You did?” Relle asked. It might have been condescending, but the way she said it carried respect.

“I couldn’t very well just sit back and keep the weeds out of my garden while the people here had no roofs on their houses,” Ibbet replied. “It turns out I have a knack for thatching. We have only two professional thatchers in Ander and they are father and son. The elder thatcher told me I could have a job with him anytime,” she laughed. “And, of course, the tax relief King Pawlen granted us was a great benefit. And if the harvest is as good as it looks, we’ll be able to pay most of those taxes anyway. After a horrible spring, we have had a wonderful summer.”

“You’re going to pay taxes you don’t have to?” Relle asked incredulously.

“Why, of course,” Ibbet replied. “Ander was granted relief because our people would have suffered to pay their normal burden of taxes. But we will pay every penny we can afford. This my father has said and this I would do myself were it my decision to make.”

There was a strange expression on Relle’s face as she got up, but it resolved into deepest respect as she gave Ibbet a half-curtsy and murmured, “My lady. Thank you.”

“For what?” Ibbet asked suspiciously as Relle sat back down.

“That simple speech taught me a lifetime of lessons. I’ve been in court too long, I fear, and have forgotten what true honesty is. May I call you friend?”

“Lady Relle,” Ibbet began, “when I first met you yesterday, I thought... well it’s better perhaps if I didn’t say what I thought.”

“That I was one of those useless butterflies that infest most royal courts?” Relle asked bluntly. Ibbet nodded reluctantly. ‘I’ve tried not to be, but being able to escape being influenced by the intrigues of the court, that’s another matter altogether.”

“When I saw that Gae was your friend, though,” Ibbet continued, “I knew that you had to be someone worth knowing... and being friends with.”

“Similarly when I arrived I saw you as a delicate blossom sort who hides behind the men of her family and only does those things supposedly proper to a woman. I know better now. Even before you told me of thatching the roofs of Ander I knew that. How? For the same reason you came to think better of me; Gaenor is your friend.”

“Stop, both of you,” Gaenor protested, trying not to giggle but also deeply embarrassed.

“Nonsense, Gae,” Relle told her. “It’s true, though I must admit I was being a bit gushier than I can normally stand. Besides it’s my turn now.

“When we got back to Misha, the king expelled the entire Cilben embassy from the kingdom. Old Girdecus couldn’t believe his ears. I mean that literally. He really thought he had heard wrong and started in on some speech about trade negotiations and Pawlen cut him off and repeated his order. When Girdecus protested, Pawlen told him he would leave within 24 hours or his life was forfeit.

“Girdecus must be one of the most stupid diplomats I’ve ever met, and trust me, I’ve met a lot of them. He started blustering about how the Emperor would consider his expulsion reason to go to war.”

“What did Pawlen do then?” Ibbet asked.

“You’ll love this! He told him he looked forward to teaching the legions of Cilbe a long overdue lesson in humility. Then he assigned a captain of the guards to take a company and escort Girdecus immediately to the nearest border. They left him just over the border in Gostrina, not far from Mita, I imagine. The rest of the ambassadorial staff was given a week to pack and then follow him although Girdecus’ old deputy...”

“That would be Flacco,” Gaenor commented.

“Yes that’s the one,” Relle agreed. “Anyway he petitioned for and received a private audience just before leaving Misha. I don’t know what he said, but the king was a lot calmer afterwards and he agreed to accept another ambassador from Cilbe so long as neither he nor any member of his staff had any traceable relationship to Girdecus. The new ambassador arrived a few weeks ago and since then we’ve been out touring this part of the kingdom.”

Gaenor looked around and asked, “What happened to Chas?”

“He ducked out when Ibbet and I started gushing at each other,” Relle replied. “So you’re adept at last,” she said, looking at Gaenor. “Show us a trick?”

“Relle, Gaenor isn’t some cheap traveling performer,” Ibbet protested.

“Of course not,” Relle agreed instantly. “I’m not interested in sleight of hand tricks or clever illusions. I want the real thing. Please, Gae?”

Gaenor thought for a moment then replied, “I suppose. Any requests?”

“Anything!” Relle replied excitedly.

“Okay. Let me think.” Gaenor looked through her purse and laid the spell tools within it out on the bench beside her. There was the usual flint and steel, which since her misadventure in Fasri had been kept in a separate pocket in the purse. There was also the green nodule of malachite. It was late afternoon now, but it was not yet dark enough to use the spell that could change the color of flames. She also had a short rod of ash, a thin strip of copper, a silver coin, a cotton kerchief, a candle stub and two small stoppered glass bottles; one filled with water in it and the other with quicksilver. At first she considered some innocuous spell with lights, but then an inspiration came to her.

She chose the water, the ash wood rod and the silver coin then put the other tools away. The she began an incantation in Old Shandi. Her grasp of that ancient language was barely enough to do what she wanted, but in this case she desired that the spell would be a surprise to everyone present. She called on Hannor, the divine wife of Nua to guide her and protect her and all around from error and then began to intone the intention, the mystic description of what she expected the spell to do. She picked up the clear bottle of water in her left hand and the rod of ash in her right. As she continued to incant she waved them around in what seemed to Ibbet as a beautiful dance. She didn’t need to open the bottle. In this spell it was just a symbol, not an actual ingredient or tool. As the spell progressed, she gently put the bottle back down and picked up the coin, touched the rod to it and then put it back down as well. As she neared the end of the ritual, she touched the bottle with the rod and the world darkened and she suddenly disappeared.

Relle and Ibbet gasped and looked at each other to discover that they too had become invisible. They looked back to where Gaenor had last been and saw the coin lift off the bench do a flip and drop back down and suddenly the world brightened and Gaenor and they were visible again. So was a short, dark-skinned elfin female, crouching in one corner of the garden.

“Hello, Cornellya,” Gaenor said cheerfully. “I knew you were there.”

Three

“I thought I was being more careful this time,” Cornellya replied getting to her feet and walking forward. Relle and Ibbet just stared at her. “Greetings, Lady Ibbet, Lady Relle. My name is Cornellya Vasylya. Is my Shandi acceptable?” she asked Gaenor. “I’m a bit out of practice.”

“It’s fine, dear,” Relle told her before Gaenor could respond. “So you’re a Vieri?”

“A Vari, lady,” Cornellya replied as she serenely sat down on the bench next to Gaenor. “One Vari, many Vieri. Yes, I am. So you are Mishandan?” she countered with a grin.

Relle and Ibbet laughed. Asking the question was a perfect rejoinder even if Cornellya’s Shandi sounded

a bit stiff.

“Welcome to Ander, Cornellya,” Ibbet told her reaching out to clasp both the Vari’s hands in her own.

“Thank you, Lady Ibbet,” Cornellya replied.

“Ibbet,” the baron’s daughter corrected her. “Any friend of Gae’s is a friend of mine too.”

“A pleasure to meet you , Cornellya,” Relle added. “Gae, that spell was incredible. Were we really invisible?”

“Not completely,” Gaenor replied. “We were almost perfectly transparent. That’s why everything went so dark for a moment there, most of the light our eyes might normally have used to see went right through us. If we had been moving much you probably would have noticed it. Is that how you did it, Cornellya?”

“Yes, but I handled my eyes a bit differently. Parts of them were visible so I could see, although only in shades of gray. I can show you my spell sometime if you like.” Gaenor nodded.

“Cornellya, have you been following Artur and Gaenor all this time?” Relle asked.

“Yes, of course,” Cornellya responded. “I nearly lost them in Fasri, though. Gaenor, I loved your speech in Mita.”

“I didn’t realize you were there. Wasn’t that a bit risky?”

“It was, yes, but I wanted to listen and wasn’t able to get close enough when you were speaking to Doctor Haxmire.”

“Ibbet, can you find a room for Cornellya to stay in that Artur won’t know about? I don’t know where you’re going to find a place to stay in Misha,” Gaenor told the Vari, “but while we’re here I think you should be comfortable.”

“I can find a room easily enough,” Ibbet replied, “but why shouldn’t Artur know?”

“Cornellya intends to go with us to Ichtar, but Artur doesn’t want her too.”

“Why not?” Relle demanded.

“Cornellya is his godchild,” Gaenor explained and a member of his Cilben clan. Naturally he feels protective. He also thinks she’s too young, but actually Cornellya is only a little younger than I am.”

“You’re not exactly an old maid, Gae,” Relle pointed out.

“There aren’t a lot of women my age in Narmouth who are still single,” Gaenor pointed out.

“Don’t worry about it, Gae,” Relle told her. “Noblewomen often get married later than country girls.”

“I’m not noble, Relle,” Gaenor pointed out.

“True, you’re gentle, technically, but you’re also adept and a friend of His Majesty, and as long as Pawlen likes you most Duchesses will be careful to keep on your good side. There’s also the age-old

superstition against upsetting an adept.”

“What superstition?” Gaenor asked.

Relle laughed, “That if you upset an adept something terrible might happen to you.”

Cornellya asked, “Is it still a superstition if it really is likely to happen?”

“Good morning, Gael!” Ibbet told her in a low voice as she entered the suite Gaenor and Artur were sharing. “Is Artur awake?”

“Not yet,” Gaenor replied. Gaenor had been awake for a while and was fully dressed and writing a letter. “He was up late last night.”

Ibbet noticed the paper Gaenor was writing on. “Are you composing a new spell?”

“No,” Gaenor replied with a smile, “just writing a letter to my sister, Marlie. I just sent her word when I was in Mita, but I’m sure she’ll want to know where we are now and about what happened yesterday. My last note was a bit hurried too, so this one I can make a bit longer and more detailed.”

“You miss her greatly,” Ibbet noted. “She’s your only sibling?”

“No, I have an older brother and sister, but Marlie is my younger sister and I’ve always been closest to her. I suppose I ought to write to Ma and Pa too while I have the chance.”

“I thought of sending breakfast up for you,” Ibbet said, “but thought perhaps you might like breakfast somewhere special.” She grabbed Gaenor’s hand and tugged gently. “Come on!”

“Wait a moment,” Gaenor demurred. She reached over for a cloth shopping bag that was only partially full. “Okay, let’s go.”

They left the suite and started up the hall. “We’ll get Relle and Cornellya too.” A few minutes later all four were making their way upstairs in the manor. They ended up in a small room that was mostly windows above the third floor of the manor. Ibbet’s maid, a girl Gaenor did not remember from her last trip, was there having just set a small table for them.

“Thank you, Lily,” Ibbet said to the maid.

“I have everything here you asked for, my lady,” Lilly told her. “Is there anything else?”

“No, Lily. You’ve done wonderfully.”

“Thank you, my lady.” Lily curtsied and left the room.

“I didn’t know you had a personal maid,” Gaenor commented.

“Wish I had brought mine with me,” Relle commented. “I don’t generally do that when traveling with the

king. It's important not to have too great an entourage."

"I don't usually have a maid," Ibbet replied. "I can wash and dress myself very well, thank you." Relle nodded approvingly. "But Lily is the cook's daughter and he asked me to accept her for a year or two. I don't really need someone to do all the things I have her do, but the cook has relatives in Misha who work for some of the nobility there. He hopes to secure her a good job there but she needs experience first. I hope I'm training her correctly."

"Judging by this table and the food," Relle told her, "she's doing just fine."

"Cornellya?" Gaenor asked. "Is there anything wrong?" The Vari was staring fixedly out the south window.

"What?" Cornellya asked, still looking out the window.

"Are you all right?"

"Fine," Cornellya responded vaguely. "I'm fine. It's so strange."

"The view?" Gaenor asked. "It's beautiful."

"Yes, that too. But so different than at home." She turned to Relle and Ibbet and explained, "Home is a vast complex of caves, natural and Vieri-made, in the middle of the Parch. The caves are under a large hill and sometimes I climb to the top of the hill and look around. I think it's almost this high. From on top I see the desert; nothing but sand and rocks and hard-packed dirt as far as the eye can see. Until I followed Arturus and Gaenor, I'd never seen a plant on the surface."

"I used to call this my tower," Ibbet told them. "It's really just a large cupola, but I love the view. You can see all the way to the river from here."

"I had never seen a river either," Cornellya said. "All our water is in a pool deep, very deep underground. We grow our plants down there too."

"How do they get enough light?" Ibbet asked.

"Magic," Cornellya replied in wonder as though the answer should have been obvious. "You've seen light spells. We cast them once a day and then extinguish the lights when the sun has set on the surface. It seems so odd that from here I can see plants and a river instead of the warm, familiar sand and rocks of home."

"You make the desert sound beautiful," Relle noted.

"It is beautiful," Cornellya replied. "It is like living in the middle of a very large lake that has been caught in motion."

"An ocean, rather," Gaenor told her.

"An ocean?" Cornellya considered the word. "Is that like the Thimdra Sea?"

"Even larger," Relle told her.

“Thimdra Sea looked pretty big,” Cornellya opined. “I couldn’t see the other side.”

“You can’t see the other side of the Ocean Sea either,” Gaenor remarked, “and the waves get even higher.”

“Then, yes, it is like an ocean but instead of waves we have dunes and they move much more slowly, but they do move. Every day the Parch looks a little different; like this, I think. This is beautiful too, of course, but different.”

“Would you like some tea, Cornellya?” Relle asked.

“Yes, please,” she replied, finally forcing herself away from the window.

“We should eat,” Ibbet noted, “or else the food will get cold.”

After breakfast and after Lily returned and cleared the table, Gaenor remembered the bag she had carried up to the cupola. “I have something for you, Ibbet,” she told her.

“For me?” Ibbet responded with joy blended with curiosity.

“And you too, Relle,” continued Gaenor. Relle just smiled and looked enquiringly. Gaenor opened the bag and spilled the contents on to the table top, she sorted out the seed packets and gave them to Ibbet. “I’ve been carrying some of these around with me since I left Dana. Relle helped me pick the Firdani ones out. Some are from the Cilben Empire and the Thimdra States. I took careful notes on how each was to be planted. They’re all pink flowers for your pink garden.”

“Gaenor!” Ibbet exclaimed, absolutely delighted, “Thank you! I’m sure they’ll be lovely, but there are so many. I won’t be able to plant them all at once, especially with all the others you sent with Chas.”

“Then you’ll have a few years worth of seeds. Most of them, unless I noted otherwise, are supposed to be viable for years to come,” Gaenor told her.” Ibbet expressed her thanks again.

“I have planted some of them already, but just perennials, it was too late for annuals by the time they arrived. I’ll show you where later,” Ibbet promised. Gaenor nodded.

“Relle,” Gaenor continued picking up the silk, “I bought this for you in Wahton. I thought it would look good on you.”

“The color complements your eyes,” Cornellya added.

“This is real Imperial Purple?” Relle asked.

“So I was told,” Gaenor replied, “And Cornellya was right it does go well with your eyes, and it’s such a vibrant shade that your fair skin and blond hair will go well with it too.”

“Oh! It’s gorgeous. Thank you, Gae! I’ve always heard of this color but never seen it before. Very little gets out of the Empire, you know.”

“I didn’t realize that,” Gaenor replied. “I just saw it and thought of you.”

“Now that’s two gifts I’ll have to get you.”

“What are you talking about?” Gaenor asked. “You don’t need to give me anything.”

“On the contrary, it is customary to give someone a gift when they are elevated in rank by royal proclamation and I always reciprocate when a friend gives me something. It’s just right.”

“Artur would say you’d fit in well in Arberoa,” Gaenor told her. “They have a custom called potlatch.”

“I’ve heard of that,” Relle said, “but I try to give gifts of equal value, not to do them one better.”

“Oh, I’ll need to consider something too,” Ibbet noted.

“Nonsense!” Gaenor scoffed, and indicated the piece of Anderan smoky quartz pendant with gold mounting and chain. “You gave me this last time I was here. That’s why I brought these seeds.”

“That’s fair,” Ibbet agreed, “but your new rank deserves celebration.”

“Please! King Pawlen gave that to me for a hangover cure.”

“I’ve heard worse reasons,” Relle commented. Gaenor just shook her head, exasperated. Cornellya watched them all in silent amusement.

Four

“Lady Gaenor!” King Paulen greeted her as she entered the first room of the suite he used in Ander Manor. It was a small sitting room that sported a hunting trophy, a magnificent rack of antlers, over the mantle piece. “Thank you for coming. No, don’t curtsy, not when we’re not in court. We’re caroms buddies, remember?”

“I do, Your Majesty. Too bad the baron doesn’t have a table.”

“Please call me Pawlen in private,” he requested. “You did in Misha.”

“I will, if you won’t call me ‘Lady Gaenor’ in private,” she replied nervously.

“Deal,” Pawlen told her. “Now please have a seat. This is difficult for you? Just sitting and talking to me?”

Gaenor was unconsciously sitting at the edge of her chair. “You are the king after all and I’m just a commoner from a small city far from your capital.”

“You didn’t seem so nervous last time around,” he pointed out.

“I was in shock,” Gaenor replied. “Everything was happening so fast I didn’t have time to think about it. Then there was the caroms table and also I had getting to the university on my mind.”

“I’ll tell you a secret,” Pawlen said softly, leaning forward ever so slightly. “Kings and queens aren’t

really any different from commoners. We're just people who were lucky enough to have the right parents and I have very few friends who will address me by name, so please be one of them."

"All right," she paused and then stumbled over his name, "Pawlen. I'll try. So what did you want to talk to me about?"

"Ibbet, of course. I already know you figured out I was considering her as my queen, Tander told me you had commanded him not to let her know."

"I wasn't sure he wouldn't let it slip," Gaenor admitted with a grin, "so maybe I put it a little too strongly. Don't know why he obeyed. I'm a commoner, he's noble."

"You're adept," Pawlen pointed out.

"I wasn't at the time."

"He might not have realized it. I kept forgetting especially when Sir Artur kept talking about all the spells you had invented. Congratulations, on your initiation, by the way. Not quite the way you thought it might happen, was it?"

"Not by a long shot. I wouldn't have it any other way though."

"I'm sure you wouldn't. So about Ibbet." He trailed off, unable to continue.

"What about her?" Gaenor asked. "Having second thoughts? Seems normal. You haven't seen each other in years. I'm sure you've both changed. And I seem to recall your trip here was to see if she was still someone you liked and could love, so if it turns out otherwise..."

"It's not that at all. I'm more certain than ever now. She's beautiful, she's smart and she's not one of those useless flowers that hang around the court."

"You think Relle is a useless flower?" Gaenor asked archly.

"Nua forbid! She'd skin me alive if I thought that."

"Ha! She probably would at that," Gaenor laughed.

"The reason I have Lord Tallur and Lady Relle following me around is that neither of them are the useless court creatures my father used to tolerate. I don't have his patience, I fear. However, Tallur is popular and Relle... Relle is Relle and they both give me perspectives and friendship that I don't get from most of the others. Sometimes I'm tempted to do some pretty stupid things. That morning on the ship when I thought of knighting you and old Duke Indoras of Marindas tried to tell me I couldn't do it. I nearly inducted you into the Order of the Hawk right then and there, just because he said I couldn't, but Tallur caught my eye and subtly signaled to me. It wasn't much of a signal, but we know each other quite well and I knew he wanted me to think it through before acting.

"So I did think it through. It took a while and a lot of discussions with Tallur and Relle and you and Artur were already running for your lives before I had finally come up with the solution. The Order of the Distaff is equal in rank to the Order of the Hawk, and the title 'Lady of the Court,' accurately describes the nature of your rank as well. Better than 'knight' does for men these days, really. Actually, Relle hated the name 'Distaff,' but she had to agree it would be more likely to be accepted by the more conservative

nobles of the realm than anything else we could come up with.

“Anyway, you’re Ibbet’s friend. I knew that the moment I saw that quartz crystal you wear. So how do I go about asking her to marry me?”

“Have you tried just talking to her?” Gaenor asked.

“I’ve been here nearly a week and I’ve found several occasions to talk to her at length. She’s a marvelous woman, do you know that?”

“I’ve suspected,” Gaenor replied lightly.

“How does she feel about me?”

“I’m sorry, Pawlen. It hasn’t come up in any conversation. She, Relle, and I had been talking about all sorts of other things. Have you tried asking Relle? She must know why you’re here.”

“She and Ibbet weren’t exactly hitting it off before you arrived,” Pawlen pointed out.

“Oh yeah, that’s changed now, I think. So let’s go back to first principles here. Do you realize Ibbet already has a fiancé?”

“Baron Rolder told me. She’s engaged to Sir Rojur, a political arrangement. I don’t think Rolder would be adverse to breaking the arrangement, do you?”

“You didn’t ask?” Gaenor inquired.

“I thought perhaps I should find out how Ibbet feels about him first.”

“He’s a greedy, small-minded toady and I understand an unemployed one at that these days. She would go through with the marriage because she’s a dutiful daughter and would do it for her family and the barony, but I doubt it would give her any joy, nor that it would do the barony much good. Sir Tander certainly doesn’t like him. Do you know that Sir Rojur tried to get Tander and Chas too, to bribe him for an appointment with you?”

“That man is an idiot! I know full well Lord Morres suspended all bribery during the aftermath of the storm last spring. Wait, why was he trying to extort Sir Chasur for a bribe?”

“That was when he was escorting Artur to you.”

“What! I know Lord Morres insists on bribes from petitioners normally. I usually support it, it guarantees that the petitioner really needs to see me as the king, even though many of them could conduct their business easier through my various ministers. But to demand a bribe from Our Torse Herald while he is going about Our business is treasonous!”

“That’s pretty much why Lord Morres fired Sir Rojur,” Gaenor agreed. “Anyway, I’m sure Ibbet will be happy not to have to marry him, and Baron Rolder would be a fool not to welcome an alliance with you as well. So what’s the problem?”

“But how do I ask her to marry me?” Pawlen asked plaintively.

“Just ask her,” Gaenor replied. “Oh I suppose you could do the whole thing and get down on one knee, but the important thing is to ask. Talk to her, Pawlen. Tell her how you feel. Ask her how she feels. I’ll tell you this, however, be prepared to spend a lot of your time visiting Ander. Ibbet loves this barony and she wouldn’t want to go away and never return.”

“I wouldn’t mind spending a month or two here every year,” Pawlen replied, “although I hope she’ll like the gardens in the royal palace. I’ll admit that in some of them her work would be cut out for her. The ones most visitors see are lovely but I’m afraid some of the less frequented gardens need a lot of work.

“Good. Tell her all that too.”

“I won’t sound foolish?”

“Not to her, I don’t think, and as long as she doesn’t think you’re foolish, who cares what anyone else thinks?”

“Pawlen spoke with you this morning,” Relle commented. At her suggestion she and Gaenor had gone for a ride away from Ander Manor for the afternoon. However, after riding a few miles upstream. Relle suggested they stop and talk.

“You know I did,” Gaenor replied. “Looking for a report?”

“Not really. I know what he asked and I have a good idea of what you must have told him. What I really want to talk about is Ibbet.”

“She does seem to be the subject of conversation today,” Gaenor sighed.

“Gae, unless I miss my guess she’s going to be our queen. I need to know what kind of queen she’ll be.”

“I think that depends on what you think a good queen is like,” Gaenor replied. “I’m also not particularly certain I’m the right person to ask, Relle. Please don’t forget I’m a small town girl and not noble-born either. For me the king or queen is a person I might see from a distance once in my lifetime, if I’m lucky.”

“Gae, you’ve met and spoken to the kings and queens of seven or eight kingdoms. That’s as many as I have.”

“All right, but until a few months ago I’d never met any, nor had I ever dreamed of meeting any. You’ve lived in the royal court all your life.”

“No, only five years.”

“Really?” Gaenor asked.

“Really. I married Tallur when I was about your age not long after I graduated from the University. My father is technically a vassal of Tallur’s father- a country squire, some might call him. Actually until he retired he was the reeve of Senda, so a fairly important man in the county, which, by the way is as far from Misha as Narmouth is. It’s quite a bit colder too. Our winters last over a month longer than yours

do, so I wish Count Eddard a long and happy life, because after Tallur is the count we'll be spending most of our time in Senda and much as I love my homeland, I can live quite happily without enduring another Sendan winter. Maybe we should buy a house in Narmouth. It would make a nice winter residence."

"Why not Gostor? It's even warmer there."

"I don't have any close friends in Gostor, Gae."

"I'd love to have you there, Relle, but Narmouth isn't exactly the social center of the kingdom."

"No, but it might be a nice quiet place to relax. Misha gets a bit intense after a while."

"I imagine Senda is quiet too."

"Very!" Relle laughed. "Most of the time, I love the big city activity of Misha though. But about Ibbet - I must admit I wasn't too nice to her when we first arrived. Not the smartest way to behave, considering Pawlen is here to court her, but I'm afraid I let first impressions get the best of me."

"You didn't make a good impression on her either," Gaenor pointed out, "but I think you've both managed to overcome that mistake."

"Yes, I think I like her. I know you do and that's pretty much what changed my mind. You have a good instinct for people, Gae."

"No offense intended, Relle, but how do you know that? We spent about two weeks together in Dana and haven't seen each other since then. You probably know me better than my brother, but not anywhere near as well as my younger sister does."

"Oh, I admit quite easily you have depths that would take me years to understand, Gae, but I've seen your instincts in action. Did you know all the maids in Dana Palace were competing to be the ones to serve you?"

"They didn't!"

"Yes, they did. The girl who was assigned to your room received all sorts of offers to trade you to one of the others, but she wouldn't even consider it, so they competed over who got to serve you your meal."

"But, why?"

"At first it was because there were countesses and duchesses and queens all over the palace, but you were the only female adept they'd ever seen. In their eyes that ranked you up near the top, probably just beneath Queen Ymanya. However, they also liked you. You didn't ask much of them and when you did it was always with a 'please' and a 'thank you.' Even more importantly you talked to them. Most of the others ordered them, but you talked. You treated them like people. That meant a lot to them, especially since you were such a high-ranked person."

"But I wasn't."

"You were to them."

“How do you know this?”

“I noticed how they acted around you and started listening to them when they thought my mind was elsewhere. It wasn’t hard. Servants tend to talk a lot and nobles don’t tend to listen so they have a sort of privacy even when speaking in a public place. You were a real eye-opener to me, Gae. I’d like to think I wasn’t as arrogant as some of the other ladies, but with you as an example I realized that a woman can be powerful without being obnoxious and I started curbing my ways as well. My personal maid has always been a confidante, many maids to noblewomen are, but only after getting to know each other. You just seemed to befriend anyone who dealt with you.”

“Artur says I make friends easily,” Gaenor told her.

“You do and how you do it is by treating people with respect and courtesy, I think. We’re getting off the subject, though. I need to talk to you about Ibbet.”

“Relle, I’ve spent even less time with Ibbet than I have with you. Yes, she and I are friends but it’s on very short acquaintance. She treated me kindly on my first visit here and we spent some time together when she could take the time away from her chores. You want to know what kind of queen she will be? Well, I imagine she’ll be a queen in the same manner she is a baron’s daughter. She’ll work on a thousand little things in and around the palace and do a lot of the work herself. If there’s a town or village that calls for the king’s aid, she’ll be there and pitch in not only with her support, but with her labor as well. You heard what she said about helping the people of the barony re-thatch their roofs. She’s a not an audience, she’s a player.”

“Nice metaphor, Gae!” Relle replied, clapping her hands in enthusiasm. “And yes, I think she will be a very good queen, and one who will work whole-heartedly for the benefit of Mishanda and all Mishandans. It’s been a long time since we had a queen who was, as you put it, a player.” She paused a long while and just stared at the river, watching it flow by. “I like it!” she said at last. “I like it a lot! Gae, I think we’re about to live in interesting times,” she concluded with relish.

“I’ve heard that there’s a proverb in the Southlands about living in interesting times,” Gaenor pointed out. “I think it’s supposed to be a curse.”

“Shows what the Southlanders know,” Relle scoffed. “Oh, Hannor! Do you know how hard it’s going to be for me to keep from trying to influence her?”

“Keep telling yourself it wouldn’t work in any case,” Gaenor advised. “From my limited acquaintance with both of them, I think she and Pawlen are a good match in many ways. Remember what Pawlen’s reaction to that duke’s objection to knighting a woman was? I think Ibbet will be much the same if she thinks you’re trying to push her around.”

“Oh you’re right. You’re right. Actually I’m not all that different in that way. My priorities may be different but I can dig in my heels if I think I’m being pushed too.”

“Well, friends can forgive each other for not being perfect,” Gaenor remarked. “And I think Ibbet thinks of you as a friend by now.”

“I hope so.”

“Gae! Relle! Where have you been all day?” Ibbet called to them as they arrived back at the manor. “I’ve been looking all over for you. Even Cornellya didn’t know where you were.”

“Great Nua, Ibbet!” Gaenor exclaimed. “What’s happened?”

“It’s Pawlen, I mean the king, I... I guess I’m so confused I don’t know what I mean.”

“Calm down, girl!” Relle said firmly but with kindness. “Take a few breaths and then tell us.”

Ibbet took only one deep breathe before blurting out, “He asked me to marry him.” She noticed Gaenor and Relle quickly glancing at each other. “You knew!” she accused, “Both of you! Why didn’t you tell me?”

“And spoil the surprise?” Relle laughed.

“I suppose you’re right,” Ibbet sighed. She started guiding them toward the pink garden. “but I’ve been trying to find someone to talk to about it. Neither of you were anywhere to be found and Cornellya didn’t know what the big deal was about. Don’t the Vieri get married?”

“They do,” Gaenor replied, “but it’s not the same as it is among us. A Vieri couple lives together when they find each other compatible. They don’t actually get to formalize the relationship until the female is with child. You see they have so few children that they feel that it is the child that makes the marriage.”

“So does Cornellya think Pawlen and I...?” Ibbet blushed and left the question unfinished.

“No,” Gaenor replied, understanding what Ibbet was asking. “I’ve told her about human marriage. She thinks we’re all crazy.”

“She may be right,” Relle said. “So what did you tell him?”

“That I’d think about it,” Ibbet replied. Relle slapped her hand to her forehead and closed her eyes. Gaenor smiled at the reaction “Well, it’s a very big decision, isn’t it? That’s why I’ve been looking for you, so I could talk it over. Where have you been?”

“Relle just wanted to go for a ride,” Gaenor told her. “We went up stream for a few miles, then spent the afternoon watching the river.”

“Yes,” Ibbet said, smiling. “That’s quite pleasant. I did that once.”

“Once?” Relle asked. “I’d have thought it was something you’d do all the time.”

“Well, I don’t usually have the time, you know,” Ibbet explained as they entered the central area of the garden. She sat down on a bench and the other two sat on another facing her. “Not enough to spend a whole afternoon!”

“So you told Pawlen you would consider marrying him,” Gaenor prompted Ibbet.

“Well, yes. I am already engaged. Did you know that?”

“I’ve met Sir Rojur,” Gaenor replied.

“What did you think of him?” Ibbet asked. She did so in a manner that did not betray her feelings in one way or another. Gaenor considered her words, but Relle’s lip curled in disgust. “Oh! You’ve met him too, have you?” Ibbet asked Relle.

“Yes, I have,” Relle replied. “There are times that Tallur and I argue. All couples do from time to time, but when I do I think about how I might have made a worse marriage. Sir Rojur would have been worse.”

“How so?” Ibbet asked emotionlessly.

“He has no respect for others. I’m not the easiest person to get along with, Ibbet. I’m pushy and opinionated and I believe in speaking my mind.”

“Pawlen says you are the soul of discretion,” Ibbet said.

“Well, I’m not completely brainless either. I don’t publicly disagree with Tallur and always support him. In return, he allows me my beliefs and causes. It’s not all that hard to get along with him. He’s actually quite tolerant and open-minded even if he sometimes postures like an old conservative and I don’t think we disagree on any really important issue anyway. Our major bone of contention regards the rights of men and women. I happen to believe that women should be allowed to do anything a man is allowed to do.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Ibbet commented.

“Like hold property in their own name?” Relle suggested.

“Why not?”

“And vote and hold political office?”

“You want to be a politician?” Ibbet asked.

“Not really, I just think I ought to have the right to be one if I so choose.”

“You’ll get no argument from me,” Ibbet commented. “Of course, I’m not a man, so I’m going to tend to agree with you. Gae, what did you think of Sir Rojur?”

“Uh...”

“Come on, Gae,” Ibbet pressed. “Take a page from Relle’s book here and speak your mind.”

“I think Relle’s opinion of Sir Rojur might be a bit generous,” Gaenor said hesitantly. Relle guffawed and Ibbet smiled.

“I agree with both of you,” Ibbet told them at last, “but I’m not certain that in my distaste for Sir Rojur I might not be jumping into an even bigger mistake. I spoke to my father and he said that the decision was mine to make, Very nice of him considering he engaged me to Sir Rojur without asking,” she added sourly.

“My marriage to Tallur was arranged too,” Relle admitted. “I did fairly well considering.”

“Forget Rojur,” Gaenor advised. “How do you feel about Pawlen? You used to play with him when you were children, I’m told.”

“We did,” Ibbet replied. “A few times. I liked him and looked forward to his father’s visits. But we were children and children grow up. What’s he like now?”

“Probably not very different,” Relle remarked. “I didn’t know Pawlen as a child but beneath that polished and urbane exterior, there’s still an idealistic little boy. His father sheltered him a bit and the past three years have done a lot to shatter his illusions of the world starting with Pawlen II’s illness and having to deal with the Cilbens. But he still has some of his boyish ideals and the few of us he lets close to him do our best to preserve them.”

“Is that good?” Ibbet wondered. “He has to grow up. Mishanda won’t prosper with an immature king.”

“He’s not immature, Ibbet,” Relle corrected her. “He just has a few deep beliefs that haven’t been stolen from him yet. One of them is that he might yet marry a woman he loves. Hey, he’s about your age, fairly good looking, and the king to boot. I can assure you he’s a passable dancer and he actually has fallen in love with you. What’s putting you off? The beard? He might even shave it off if you ask him.”

“Actually, I don’t mind the beard, as long as he keeps it neatly trimmed,” Ibbet remarked. “I’m not even sure why I’m hesitating. Yes, I do. It’s the whole concept of being the queen. I know how to manage this household and I’m not afraid to do a man’s work when it needs doing. I could be a good baroness, I think, although that doesn’t appear to be in my list of options, but I don’t know how to be a queen.”

“Nonsense!” Relle told her. “Being a queen is just a matter of marrying the right man. It’s what you do as queen that makes the difference. If you want you can just sit around hosting tea parties and arranging the royal social occasions.”

“No,” Ibbet disagreed. “I don’t think I could do that. I’d be bored out of my skull in no time. Here I help my father manage his barony. I don’t just take care of the manor. I go out and talk to the people who live here and find out how they are doing; if they need anything. In the spring I help plant the fields and at harvest time I help bring in the crops. I can’t do that for the entire kingdom.”

“No, but there are other things you can do. For one thing there are parts of this kingdom where the people haven’t seen the king or queen in years. Narmouth, for example. Gaenor told me that to see the king from a distance was something she might normally have expected to experience once in a lifetime. Well the king can’t process around Mishanda all the time. He would never get the rest of his work done. The queen can’t either, really, but she can make a point of touring parts of the kingdom every year until she’s been seen everywhere. Pawlen’s mother used to get almost everywhere in about five years.”

“Really? I don’t recall seeing her in Narmouth,” Gaenor noted.

“She died over seventeen years ago, Gae,” Relle informed her. “You were probably too young to know what was going on.”

“Touring the kingdom?” Ibbet asked. “What good does that do?”

“It’s the same as when you go talk to the people of Ander. After a two month tour or so, you return to the capital and tell the king what you learned. And of course you’ll have other duties.”

“Such as?”

“Whatever you decide is best, of course. Every queen must decide for herself how best to meet her responsibilities, and her responsibilities, when you come right down to it, are pretty much the same as the king’s – the welfare of the kingdom.”

“And bearing a royal heir,” Ibbet added.

“That’s also a benefit to the kingdom. Were you planning not to have children?”

“Well, no. So I’d be raising the next king as well.”

“Or the next queen, or both. Who knows what the future holds?” Relle countered. “Ibbet, you’ve been offered a challenge few deserve or are even capable of meeting. Are you going to accept it? Or run away from it?”

Five

“They will officially announce their engagement in six weeks at Ander’s harvest festival,” Relle informed Gaenor as they rode to Misha in the king’s carriage. “That will give the baron time to officially break off the agreement with Sir Rojur, though I think that’s why Tander is traveling with us. Sir Rojur is a fool on several counts, not the least of which is he put off his marriage to Ibbet for too long. They could have been married last year but he wasn’t willing to give up his single status for what little that is worth. Her marrying Pawlen is just as well. Rojur is likely to have cheated on her during their honeymoon, I doubt Pawlen ever will. He doesn’t even kiss a girl on the lips if he isn’t serious about her.”

Tallur had borrowed Gaenor’s horse and Baron Rolder had loaned a mount to Pawlen and they were riding together with Artur and Tander while Relle and Gaenor had the carriage to themselves.

“I’m glad they both finally managed to do it. I thought it was a near thing,” Gaenor remarked. “Neither of them were exactly sure of themselves.”

“It’s a good sign, Gae,” Relle told her. “Neither is impetuous. They think out a situation before acting.”

They arrived in Misha the next day. Gaenor decided that someone must have ridden ahead of the party because their trip across the Great Bridge of Misha had the feeling of a parade. There were people on either side of the procession, cheering and waving small flags emblazoned with the arms of Mishanda on them.

Relle smiled and waved at the crowds, but Gaenor just looked out of the carriage in wonder. “Wave, Gae!” she told her friend. “It’s expected.”

“But I’m not anyone important,” Gaenor resisted.

“They don’t know that,” Relle replied. “You could be visiting royalty for all they know. Smile and wave at them, Gae. It will make them happy.”

Relle turned out to be correct on that. When Gaenor waved at the crowds the cheers became a bit

louder and more joyous. It took them another two hours to reach the palace and by that time Gaenor had a sore arm from all the waving.

“My face hurts from all the smiling too,” she confided in Relle.

“You wave too energetically, Gae,” Relle told her. “You probably smile too widely too. A lot of people think a king or a queen looks haughty or bored when acknowledging the crowds. The truth is they’ve learned that enthusiasm take a lot of energy so it becomes an instinct to be somewhat reserved. For those who learn the hard way, they become far too reserved even in private. I must make a note to show Ibbet how to do it correctly before she wears herself out, because that’s just what she’ll do. Moderation in all things, Gae. One of the ancient Cilben Emperors actually coined that phrase, but he had it right. Keep to doing things in moderation and you’ll never wear yourself out.”

“Holding Ibbet back may not be all that easy,” Gaenor pointed out.

“I don’t know,” Relle disagreed. “She is not unduly headstrong.”

“No, but you are,” Gaenor replied. “I think you’re going to have trouble moderating yourself on anything the two of you agree on.”

“You could be right,” Relle admitted a few minutes later. “Well, here’s the palace. I wonder where Cornellya is now.”

“Right here,” Both Gaenor and Cornellya responded. Cornellya made herself visible for Relle.

Relle started. “Stop doing that, I don’t think my heart can take it.”

“Of course it can,” Cornellya told her. “You are very healthy, Relle.”

“I won’t be if you keep scaring the life out of me,” Relle retorted “How do you do that?”

“By magic, of course,” Cornellya laughed. “I could teach you how, then Gaenor, Artur and I could initiate you and you could do it for yourself.”

“No, I can’t, dear,” Relle replied wistfully. “Mishanda has laws against that. Nobles may not be adepts.”

“That’s silly. What about Gaenor and Arturus?”

“Technically they aren’t nobility, they are gentry. The law makes an exception for those who are already adept before becoming noble in any case,”

“That’s even sillier,” Cornellya remarked.

“I didn’t write that law,” Relle laughed, “I only have to live by it. Now what are we going to do with you?”

“I’ll find a place to stay in the palace,” Cornellya replied. “Don’t worry about me.”

“Be careful,” Relle advised her. “If we tell the maids you’re here they won’t keep it a secret very long and then Artur will send you home again.”

“He will only try,” Cornellya replied calmly. Then she muttered a few words and disappeared again as the carriage rolled to a halt.

Relle shuddered, then collected herself and opened the carriage door. She started walking toward the front door when she noticed Gaenor wasn’t following. “Gae, what are you doing?”

“Looking for my bags,” Gaenor replied.

“The saddle bags? They must be on your horse with the king.”

“No, they were loaded in the back of the carriage.” She started opening the storage compartment but was stopped by a tall man wearing green livery.

“Please allow me, my lady,” he requested. “I’ll see that your bags are in your rooms shortly.”

“Thank you... What is your name, sir?” Gaenor asked.

“Honard, my lady,” he replied with a nod of his head.

“Thank you, Honard.”

“Come on, Gae,” Relle called. “I want a bath before dinner.”

Dinner seemed like a lavish affair to Gaenor, but Relle shrugged dismissively as she entered the dining hall.

“I won’t tell you we have this large a crowd here every night. Usually it’s just the king and a few special guests at the high board and ranking staff. Tonight is a little special because His Majesty is back in residence so all the ambassadors are here and a fair number of nobles who have houses here in town.”

“This looks as large as the crowd as the morning after Artur was knighted,” Gaenor commented.

“Probably the same cast of characters too. Then the occasion was that we were leaving Misha for a royal visit to Firdan. I don’t see one notable, however.”

“Who?” Gaenor asked.

“The Cilben Ambassador. He’ll probably be along presently.”

“Who is the new ambassador?” a voice asked from behind them.

“Sir Artur! You startled me,” Relle admitted. “Let’s see, as I recall his name is Brotus Armellian Ultho or something like that.”

“How about Brotius Armellian Utho?” Artur asked.

“You know him? Oh, I guess you must.”

“It doesn’t necessarily follow that I would,” Artur replied, “but yes, we’ve met. We were never friends, it’s unlikely Lusius would have sent anyone who was a friend of mine on an important mission, but Brotius was never the enemy Girdecus was. Here he comes now.”

Brotius was a tall, powerfully built man, not entirely unlike Artur, but with curly gray hair and an almost permanent scowl. He walked into the hall as though he thought he owned it.

“Is arrogance a Cilben racial trait, Sir Artur?” Relle asked. Then she realized what she had said and that Artur had been born and raised in the Empire.

Before she could correct herself though, Artur smiled and replied, “I’d like to think it isn’t, but arrogance is something that comes easily to the nobility as you know, and Cilbe is a very noble nation. She has, perhaps, the strongest armed forces in the world and might well rule the world as well if natural boundaries like the Parch and various mountain ranges didn’t get in the way. Of course there are economic reasons the Empire may be at its point of greatest growth as well, and trying to hold an empire together across which it might take months to send a letter isn’t the easiest thing in the world either.”

Ambassador Brotius had been swaggering toward the high board, but while Artur had been speaking Brotius changed course to head toward Artur, Gaenor and Relle. His eyes widened a bit as he spotted Artur, but he quickly got his facial expression back to bored neutrality.

“Senator Arturus,” he greeted Artur stiffly. “I had heard you were here in Mishanda some months ago, but didn’t expect to see you back here.”

“Or anywhere else again, I dare say, Brotius. You’re looking well.”

“Must be the fresh air of Mishanda,” the ambassador replied.

“It’s done wonders for me,” Artur countered.

“Yes, so I see,” Brotius nodded. “Have you ever thought of returning to Cilbe?”

“Not seriously. Last I heard, the Emperor was still a little peeved with me.”

“Yes, I suppose,” Brotius murmured. “So what are you doing in Misha?”

“Living.”

“Ah.” Further conversation was interrupted by a soft gong.

“Come along Artur, Gae. We’re to be seated at the high board this evening.”

“Then we shall be dining together this evening?” Brotius asked.

“I’m sorry, Ambassador Brotius,” Relle replied smoothly. “There are too many ambassadors to seat everyone at the high board this evening so we have designated the next table for ambassadors and their guests.”

“Hmph!” Brotius snorted and stalked off.

“That took some of the hot air out of his sails,” Relle noted smugly. “Come, Tallur and Pawlen are already by their seats.”

The dinner was a long and drawn-out affair with many different foods offered with each of five removes. Several different singers performed and in the middle of the festivities a short play was performed. In between these major acts there was instrumental music of various sorts. Just before the dessert remove, however, King Pawlen stood up to speak.

“My friends and guests,” he began. “Thank you so much for welcoming us back to Misha. Many of you were here on our return from Dana. You may recall we created the new Order of the Distaff and had our herald proclaim the first member of that order. We are pleased to announce that tonight that lady is finally among us once more.” He raised his cup high and announced, “We give you Lady Gaenor of Narmouth, First Companion of the Distaff!” Then he drained the cup as the assembled lord and ladies did likewise.

“Stand up, Gae,” Relle urged her. “It’s the thing to do.”

Gaenor stood and a resounding cheer filled the hall. When it subsided, Pawlen left his seat to stand beside her and said, “This ring is yours, Gae.” Then he placed a gold ring with a carved red stone on the ring finger of her right hand. “All knights are given a signet ring with their arms. The Distaff is an order equal in rank to the Hawk, so I suppose you might decide to buy a chain of knighthood. That is your choice, future ladies of the court will, no doubt, follow your example.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Gaenor replied, staring at the ring. The stone was the red of the Firdani arms, and into it had been carved her heraldic arms, an oak tree with a crown around its trunk. When she looked back up, Paulen had already returned to his seat. Gaenor sat back down and asked Relle, “What sort of stone is this? I mean it can’t be a ruby, can it?” Relle took a long appraising look at the ring.

“It is, yes,” she replied at last. “I helped choose the stone, though Pawlen wouldn’t tell me what would be on it. I think the royal jeweler may never forgive either of us. Do you have any idea how hard it is to carve a ruby? Well, you can see it isn’t a perfect stone although the jeweler used the inclusions in such a way that they look like part of the tree. An excellent job, I must say. Very few signet rings use precious stones, but I felt that as the first of your order yours should be special and I convinced Pawlen of that as well. Good thing rubies are native to Mishanda. That kept the price down and also satisfied the tradition that such rings use stones that are native. Normally for a red stone they probably would have used a red garnet.”

“Thank you, Relle.”

“I told you I’d get you to wear more jewelry. Oh, better write Ibbet a quick note tonight or in the morning. I told her about the ring and she wants to at least see an impression. Have you ever used a seal?”

“I’ve sealed enveloped with wax and pressed it flat with a coin. Is it very different?”

“Not really. The trick is to use enough wax to get a good impression, but not so much as to make a mess. It’ll come to you.”

“I’m not sure I have any wax at the moment. Is there a place nearby I might pick some up?”

“There’s a stationer a few blocks away from the palace. I’ll show you where in the morning.”

“It might have to wait, Relle. Artur and I are supposed to go to the university in the morning.”

“We’ll have time. Only the junior professors teach early morning classes and unless things have changed since I attended, the magic classes don’t start until at least mid-morning.”

“Relle, I’ve been meaning to ask you. What did you study at University?”

“Liberal Arts mostly. I have a good grounding in literature, history and political science. I also took some classes in the sciences and one in introductory magic theory. Are you surprised?”

“Not really, no. Sounds like you had all the classes I wish I’d had. But what were you trying to be?”

“A graduate.” Relle laughed. “There has been a lot of stress toward specialization these last couple of decades, but I knew I wasn’t going to be a scientist or an adept or any other sort of professional.”

“You seem to be a fair politician,” Gaenor pointed out.

“A politician who isn’t allowed to run for office, Gae,” Relle responded seriously. “No, maybe I’m a diplomat, but not a politician. Anyway, I decided early on that there was definitely a place in this world for a generalist.”

“Most adepts are generalists,” Gaenor noted.

“You know I wanted to be an adept, but...” she trailed off.

“I think you’d have been a good one,” Gaenor told her.

“Thanks.”

Six

“My lady?” a maid’s voice followed a soft knock on the sitting room door the next morning.

“Come in, Berrin, but quietly. Sir Artur is still asleep,” Gaenor told her gently.

“Yes, my lady. The king sent you these.” She gave Gaenor two packages. One was a large flat envelope that felt like it contained a wooden board, but the other package was just some tissue paper wrapped around two fat sticks of something tied up with a ribbon. She decided to open that first and discovered two pieces of bright green sealing wax.

Berrin gasped, “That’s the royal sealing wax! I didn’t know anyone but royalty was allowed to use that color.”

“It appears I’ve been granted a special dispensation or whatever they call it,” Gaenor mused. “Pawlen must have overheard me say I didn’t have any last night. Still I should probably find another color.” She looked at her ring and added, “Red, perhaps. What do you think?”

“Oh yes, it would go with your ring,” Berrin agreed readily. “What is in the other package.”

“That would be my grant, I expect. Let’s see it.” She opened the package carefully knowing she would want to use it to send the document home. She pulled out two stiff wooden boards and found the expected parchment sheet pressed between them.

“Oh!” Berrin gasped again. “That’s lovely!” The maid was right. The grant was more than a mere legal document but a masterpiece of calligraphy and illumination with highlights of gold leaf that had been embossed with an ornate geometric pattern. And near the bottom was a realization of Gaenor’s arms. Berrin’s experience in the palace had taught her most of the forms and symbolisms and she immediately caught sight of the crown on the emblazon. “Forgive me, lady! Are you royalty?”

“No, of course not,” Gaenor replied. “Why do you ask?”

“The crown on your arms...”

“Oh that,” Gaenor smiled and explained why that particular heraldic charge had been chosen for her. Berrin’s eyes grew wide and she just nodded, awestruck, as Gaenor spoke.

“Thank you for telling me,” she said after Gaenor had finished. “Shall I bring breakfast in?”

“Yes please, Berrin. And would you invite Lady Relle and Lord Tallur to join us? Sir Tander too if he’s available.” Berrin nodded and hastily exited the room. Gaenor wondered at Berrin’s reaction, but soon remembered what Relle had said about being adept would place her more highly in the eyes of the palace servants than being a duchess might. Until that moment she had not truly believed it. On a deeper level she still didn’t, but while she waited for breakfast and her guests to arrive, she worked on letters to Ibbet and Marlie. She wondered what Marlie’s reaction would be to seeing her arms pressed into the king’s sealing wax.

The University at Misha was a large, oddly assorted collection of buildings all contained within an ivy encrusted red brick wall. A few quick questions thrown at passing students allowed them to catch enough answers to quickly guide them to the Department of Magical Studies. Unlike at Es, the department had a building all to itself. The building, a tall brownstone building that resembled an ancient castle, stood facing the central campus of the university and towered over its neighbors.

Artur and Gaenor walked in through the front doors and found themselves in a large lobby facing a wide staircase that went halfway up to the second floor, then split in two, each half continuing the journey in opposite directions in wide curves to the left and to the right. There were murals on the walls with mythological themes.

“Where now?” Gaenor asked looking around.

“I think that might be the department office over to the right. We have an appointment so we shouldn’t have to wait long.”

“We have an appointment?”

“Yes,” Artur replied with a smile. “I sent a note over last night and the dean of magic, a Doctor Lastor of Arshemouth, invited us to meet with him this morning.”

“You didn’t tell me you had,” Gaenor accused. “Come to think about it, I should have thought of that myself.”

“You’ve had a lot of distractions lately. Good thing you haven’t sent your grant home to Marlie yet, by the way.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I suspect you’ll have another sheet of parchment to send home with it before we leave.”

“I will?” Gaenor asked.

“Your diploma,” Artur reminded her.

“Oh yes! Where has my mind been lately?”

“Like I said, you’ve been distracted.” He opened the door to the office and they walked in. “Hello,” he said to a young woman working at a desk. “I believe we have an appointment with Doctor Lastor. Sir Artur and Lady Gaenor.”

“Yes, Sir Artur,” she responded immediately. “Doctor Lastor will be out of class in a few minutes and asked me to direct you to the tower meeting room.” She gave them directions and they climbed the stairs to the top of the building and found themselves in a round room at the top of the building’s central tower. There were windows all around the tower and in the center a long conference table had been set up with fifteen chairs around it. There were notebooks, pens and bottles of ink in front of eight of the chairs and a small pile of books at the head of the table.

“Quite a view, Gae,” Artur commented looking out. “You can see much of the city from here.”

They were both looking out the windows when Doctor Lastor arrived. Lastor was a short, elderly man with a full head of white hair. Behind him were several other men, all members of the Magic Department.

“Lady Gaenor,” he began accusingly, “you’ve kept us waiting.”

“We got here first,” she replied.

“No, my dear,” he replied with a twinkle in his eye. “I mean we have been waiting to welcome you here for nearly two years now.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Doctor... Lastor?” Gaenor finished as a question.

Lastor nodded affably. “Well, I must say it is a delight to meet you face-to-face at last! And Sir Artur, congratulations to both of you on your elevations! I see Lady Gaenor is wearing her ring. We were all invited to the court in which her elevation was proclaimed. Please, let’s all be seated. Sir Artur, I can’t tell you how happy I am that you saw fit to inform us of Lady Gaenor’s revolutionary ideas. It caused quite a stir around here, I must tell you, but after the dust settled, our most stringent arguments involved some of the symbols used rather than the method itself.”

“What was wrong with the symbols?” Gaenor asked.

"I didn't think they were intuitive enough," a middle aged professor replied. "Oh, forgive my manners, I am Tellynar of Afton. For example, we already had symbols for some of the more common magical elements. Why didn't you use them?"

"I'm sorry, Doctor Tellynar," Gaenor apologized, "but I wasn't aware of those symbols. Many of the ones I used, especially the earliest ones, were those shown to me by Artur."

"Ah, I see, and it's Master Tellynar."

"The fault is mine," Artur confirmed. "The earliest symbols Gaenor used were either ones I learned from my master or ones I grew up with in Cilbe. The real innovation, of course, is the subtext."

"Of course and there I have no arguments, but..."

"Tellynar," another professor, roughly Tellynar's age, interrupted, "I said you were being too chauvinistic in favor of Mishanda. Why should everything be done in the Mishandan way, especially since this new notational system is multinational?"

"Gentlemen!" Lastor stopped both of them, "This is an old argument and we agreed to accept Lady Gaenor's..."

"Just Gaenor, please," Gaenor interrupted. "I'm not quite used to that title. Not sure if I ever will be." Several professors chuckled softly.

"Gaenor then, thank you," Lastor nodded to her. "Anyway we agreed to accept her system of notation as it was and to accept her decisions concerning additions to the system. We certainly shouldn't go changing it now especially since we've sent copies to colleagues all over the world. But that reminds me; we have a number of suggestions that have been building up over the last few months. I'm sure we'd all like to go over them with you."

"Of course," Gaenor agreed.

"First, however, I think it's long overdue that we presented you with this," He handed her a thick leather folder. When Gaenor opened it she found it contained a vellum document written in Old Shandi."

"My diploma," she identified it with a smile. "Wait. Master of the Arts? Shouldn't I be a bachelor at most?"

"That was a long argument as well," Tellynar commented.

"Indeed," Lastor agreed. "We were fairly evenly split on that, but two of us were in favor of an honorary doctorate. We eventually decided on a master's since your work is still unfinished. Later as it becomes even more complete it will be worthy of a doctorate, no doubt."

"Some of us felt that you should have at least sat through an oral comprehensive exam before being granted a master's degree," Tellynar added.

"Tellynar!" Lastor almost snarled at him.

"Actually, I tend to side with Master Tellynar," Gaenor told them. "I mean all you saw of my work was the notational system and my writings on it. How is that supposed to be an indication of my general

knowledge?”

“You and I have been corresponding for some time,” Lastor told her. “Your explanations and answers were all the exams we needed to judge you by. If you must know, I was your harshest critic when I first became aware of your system, but as we discussed your ideas about Menandan’s Principal, I saw the wisdom behind what you proposed and how the new ideas you brought us just naturally followed.”

“Watch out then,” Artur laughed. “Gae’s come armed with even more new ideas to discuss as well.”

“Excellent!” Lastor exclaimed. “We are at your disposal, unless...”

“Yes, doctor?” Gaenor asked, suspecting what was coming.

“I was hoping you might see fit to speak before all the faculty and students of the department?”

“Told you, Gae!” Artur said.

“I’d be delighted, Doctor Lastor,” Gaenor replied, ignoring Artur’s verbal jab. “and Artur is right. I do have some new ideas. I spoke about them in Mita recently. They involved some extrapolations of the laws of sympathy and contagion.”

“She also took on the physical Laws of Conservation of Matter and of Energy,” Artur expanded.

“Doctor Haxmire seemed to think they had some merit,” Gaenor said modestly.

“If Haxmire thought that, then no doubt we all shall too,” Lastor told her.

“I’d almost be happier if you found some points to argue with,” Gaenor admitted. “It seems to me that questions are an important part of learning. It’s by questioning Menandan’s Principal that my notation came about. My newer notions, and really so far they are just ideas that I haven’t had very much time to develop, question even more of our basic concepts. It seems that if I’m questioning them, it’s totally wrong if no one is questioning me.”

“You’re a brave woman, Lady Gaenor,” Lastor chuckled. “Oh, before we go much further, I also have a bound copy of your thesis for you as well.”

He handled one of two tomes from in front of him to Gaenor. She opened it up at random and smiled as she read some of the words on the page. “Thank you,” she said at last.

“We should all be saying ‘thank you’ to you, my dear,” Lastor replied. “This department has been rejuvenated since we added this to our third year curriculum.”

“The Mita College is using it on their first years,” Artur informed him.

“So Haxmire and Fallendir have told me,” Lastor nodded. “We aren’t quite ready to take that step yet. Third year of studies seems right to me.” Several others nodded in agreement, but Gaenor noticed that the attitude was far from unanimous.

“I notice you have another copy of her thesis there,” Tellynar commented.

“That’s my copy,” Lastor explained. He picked it up and handed it to Gaenor. “Might I ask you to sign

it?”

Gaenor smiled and autographed the title page before handing it back to him.

“Thank you, now let’s get down to the reason Sir Artur asked us to meet you two. As soon as we get that out of the way we can move on to all the new symbols and modifications to Gaenor’s system we’ve all been wanting to discuss.”

Artur and Gaenor were both experienced at explaining the problem by now and together they quickly outlined their plan to put together a team of adepts to go to Ichtar and disrupt the spell that was wreaking havoc in the Parch and would soon spread to cause damage world-wide. Gaenor handed around a copy of the spell they would have to cast on Ichtar and also the spell she wanted them to use here in Misha to remotely support the team that would go to Ichtar.

“Very interesting,” Lastor commented, looking at the spells. “I almost wish I was young enough to go with you.”

“Oh come on now!” Tellynar complained. “Vieri? You expect me to believe in Vieri in this day and age?” Gaenor looked around but realized that Cornellya hadn’t followed them to the University. She was hiding out in the palace until the time came for them to leave. Tellynar continued, “I might be willing to believe if you could show me the proof of this vast change in the weather patterns, but I haven’t seen it. And if it is raining in the Parch, where’s the harm in that. Maybe it will turn that vast wasteland into a paradise. That wouldn’t be a curse, but a miracle. More arable land to be used to feed the world.” Most of the faculty members appeared to agree with him.

“That’s precisely what the Vieri are afraid of,” Artur explained. “The reason they live in the Parch is because we can’t. If it suddenly became livable to our kind they’d be driven out. Oh, they could fight us off with magic, they’re all adept, even the children and they live much longer than we do, but that’s not their way.”

“They live by an amazing philosophy that combines wisdom and magic,” Gaenor added. “They call it simply, ‘The Way.’”

“Fascinating,” Tellynar said sarcastically. “A lovely fairy tale.”

“I remember ‘The Way,’” an old and wizened adept said from halfway down the table.

“You’ve met the Vieri?” Gaenor asked him.

“One Vari,” he replied softly. “It was many years ago. I was just a lad in my home town, Arceri. That’s on the edge of the Parch in Gostrina. I found a man in a field outside my parent’s home. He was sick, dying of thirst, mostly, I think, but I helped him to the house where my mother cared for him. It wasn’t until we were inside that I realized he wasn’t human. We nursed him while he recovered and he told me about ‘The Way.’”

“How did he get so sick?” Gaenor asked. “The Vieri can all cast water spells to bring water up from beneath the desert.”

“He had gotten ill somehow,” the old adept explained, “and was having trouble concentrating enough to cast a spell. That’s why he came out of the Parch. He knew there was open water out here. He just didn’t realized that it wasn’t just everywhere, you had to be in the right place. But it was his lessons that

got me started studying magic. Later, I finished my studies in Es.”

“May I know your name, sir?” Gaenor asked.

“Julinir of Arceri,” he replied simply.

“I’m honored to meet you Doctor Julinir,” Gaenor told him. She turned to others, “See? Doctor Julinir knows I’m telling the truth about the Vieri.” They looked uncomfortable and she realized that they didn’t want to admit that the prospect of going to Ichtar frightened them. She let the matter drop. If Doctor Lastor was too old to join their party, Doctor Julinir was even older.

“We can help you with this other spell, however,” Lastor told her. “When do you need us to start?”

“Not until just before we’re leaving to set sail for Ichtar,” Artur replied.

“And certainly not until we have ten adepts together to get it started,” Gaenor added.

“We could probably round up enough adepts in and around Misha to fill the quota, but if you don’t want us to start until your team is put together we can wait.”

“That would be best,” Gaenor agreed. “If we cast this too soon, whoever is casting the spell affecting the Parch might find a way to counter it before it does any good. Still, it will not be amiss to acquaint yourselves with this in the meantime.”

“Is that your only copy?” Lastor asked.

“I have one other,” Gaenor replied. “But we’ll need copies for everyone. Haxmire and Fallendir have their students copying the spell we’ll use on Ichtar, perhaps some of your students can copy these?”

“They’ll have to be very careful,” Tellyndar noted, scowling at the sheets of paper.

“Very careful, indeed,” Gaenor agreed. “Doctor Haxmire and Master Fallendir are instituting a round-robin system to prove the copies perfect. They are not only inspecting them themselves, but having all the copyists inspect each other’s work as well. A single error could be disastrous after all.”

“One more matter,” Artur added. “I can see it’s obvious none of you will be able to join us, but do you know of any accomplished adepts who might join us?”

“I can think of several here in Mishanda,” Lastor told them. “I’ll contact them for you and see if they’ll be willing to go with you. Where are you off to next?”

“Aston,” Artur told him. “In Mita we were told there were two, maybe three adepts there who might be able to help us. Let’s see, what were their names?”

Gaenor replied, “Geramir of Es and his wife from Kimn. Also there was a Faber Gerhardsson from Aston, but currently in Vohn.”

“Vohn?” one of the professors asked, “What in Nua’s name is he doing there?”

“He apparently has some sort of permission to practice there,” Gaenor explained. “We have a few other leads as well, there’s a Sarmuel in Maxform that we learned of in Wahton and it appears the island state

of Kimm has a reputation for adepts.”

“You’re going to be traveling a long way, aren’t you?” Lastor asked.

“It’s starting to look that way,” Artur agreed. “we’re going to need more than the run of the mill adept, so we may well have to go a long way to find everyone we need.”

“Well if you don’t mind going somewhat out of your way or if for some reason you find yourselves in Nimbria you’ll want to look for a man named Jimeleo, I believe he works out of Tandra. He writes me some interesting letters every now and then on the nature of magic. Not as interesting as yours, Gaenor, but interesting, nonetheless.”

“Sounds like the sort of man we need,” Artur noted. “Questioning and open-minded.”

“While you’re in Aston, try asking about for Vitautis of Senne,” Tellyndar suggested, “He’s known as Vito to his friends. He’s supposed to be an expert on Vieri and other non-human sapient species in the world.”

“There*are* others? Aside, possibly, from the people on Ichtar, that is?” Gaenor asked.

“Maybe not. He’s been conducting research in a small mountain town called Remarscen. I think he’s studying lomorgs there.”

“They’re not very intelligent,” Gaenor pointed out.

“None of the troll species are,” Tellyndar replied offhandedly. “But some say they’re either stupid people or very intelligent animals. Personally I think they are animals, but...” He shrugged.

Gaenor wrote these suggestions down and thanked both men for their help. After that, she spent the next few hours discussing her notational system and suggested additions to it.

Seven

“Relle, this is Mnoster’s house.”

“Of course it is,” Relle replied. “You’ve heard of the earl?” When Artur and Gaenor returned from the University that afternoon, Relle had immediately rushed them back to their rooms so they could get ready to attend some large party where all the elite of Misha would be in attendance and she had just happened to get them invited. Neither Gaenor nor Artur were particularly interested, but Relle was insistent and in the end they agreed to go for a little while. Gaenor thought it strange that Relle was acting so mysterious about this party, not even telling them where it was, but by now she knew that trying to refuse would just make Relle all the more determined to drag her there and she wasn’t completely averse to going so there was no need to make a fuss. Evidently only Relle was really interested in the party as both Tallur and Artur were lagging behind by about thirty feet. The noise from the party was loud enough that they’d been hearing it for the last block as they approached.

“Artur and I stayed with him last time we were in Misha. He’s a cousin of Baron Rolder.”

“I think I knew that,” Relle muttered. “It’s been a long time since I had to study the peerage records. He

throws the most fabulous parties and almost everybody important is there whenever he does.”

“Relle, have you ever actually met Earl Mnoster?” Gaenor asked her friend.

“Well, not really. I mean these parties are so big that you can’t meet everyone.” Relle was correct about that. There were lights on all over the first two floors of the large mansion and apparently there were crowds of people on both floors.

“Relle, do you often go to a party and not thank your host?”

“Of course not, but this is one of Mnoster’s parties! I mean it’s so large we’d probably never find him anyway.”

“You’re right there,” Gaenor agreed. “He’s probably not even in Misha at the moment.”

“What?” Relle asked as they walked through the front gate and approached the door.

“I mean he must go back to Ulren every so often. It is his land after all. Besides he never attends his own parties.”

“How do you know that, Gae?”

“He told me so,” Gaenor shouted over the din as they finally entered the house.

“That’s nonsense!” Relle shouted back. “He must be around somewhere. Come on, let’s go find him.”

For the next hour and a half they made their way throughout every part of the house in which the party was going on, but no matter where they went, they didn’t find their host, although several people they did meet thought he must be in another part of the house, but when they arrived in whatever location they were pointed toward, Earl Mnoster was still nowhere to be found.

“Told you so,” Gaenor said to Relle.

“Gae, if this is true, it’s been the best kept secret in Misha,” Relle replied. “Actually, come to think about it, it may be the only real secret in Misha.” She shrugged. “Oh well, let me introduce you to some of my other friends.”

Later, while Relle was chatting with those friends, Gaenor slipped away to see if she could find a quiet corner to collect her wits in. The noise of the party had started getting to her. She wandered around and, unable to find a quiet spot, remembered Mnoster’s caroms table and headed toward the game room. When she arrived at the wide double doors she discovered they were locked. She turned and was about to go somewhere else, when behind her she thought she heard the click of two caroms balls hitting each other. The party was still quite loud so she stood still and listened very hard and heard the sound again. She knocked politely but there was no response.

Looking at the doors, she was tempted to just walk away but curiosity got the better of her. She remembered the first spell she ever saw Artur cast and opened her purse to take out her piece of steel, a small handkerchief, a small rod of ash, a small phial of oil, her pen and ink and a small notebook. She removed one page from the note book and quickly scribbled out a small multiplication table, then put the notebook, pen and ink away. Looking around she found a small lidded box full of candy on a table near the doors. She put the piece of paper on top of the box and then laid the steel bar on that. Then she

recited a short incantation, combined with gestures with the rod of ash that identified the box with the doors. Next she picked up the steel and smeared a little oil along one edge and put it back down on top of the paper and restoppered the phial. When she recited the incantation again she touched the rod to the top of the box. Then she lifted the lid of the box, knocking the paper and steel off. The door opened slightly beside her. She quickly grabbed her spell tools and slipped into the room, closing the door behind her.

“Well, hello!” a surprised voice greeted her.

“Hi, Mnoster! I didn’t expect to find you here tonight,” Gaenor replied as she wiped off her finger and the steel bar with the cloth. She started putting all her tools back in the purse.

“Then why did you come in here?” Mnoster asked, amused.

“I was trying to find a nice quiet place to rest,” Gaenor confessed.

“And used magic to force your way in, I perceive,” Mnoster commented.

“Sorry about that,” Gaenor replied. “I wouldn’t have done so, but I heard you playing caroms.”

“Quite okay, Lady Gaenor,” Mnoster said with a bow. “You are always welcome at my table.”

“Hey! I thought we were supposed to ignore whatever titles we bear when playing caroms,” Gaenor protested.

“I stand corrected, Gae, except to congratulate you on both your elevation to the gentry and your initiation as an adept.”

“Thank you, Mnoster,” she replied modestly.

“Now, would you like to break?” he asked as he started setting up the colored balls in their starting positions.

“I’d love to, but please forgive me, but I haven’t had a chance to play in months.”

“I’ll forgive you, if you’ll tell me what you’ve been up to since I last saw you.”

“Done!” Gaenor exclaimed and started getting the earl caught up. They were working on their third game when Gaenor finally finished telling her stories. It was a delight to do so, because unlike anyone else she’d spoken to lately Mnoster just let her talk at her own pace and didn’t interrupt with unnecessary questions.

“Well!” Mnoster said at last, “That’s quite a tale. Obscure Cilben assassins, Vieri and all! I’m jealous, Gae. Really, I am. You live such an interesting life.”

“If it gets much more interesting, it may not be a long one,” Gaenor pointed out, trying to line up her next shot.

“Not necessarily, Gae. I believe the gods only set trials before us that we can actually succeed at.”

“That’s an interesting notion,” Gaenor commented, “and the fact that we have many examples of those

who failed in their trials?”

“Just goes to show us that just because we are capable of meeting a challenge, it doesn’t follow that success will be handed to us on a platter.”

“I’ll have to give that some thought,” Gaenor replied, taking her shot. The cue ball banked off a nearby rail and moved on to its target, one of the few green balls left on the table. They clicked together and the green ball rolled two feet across the table and into a pocket. Then she started considering her next shot at one of the numbered balls. “It’s certainly not something I’ve thought about before. Do you have any training in the physical sciences, Mnoster?”

“I had a few classes at University, but that was twenty years ago at least,” Mnoster replied. “Why?”

“I’ve had a few new ideas about the laws concerning conservation of matter and energy lately. Well, actually most of those ideas have been better developed by a Doctor Nyima of Corinia than anything I had come up with. I wrote to him but it hasn’t been long enough to expect to receive an answer any time soon, but he is working from an entirely physical standpoint while mine is integrated with my knowledge of magic. I guess I was just hoping I could bounce some ideas off you, get a new perspective, but if it isn’t a subject you’re comfortable with...”

“Go ahead, Gae,” Mnoster told her. “If nothing else, I’m a good listener. I’ll let you know when you lose me.”

They finished the third game while she was just finally getting warmed up to the subject and rather than keep playing they both sat down and continued discussing Doctor Nyima’s theory and how it applied to Gaenor’s new ideas about magic. They lost all track of time until one of the doors opened and Relle stuck her head in.

“Gae! So this is where you got to?” Relle asked.

“It was a bit too loud for me out there,” Gaenor replied. “It was much less hectic in here and I got to play caroms.”

“It’s a lot quieter out there now; most of the guests have gone home. The Cilbens too, thankfully.”

“There were Cilbens here tonight?” Gaenor asked.

“You didn’t notice? Well I don’t think Artur completely relaxed until they left. You know that ascerbic sense of humor that comes out when he’s feeling pressed? Well it made him the hit of the party, but I think I know him well enough by now to catch that.”

“I think you do too,” Gaenor agreed.

Then something Gaenor had said came back to Relle. “You play caroms?” she asked.

“Don’t you?” Gaenor countered.

“I don’t know any other ladies who do,” Relle replied.

“Since when did that stop you?” Gaenor challenged her. “By the way, this is Earl Mnoster. I guess you were right. He was here tonight.” Gaenor finished the introductions and offered to rack up the balls for

another game.

“I’m afraid I’m all worn out for the night, Gae,” Mnoster told her. “You and Lady Relle may play if you like.”

“Actually it’s late for me too,” Relle admitted. “Gae, the sun will be rising in a couple of hours.”

“Really? I guess I’d better get some rest. I have to lecture at University tomorrow afternoon and then day after that Artur and I leave for Aston.”

“Are you going to talk about Doctor Nyima’s Theory?” Mnoster asked her.

“Probably, I’m planning to do the same lecture I did in Mita, only with a few of the newer conclusions I’ve reached since then. Why?”

“Ask them to invite some physicists in to listen,” he suggested. “They may be able to enlighten you a bit on the parts you are unsure of. Alternatively they may be able to show you where Nyima’s theory has holes in it, if any.”

“Thanks,” Gaenor replied, hugging him. “I’ll do that.”

“Be sure to stop in next time you’re in town, Gae,” Mnoster told her.

Aston

One

“Good thing we’re moving again,” Gaenor remarked as she, Artur and Chas left Misha. “I think I was starting to get used to sleeping in the same bed more than one night in a row.”

Artur laughed, but Chas replied, “I know the feeling all too well. I’ve been in Misha over the summer more this year than any time in the past since I first became a herald.” Chas had Mishandan business to conduct in Jeritalen, the capitol city of Aston and had asked Artur if he might travel with them. Artur had agreed instantly.

“I thought you’ve been traveling with Pawlen all summer,” Gaenor commented.

“No. I arrived in Ander three days before you did and the king showed up the next day. He suggested I stay in Ander while he was there and travel back to Misha with him. Before that I was working in the city most of the time with only a few trips to some of the nearer baronies. This trip, on the other hand, will be one of the longest ones I’ve ever been on so I guess that averages it all out.”

“Have you heard from Win lately?” Artur asked. Sir Winniam Mates was the Lymphad Herald of Mishanda, the head of the office that traveled all over the world to the farthest shores on the king’s business.

“Uncle Win sent back a dispatch from Tindi saying that his mission there was going well and he hoped to

have it concluded in a week or two. He also added that he saw an opportunity in a small conflict that seemed to be going on between Baria and Drombra and planned to look into it on his way home. His Majesty wrote back the usual pleasantries and added that he would not be displeased should Lord Lymphad find an excuse to officially visit Cilbe. He instructed Win to deliver an official protest concerning the event in Firdan.”

“I thought that had been done by expelling Girdecus and his people from the kingdom,” Gaenor replied.

“Yes. That was about as official as it gets, but I think he’s attempting to negotiate damages to be paid to Mishanda, Firdan and in some part to all the monarchs who were in attendance.”

“Hah!” Artur laughed. “I wish him luck. Lusius is the biggest tightwad he’s ever likely to meet.”

“If damages are paid, a goodly sum will go to you two,” Chas pointed out.

“It will?” Gaenor asked.

“We’ll take it,” Artur said at nearly the same time.

“But we weren’t harmed,” Gaenor protested. “How can we collect damages?”

“It’s a legal matter,” Chas explained. “By the legal definition you were harmed because there was threat to your life, and let’s face it, you aren’t still alive because of the Temi’s lack of trying.”

“True enough,” Gaenor admitted.

“And Mishanda and Firdan were harmed because not only were our kings threatened, they were also embarrassed by the assassination attempts. The other kings and queens will sue for damages because they too may have been physically harmed. In the end Cilbe will probably owe us all quite a lot.”

“Don’t hold your breath waiting for Lusius to hand over the money,” Artur advised. “Even if he agrees that the Empire owes us anything, and I doubt he ever will - more likely he’ll disavow any knowledge of the affair – he’ll try to pay off with some worthless trade deals.”

“Fortunately that isn’t going to be my problem,” Chas told him. “Gae, how did your lecture go yesterday?”

“Very well, thank you,” Gaenor replied. “I knew most of it would be well received at any rate as it was essentially the same lecture I gave to the school in Mita, but there was a fair amount of disagreement among some of the faculty members when I got to the newer ideas I’ve been working on.”

“I don’t think Master Tellyndar is going to be your biggest supporter,” Artur commented. “In spite of his polite tone, I’m not sure he agreed with you on even a single point.”

“I enjoyed the debate he started,” Gaenor replied. “It’s exactly the sort of dialogue I wanted to engender.”

“Gae, if he was any more in opposition to your viewpoints he’d have been questioning whether you got your own name right!”

“I think that was just his way,” Gaenor said dismissively. “Besides, I could be completely wrong. I don’t

want adepts accepting everything I say without first testing for confirmation.”

“You don’t want them rejecting your ideas because they don’t agree with their own preconceptions, either,” Artur pointed out.

“I’m not worried about that. Besides several of the senior professors liked my ideas and defended them. Doctors Lastor and Julinir were especially supportive.”

“Maybe they’re just dirty old men who were playing up to a pretty woman,” Artur suggested with a good natured laugh.

“I suppose you ought to know,” Gaenor shot back, but with a smile that took the sting out of the comment. “I’ve been meaning to ask you about your encounters with the Cilbens at Mnoster’s party. Relle said you were very tense most of the time. Old acquaintances?”

“Just Brotius and a few of his toadies. A few of them evidently felt I was fair game and they were safe in their calculatedly subtle insults. You’ve seen the same from other Cilben dignitaries.”

“Anything serious?”

“Probably not,” Artur shrugged. “Although I suppose word will get back to the Empire that I’m alive and well.”

“They likely already know that,” Gaenor pointed out. “We weren’t really sneaking through the Thimdras, especially when we were in General Narsian’s camp.”

“You’re probably right, but this sighting will tell Girdecus and his people we are back in Mishanda. Well, there’s no helping it, I suppose.”

It took over four weeks to get out of Mishanda. They were traveling across the length of the kingdom, following the River Rind to its headwaters and then up and over the mountains it flowed down from. The weather turned on them around the time they came down the west side of the mountains and within sight of the Bengolian Bay, a long narrow waterway that stretched across northern Mishanda from the Ocean Sea almost to the Aston border, and they had to slog along muddy roads for several days in a row.

The bad weather was made more bearable, in Gaenor’s eyes at least, by the change in diet afforded them by the proximity of salt water. The Bengolian Bay was a rich source of fish, shellfish and lobsters. The fare reminded her of Narmouth, although the seasonings used in the Bengolian area were subtly and sometimes not so subtly different.

Finally the rain cleared up but the nights started getting colder and in valleys where cold air would settle at night the leaves on the deciduous trees were beginning to turn to their autumnal colors. So far most of the foliage was still dark green but here and there they would see a stand of trees that were aflame with yellows, oranges and reds.

They were in Ulren, Mnoster’s Earldom, and very near the border with Aston when they saw the first snow of the season. The day had begun with an almost clear sky. They had started riding just before the sky started to lighten because Chas had informed them that the alternative would involve riding late into the evening in order to get to the first town with a decent inn in Aston. As the sky grew lighter, however, a line of clouds rolled in from the west and just as the sun rose with a clear white light, the clouds closed down on the eastern horizon, making the new day seem more like early evening. An hour later large

flakes were floating down around them.

“Isn’t it early for this sort of weather?” Gaenor asked.

“We are pretty far north,” Artur commented.

“And inland,” Chas pointed out. Misha is close enough to the ocean that its climate is moderate. However, Gae is right, it is early for snow. Let’s hope it doesn’t get heavy or we may have to stop at the next town.”

The snow didn’t show any sign of getting heavier an hour later when they entered the border town of Thirnasa, but Chas was worried about what might happen later if they kept going.

“We’ve only been riding for three hours,” Artur told him. “Let’s keep going. We should be meeting travelers coming from the other direction in two hours or so. If it gets heavier before then we can turn around and if it doesn’t we can ask those coming out of the mountains what it was like behind them.”

“It’s likely to be heavier up there,” Chas replied nervously.

“There are people along the way, aren’t there? Farmers, for example.”

“I suppose there are. There are a few small mining towns along the way too. No place you really want to stop unless you have to.”

“Any port in a storm, Chas,” Artur replied.

Chas got them through customs in record time. As a herald on duty he was exempt from the usual formalities for the same reasons an ambassador would be. As his companions, Artur and Gaenor were similarly waved through by both the agents of Mishanda and Aston.

“We shouldn’t have just been passed through,” Gaenor pointed out as they rode upslope away from the border. “You really shouldn’t have told them we were part of your party.”

“I wasn’t really lying, Gae,” Chas told her. “If you weren’t traveling with me I’d have had to co-opt the services of two of three of the royal guards. The road to Jeritalen is a bit wild at times and a single traveler is never quite safe. Three of us aren’t likely to be bothered.”

“What about your trip home?” Gaenor asked. “We’ll probably be traveling to Kimn after we finish in Jeritalen.”

“I’ll be headed home by way of Landrela, Medra and Northern Gostrina. Those roads are as safe as any these days.”

“You’ll be going through Mita then?”

“Yes, of course,” Chas replied, “That will be my best route back to Misha.”

“Good. I’ve been meaning to write to Doctor Haxmire. I’ll work on it as we travel. I guess I have at least two weeks, maybe more.”

“A bit more, even if we don’t get trapped by the weather somewhere.”

“I don’t really know much about Aston, Chas,” Artur commented. “What can you tell me about it?”

“What do you want to know?”

“Well, let’s start out with what Asts do for a living then move on to how they run their country. After that I can always ask questions.”

“Around here there are two main industries; wine and coal. Mishanda mines its own coal, we’re lucky there, but Gostrina and the Thimdras do not. Gostrina buys most of her coal from us, but the Thimdrans buy from Aston as do some of the so-called Barbarian Kingdoms. They also make some very fine wines, white ones mostly although most of the large vineyards are to the south of here. We’ll also see some dairy farms, sheep, and oat and barley fields once we get back down out of the mountains. Quite a few turnip farms too. Though I’m not particularly fond of turnips in general theirs aren’t too bad so long as you don’t have to make an entire meal of them.”

“That’s it?” Gaenor asked. “They grow grapes, oats, barley and turnips?”

“For export,” Chas told her. “For their own consumption you’ll find a somewhat wider diversity of crops.”

“How is the country organized, Chas?” Artur prompted him.

“Technically it is a monarchy. I mean they have a king and a queen, but they do not rule the country in the same way the monarchs of Mishanda, Gostrina and Firdan do. Their job is to preside over the Royal Council a bicameral governing body made up of a Noble House to which all Earls and Dukes belong and another called the Gubatorial House made up of the men elected by the gentry of their districts, towns or cities to serve both as governors and representatives on the council. The counties, and here they are called counties regardless of whether governed by a count, earl, baron or duke, are almost autonomous. In theory His Majesty can rule over all the land, but in practice the barons, earls and other landed nobles run the affairs of their fiefs without royal interference except where that might run counter to the laws as passed by the Royal Council.”

“So the king acts as the judge of the nobles?” Artur asked.

“Yes, and as the final arbiter of the justice. It’s a strange system, I’ll admit, but it appears to work for them. It is also his job to break a tie in any vote by either house of the Royal Council.”

“I’ve encountered stranger systems,” Artur admitted, “but not by much.”

The threatening storm never actually materialized. Instead the snowfall remained light throughout the morning and early afternoon, leaving a just barely visible dusting over everything in sight.

“It’s very pretty like this,” Gaenor commented as the afternoon wore on, “but unless my mind is playing games with me, it’s also getting quite a bit colder.”

“It’s not a trick, Gae,” Chas told her. “It is colder. I’m very glad we got the early start this morning. It would have been too cold to ride after sundown tonight. Fortunately our stop is less than an hour away. The town I had in mind is in the valley below us.”

“Good!” she replied. “A pot of hot tea and a shot of whiskey is sounding pretty good about now.”

“I didn’t know you drank whiskey,” Chas remarked.

“I don’t make a habit of it. It’s just something my mother used to give me when I was sick sometimes. Right now it seems like the perfect thing to warm up and stave off a bad cold.”

“I’ve never noticed that getting drunk did anything to make me healthier. Just the opposite, usually.”

“The point isn’t to get drunk, Chas, just warm. I’ve read that many experts do not believe whiskey has any ability to cure or prevent illness, but it still makes me feel better, especially when I’m cold.”

The inn was neither large nor particularly luxurious. *Just a place to stay the night*, Gaenor decided. It was small, with only a few rooms available. The stable was not cleaned as often as it should be, Gaenor decided and Artur later admitted that he had been tempted to leave the horse outside except that they were more likely to still be in their stalls the next morning and there was no telling where they’d be if tied to the rail outside the inn.

There were only a few locals in the taproom leaving Artur to wonder how the landlord managed to stay in business. Chas explained that he had been here a few times before and normally the inn had been a much busier place.

“So this is the off-season, is it?” Artur asked.

“Could just be an off night,” Chas replied. “Care for a game of darts?”

“No thanks,” Artur replied, taking a swig of his beer, a dark bitter brew that he decided was much better than he’d the right to expect at an inn like this one.

“I’ll play,” Gaenor said, looking up from the letter she was writing.

“You, Gae?” Chas asked.

“You don’t think I know how to throw a dart?” she countered challengingly.

“It’s not that,” Chas replied hastily. “It’s just that you’ve been spending almost all your free time writing this trip. Come to think of it, you did likewise the first time I traveled with you.”

“I love writing,” Gaenor replied. “It doesn’t matter if it’s a letter to a friend or loved one or working on a new magical idea. Often it’s both. But every so often I could use a break and darts is almost as much fun as caroms. I’m sure glad I got to play a game with Mnoster while we were in Misha. It had been a while and I love that game. Too bad I can’t afford a table for home.”

“Where would we put it, Gae?” Artur laughed.

“There’s room in the lab,” she replied, “or we could put it in the dining room; cover it with a board when we eat there. Oh well, no need to either worry about that, is there? What game do you want to play, Chas? Double in, double out?”

“That would suit me, but the board they use here isn’t the same as one finds in Mishanda. Come, I’ll show you the game they play here.”

The dartboard was a square piece of wood with thirty-six numbered spots painted on it. The numbers seemed randomly assigned, but Chas assured Gaenor that this was the standard arrangement for dartboards in Aston. The object of the game was relatively straightforward; the players had to hit each spot in a prearranged order. For a short game, players would shoot at only the odd numbered spots starting with number one and working up to thirty-six. A full game would involve “shooting up the odds,” and “shooting down the evens.” They played two full games until a pair of locals indicated they’d like to play too. They had offered to play the winner, but Gaenor, having won both games, was anxious to go back to her writing.

The next morning started out cold but by noontime the temperatures had risen back to average for a summer day. They were riding through a forested area with plenty of cool shade so were quite comfortable, but the trees also provided adequate cover for a small group of waiting bandits.

“Hold there!” one shouted as two of them came out of the woods from in front and another pair came up from behind. All wore sabers and two carried small arbalests which were kept aimed at Chas and Artur. “Dismount now and don’ try anything funny or we’ll kill ye.” Artur glanced at Gaenor, but the spokesman caught that and shouted, “Now! Off yeh horses or we’ll shoot yeh off! Not ye, gehrl! Ye stay mounted!”

Gaenor didn’t like the sound of that and even as Chas and Artur dismounted and walked to the side of the road as directed by the crossbowmen she was trying to surreptitiously reach into her purse for the flint and steel. But before she could act there was a clap of thunder and the sound of rushing wind as all four men were suddenly whisked off from their horses and thrown forcefully against nearby trees. They all slumped to the ground unconscious as their horses galloped away in panic. Strangely, neither Artur’s, Chas’ nor Gaenor’s horses reacted at all to the sudden noises and actions, but stood where they were as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

“Cornellya!” Artur shouted, seeing the Vari approaching them from the direction they had been riding from. “I told you to go home!”

“And where would you have been if I had?” she countered.

“She does have a point, Artur,” Gaenor pointed out. “Your spell tools were in the saddle bags and I didn’t have anything available that might have helped me against all four men at once.”

“I wasn’t completely defenseless,” Artur replied. “I had my flint and steel handy.”

“But the spell we use is most effective against a single assailant,” Gaenor pointed out. “It would have been a big risk because there was no way for either of us to know which bowman the other would aim at. Then the other two might still have killed us before we could get them too.”

“You’re giving them far too much credit, Gae. They would have been spooked the moment the magic started flying,” Artur insisted.

“Maybe you’re right,” Gaenor admitted, “but Cornellya’s solution was better.”

“This time maybe,” Artur admitted grudgingly. “Now Cornellya I want you to turn around and march

straight back to the Parch and stay there. It's too dangerous for you here."

"I wasn't in any danger," Cornellya replied calmly.

"And what if these four had back-up men still hiding in the woods?"

"You would have been in even worse trouble then if I hadn't been here," Cornellya replied. Artur wasn't in a mood to listen to reason, however. His face reddened and he angrily pointed back up the road. Cornellya smiled and nodded then turned around and walked away.

"What...? Who...?" Chas asked, staring at Cornellya as she walked away. Then she disappeared instantly and he gasped.

"My godchild," Artur explained. "She seems to be of the opinion that we can't do without her. You!" he turned on Gaenor, "You knew she's been following us, didn't you?"

Gaenor replied, "I did. I knew she was back ever since we had to cross the Trina. She convinced me that she would have to go to Ichtar with us. I've seen her a couple of times since then."

"She hasn't convinced me yet," Artur growled, but he decided to let the matter pass. Maybe this time she would take his advice and go home. "Chas, it looks like you were wrong on one point. Three of us aren't enough to keep the local bandits at bay,"

"They never used to run in packs of more than two or three," Chas informed him.

"I think they're teaming up these days. Have you noticed the traveling carters and merchants have been traveling in caravans since we arrived in Aston?"

"I had, but they always did have a tendency to anyway. Should we join a caravan?" Chas asked.

"No. That would slow us down too much. Gaenor and I have a magical solution that should give us the elements of surprise and superior power."

"The personal amulet spell trick again?" Gaenor asked.

"That's what I have in mind. Let's get away from here, though. Cornellya only knocked these men out, and I don't care to be anywhere around here when they wake up. But when we stop for the night I think we ought to charge ourselves up with spells like we did in Firdan and Gostrina."

"We'll set Chas up too," Gaenor replied.

"I don't get it," Chas admitted. "What are you going to do?"

"We can store spells inside you so that you can release them when you want to by making a certain gesture."

"Oh, right. Now I remember, that's how you were able to cast the binding spell on Queen Ymánya and that's how Relle was able to cast those colored light spells for a few weeks. Right?"

"Exactly," Gaenor told him. "When we're through, you'll be armed and very dangerous!"

Two

After nearly two weeks of small towns, countless fields of grain and half a dozen bands of shocked, burned and scattered bandits, Gaenor was unprepared for the size and splendor of Jeritalen. Until now they had seen many small settlements but nothing she could honestly call a city.

Chas had explained that Jeritalen was the only major city in all of Aston. Here and there were some larger towns that served as centralized markets for farmers. The road they had traveled in on was locally called the Mishanda Caravan Route, but while relations between the two neighbors were cordial, trade between them was not as brisk as it had been in the past. The towns along the caravan route were not as prosperous as the ones along the roads that went into the Thimdra States, the Barbarian Kingdoms and Seinut, the port town from which most travelers left for or arrived from Kimn.

Jeritalen was a city of contrasts. Most buildings were constructed of red brick and were only three or four stories high, but amidst a sea of dark red stood towers of white marble, pink granite and other materials. The royal palace, called Grosseschloss, however, stood out not because of the height of its towers, which were no taller than any of the others, but by the sheer lateral size of the compound. The outer perimeter walls of Grosseschloss stood only 20 feet tall but enclosed buildings and park-like areas that spread across many acres in the heart of the city. Roughly half the enclosed area was further enclosed by an inner perimeter wall and inside that wall were the home and private gardens of the king and queen.

Chas convinced Artur and Gaenor that it would help his own mission if they would pay their respects to King Gunnas and Queen Ata. So, soon after they entered the city, they found themselves at the front gate of Grosseschloss.

“No guards?” Gaenor asked as they walked through the wide open portal.

“The area in the outer portion of the Grosseschloss is open to the public. In this area we have governmental administration buildings, the hall the Royal Council meets in and a very large public park. In the summer many city dwellers enjoy having picnics in here,” Chas told them. “Even today, warm as it has been it was probably quite full around noon. We should be able to present ourselves to Their Royal Highnesses almost immediately. This isn’t like Mishanda where one needs to make an appointment in advance.”

“Highnesses?” Gaenor asked, “not Majesties?”

“Correct. It’s the term they use here. I don’t think anyone would take it amiss if you slipped and called them ‘Majesty,’ but ‘Highness’ is the correct term. By the way, I’m still fully charged up with those spells you put on me. How do I disperse them?”

“Just fire them off, they’ll stay put until you use them,” Gaenor replied, “but why disperse them? You may still need them on your way home.”

“Good thing finger snapping isn’t a habit of mine,” Chas commented. Gaenor chuckled, remembering her own mishap in Firdan.

Chas proved correct about not needing an appointment and they were escorted to Their Highnesses’ presence within minutes of making their request. The king and queen were a kindly middle aged couple

who remembered all three of the party. Chas they had met on several occasions and they remembered Artur and Gaenor as the adepts who conducted the magical side of the coronation ceremony in Firdan.

After formal greetings were exchanged and the king wished Sir Chasur well in his negotiations – those talks would be with the minister in charge of commerce – the queen said, “I am happy to see you here in Aston, Lady Gaenor. Am I correct in assuming you have resolved those difficulties that forced you and Sir Artur to leave Dana before the festivities were completed?”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Gaenor replied, “That’s all been taken care of. Neither Sir Artur nor I would have come here if it would have endangered you.” The queen visibly relaxed. No doubt she had been having visions of red-clad assassins in her palace.

“So, Lady Gaenor,” Queen Ata continued, “what business brings you and Sir Artur to Aston?”

“We came here to confer with some fellow adepts,” Gaenor told her. “It is a matter of some urgency and we didn’t want to trust it to the vagaries of the post.”

“Certainly,” the queen agreed, “When it’s a speedy reply you need, there nothing faster than talking to someone face-to-face. Are these adepts in Jeritalen? I understand there are a small number of them here although I fear it is not as popular a profession here as in Mishanda or Gostrina.”

Gaenor already knew that. Asts allowed adepts to practice but it was not considered a proper profession for a gentleman.

“Two of them live a few leagues upstream of Jeritalen,” Gaenor replied, “The third is supposed to be in Remarscen.”

King Gunnas and Queen Ata glanced at each other and Gunnas asked, “Sir Artur, much as it pains us to admit it, our realm is not as safe for strangers to travel in as it ought to be. It is usually best to hire a guide to help one stay clear of the more dangerous areas.”

“We’ve encountered some of those areas, Your Highness,” Artur replied. “I think we’re adequately prepared for the less well-behaved of your subjects.”

“I’m sure you are capable of taking care of yourselves,” the king agreed, “but we would take it as a personal favor if you would accept someone to guide you as you consult your colleagues.”

“I suppose it couldn’t hurt,” Artur agreed.

“Excellent! We will send our son, Prince Leonhart to meet you tomorrow morning. And we’ll be most happy to pay your expenses while he is with you.”

“Thank you. Uh... Your son, Your Highness?” Artur let his surprise show.

“Indeed.” Gunnas looked around and gestured for Artur to come a bit closer. When Artur had done so the king continued, “Actually, Leo is a bit, shall we say, sheltered and...” he hesitated.

“Headstrong and full of unseemly pride,” Queen Ata supplied the words.

“Um, yes,” Gunnas agreed. “His mother and I would appreciate it if you might take him along with you. We feel the experience would be beneficial to both him and all of Aston.”

“One thing, however,” Queen Ata added. “Please do not treat him as royalty. Treat him as an equal and should he step out of line, don’t hesitate to treat him in the same way you might anyone else.”

“Is Your Highness certain of that?” Gaenor asked.

“Yes, we have pampered him too much perhaps. We thought at first I was unable to conceive so when we finally had him, we overcompensated, I think. Please show him a piece of the real Aston. After all, he will be her king someday, so he’s going to have to grow up.”

“Very well, Your Highnesses. Please have him meet us at the Mishandan embassy right after breakfast and have him prepared to travel.”

“Chas, just what sort of trade negotiations are you here to conduct?” Gaenor asked at breakfast in the Mishandan embassy the next morning. “From what you’ve told us, Aston doesn’t have a lot we don’t already have in Mishanda.”

“That’s part of why I was sent to aid our ambassador, Earl R overt of Ollinder, on this matter. What we really want is to sell our goods and materials to Aston and they want to buy them too, but we need to work out a deal by which they won’t feel we’re coming in and taking all their money.”

“But if they don’t have anything we need, isn’t that just what we’re proposing?” Gaenor asked.

“We’re trying not to. For starters they do have a few luxury items we want, gemstones and they have a barley-based whiskey that is better than any we produce, their master distillers claim the key difference is that they use peat for their fires. We don’t have peat bogs in Mishanda, at least not where most of our people live. I think we may have some in Marindas, but they don’t make whiskey there.

“Anyway, the problem is that Aston’s biggest exports are also our own. King Pawlen has instructed me to negotiate for some of their coal, which we will then sell to Gostrina and Firdan. We won’t make as much selling their coal, but it will open the doors to our goods so everyone will benefit.”

“Sounds good,” Gaenor opined, “but then why couldn’t Pawlen just send our ambassador a letter?”

“Some of it is a matter of putting on a good face. By sending me, he demonstrates that he takes this matter seriously. I’d also like to think that he trusts my judgement and negotiating abilities. It’s part of what I do, after all. The College of Herald’s is not just a messenger service. In fact these days we’re increasingly less so. My mission to bring you and Sir Artur to Misha last spring was not my usual sort of trip. Actually it was one of the more enjoyable tasks I’ve had in the past few years. I do a lot of things the heralds of old wouldn’t have, so when I can carry out a traditional chore I generally enjoy it. Good morning, Sir Artur!” he concluded as Artur entered the dining hall.

“Morning, Chas,” Artur replied. “Gae, why did you let me sleep in?”

“Are we in a hurry? We’re waiting for Prince Leonhart to show up and frankly, from Queen Ata’s instructions, we wouldn’t be amiss in making him wait a little,” Gaenor replied.

“True enough,” Artur agreed, “And we’re not to call him ‘Prince’ either. Nobody here but us goodmen and women.”

“I’m comfortable with that,” Gaenor replied, “but I’m not sure how Goodman Leo will like it.”

They didn’t find that out until late morning when Prince Leonhart and a retinue of twelve young men all approximately his age arrived at the embassy.

“He has how many with him?” Artur asked Chas. Chas repeated himself. “What the hell is he playing at?”

“In Narmouth,” Gaenor snickered, “we call the game ‘Silly Buggers.’”

“What’s so funny, Gae?” Artur asked.

“It just occurred to me that this particular silly bugger doesn’t realize the deck is stacked against him. Time for the old amulet spell again. I think we’re going to need something flashy and impressive and obviously a threat but will cause no harm.”

“I have an idea or two,” Artur replied confidently.

“I thought you might. Let’s get them ready quickly. Chas, would you be a dear and tell our guest we will be with him presently?”

“I think he expects you to show up immediately,” Chas noted.

“He won’t be too disappointed,” Gaenor replied, smiling.

A few minutes later Artur and Gaenor made their entrance. They had been given a room on the third floor of the embassy made their way down to the first floor down a wide circular marble staircase that brought them to the back wall of the building’s main gathering room.

Leonhart was a young man in his late teens or very early twenties with medium length blond hair and a thin beard Gaenor thought of as prissy. He was obviously not dressed for traveling. His tunic was made from heavy brocade in gold and red and he was wearing tights that might have been fashionable in Gostrina or Firdan but with the exception of the ones worn by his companions, they were the first she had seen in Aston where trousers seemed more in fashion although some of the older men wore kilts. Chas had told her that kilts were worn on formal occasions as well.

“It’s about time you attended me,” the prince told them when Chas had formally performed introductions.

“Nice start,” Gaenor commented wryly. Leonhart ignored her.

“We aren’t here to attend you,” Artur replied with a calm glacial chill. “And who are these gentlemen?” The way several of them bristled, Artur knew he had hit pay dirt. He’d just demoted them from the nobility.

“My retainers,” Leonhart replied. “They will be traveling with us.”

“No they won’t,” Artur replied. “You may go home now, boys. Your job is done.”

“They most certainly will not. Perhaps a low-born such as you is unable to understand, but a prince never travels alone.”

“One,” began Artur, pacing back and forth, “you will keep a civil tongue in your head if you care to return to Jeritalen with all your appendages. Two, my family were patricians in Cilbe when your unknown antecedents were running around in green animal skins. Three, perhaps your parents neglected to inform you but for the next few weeks you aren’t going to be a prince, just a hired hand on my expedition. Now you may call me Sir Artur, Senator Arturus or just sir. This is Lady Gaenor. If I need to tell you how to behave toward her you may begin by breaking your own leg. If you forget I’ll give you a thrashing you’ll not soon forget and if you’re really offensive I’ll let her handle you herself. Trust me, you don’t want to get on her bad side. What are you lot still doing around here? Beat it!” he finished in what he thought of as his parade ground voice. Most of the young noblemen backed up several paces, but Leonhart wasn’t quite ready to surrender.

“Stand fast,” he told the young dandies. “There’s only one of him.”

Artur snapped his fingers and opened his hand and a ball of fire appeared in it. The men backed up another pace and Artur negligently tossed it at a nearby fireplace. The logs within burst immediately into flame. He snapped his fingers again and another fire ball appeared.

“Who’s first?” he asked. Half the men turned and ran out of the embassy.

Now it was Gaenor’s turn. She merely looked over her shoulder and said, “Here, Spot!” a large snow leopard stalked into the hall from a side room and stopped next to her. She petted the beast and it purred. “Want to meet my pet?” she asked lightly. The leopard growled and advanced toward the remaining dandies. A moment later they were gone too. “You really ought to have chosen braver allies,” Gaenor commented.

“Witch!” Leonhart accused.

“What was that you said, boy?” Artur asked with deceptive mildness. He took a step toward the prince, who stepped back and drew a rapier from his belt. “Unless you’re asking for a fencing lesson, I’d suggest putting that toy down,” Artur told him, but Leonhart foolishly tried to thrust. It was a clumsy maneuver, shaky and overextended. Artur moved slightly to the side and reached behind the sword’s guard and grabbed the prince’s wrist. He squeezed it expertly and gave the arm a twist and the sword clattered to the floor. Then he knelt, dragging the prince down and across his knee, whereupon he proceeded to give him a thorough spanking.

“How dare you?” Leonhart sputtered when it was over.

“I have dared quite a lot, young man,” Artur told him. “This doesn’t even count. That was for engaging in what might have been construed as an act of war on foreign territory and as long as you are in this building you are in Mishanda. Get that straight. If you had drawn that blade on me in Aston, I would have thrashed you within an inch of your life. Now do you have any clothing suitable for traveling in and what the hell do you think you need all these bags for?” The bags had been dropped by the prince’s erstwhile companions. “I specified that we would be traveling light.”

“This is light,” Leonhart maintained defiantly.

“Not a problem,” Gaenor put in. Artur looked at her, but said nothing, waiting for her to drop the other

shoe. "You can take as much as you want."

"I can?" Leonhart asked, starting to catch on that he wasn't in control here. "What's the catch?"

"You have to carry your own luggage. Me? I prefer to take only what will fit in my saddle bags, but if you have some remarkable new way of putting all that stuff on a horse and not simultaneously breaking all its legs, you'll have to show me how you do it. By the way, I do hope you have some clothes a bit more suitable for traveling in, because I don't think you could be wearing anything more inappropriate unless you chose to wear one of your sister's dresses."

"I don't have a sister," Leonhart replied.

"Lucky for her," Gaenor shot back.

"Aren't we traveling by carriage?" Leonhart asked.

"No," Artur told him. "Carriages are fine in their place but we may be riding over rough terrain. Horses are better. You didn't bring one, did you? You must have a horse."

"Of course, I do," Leonhart insisted. "I have a whole stable full of them."

"Then we'll have to go get one of them for you," Artur concluded.

"Look," Gaenor cut in. "I'll try to be helpful here. Pick two outfits of plain rough clothing – stuff that will hold up under heavy usage – then send the rest of all this back to Grosseschloss."

"I don't have anything like that," Leonhart admitted.

"Then send all of this back to the palace," Artur advised him, "and we'll go shopping on our way out of town."

It was already early afternoon by the time they were ready to leave. Leonhart whined something about being hungry so Artur bought some sort of breaded sausages on sticks from a street vender for the three of them. Gaenor thought they were quite good with a generous dollop of the brown mustard the vender supplied, but Leonhart turned up his nose at it.

"You've already cost us the better part of the day," Artur told him coldly. "You may eat that or not, I frankly don't care. They're better than some of the things I used to eat in the army. However, our next meal will be dinner and because of our late start that may be very late indeed."

After that Leonhart sulked for the rest of the day, but Gaenor noted that he did finally eat the sausage.

Three

Artur had hoped to reach the home of Geramir of Es and Khotina of Kimn that same day, but due to their late start they were still some miles from there when the sun set that evening.

"We may as well stop in this town," he told Gaenor and Leonhart. "I don't know exactly where we are going and Geramir's house is supposed to be well away from any other dwellings."

“Where will we stay?” Leonhart asked.

“I’m sure there’s an inn or a pub or something like it in this town. There almost always is. If all else fails, I suppose someone might let us sleep in a barn or carriage house if we offer to pay.”

“You want to sleep in a barn?” Leonhart asked incredulously.

“Not particularly, though barns aren’t all that bad. Better, usually, than sleeping out under the stars. I’d prefer to sleep in an inn. Let’s see what we can find, though.”

The inn they found was better than most of the ones they had patronized in Aston. Here the landlord obviously cared about his customers and his property. Whatever Leonhart was thinking, he kept it to himself. He didn’t even complain about the food which turned out to be roast mutton, a bean and barley stew and a heavy, thick-crust bread. Gaenor thought the mutton roast was quite good, her preferences usually ran to lamb, but she made a mental note to find out how the meat had been seasoned.

They started out right after breakfast the next morning. To Artur’s surprise, Leonhart did not try to sleep in but came down from his room just after Artur and Gaenor had ordered. Nor did he complain about the food or the room he had stayed in even when Artur gave him the chance.

“How did you sleep Leonhart?” he inquired politely.

“Okay,” Leonhart replied simply, then added, “sir.” Artur let the pause go by. He suspected courtesy toward those other than friends came hard by the prince and he was obviously trying.

“Was the food acceptable?”

“It was strange,” Leonhart replied. “It wasn’t bad, but I’ve never had anything like it before.”

“It was good healthy food,” Gaenor told him. “You need to get out more, I think.”

“That’s why he’s with us, Gae,” Artur commented.

It took the best part of an hour to find the small path that led uphill to Geramir’s and Khotina’s home. It was not a wide path and it was somewhat overgrown so they went past it several times before they noticed it. It took another third of an hour to make their way to the house.

“This path hasn’t been traveled much lately,” noted Artur as they rode through overgrown grass on the path.

“They must not have to leave the house very often,” Gaenor conjectured.

“Could be,” Artur allowed.

The house was a small wooden building, painted brown with a thatched roof. It was a warm day, almost hot, but the door and windows were all tightly shut.

“I wonder if anyone is home,” Artur said.

“I guess we can try knocking,” Gaenor suggested, as they dismounted.

Artur walked up to the door and knocked while shouting, "Hello! Anyone home? Master Geramir? Mistress Khotina? Hello? I suppose I should try the door," he told Gaenor and Leonhart. He reached out, turned the knob and pushed the door open. He was immediately assaulted by an incredible stench. "Get back!" he half shouted and half coughed to them. He ran back down from the porch.

"What is it, Artur?" Gaenor asked.

"I think they're dead," he replied. "Something is dead in there anyway. Let's let it air out a bit."

"Good idea," Gaenor agreed. "I'll work up a deodorizing spell of some sort. Let me think about it."

"It might be easier just to deaden our own senses of smell temporarily," Artur replied.

"I'd hate to do that if I can avoid it," Gaenor told him. "There may be other dangers we'd fail to detect."

"Such as, my lady?" Leonhart asked.

"I don't know," she admitted. "That's why I'm being cautious." She thought for a few minutes then told Artur, "I think we can open all the windows from here. That should help a bit."

"All right, do it," he told her.

It was only a variant on the spell that Artur commonly used to open a safe or that Gaenor had used to open the door to Earl Mnoster's game room and a few minutes later Leonhart gaped as all the windows on the house opened simultaneously.

Gaenor caught a whiff of the stench from within and suggested, "Maybe we ought to move up wind."

The smell had only improved slightly an hour later so Artur cast a spell to deaden their olfactory senses for an hour after all and they went in to see what had happened. Looking carefully through the front door, they saw only a normal front room. There was nothing obviously out of place and there were no signs of violence. From this room there were doors leading into a kitchen, to what Gaenor thought might be a dining room and a stairway to the basement. There was also a loft overlooking the front room. Artur led the way into the dining room and then the kitchen. The dining room was in order just like the front room had been and the only disorder in the kitchen were several dishes and utensils in a drying rack by the sink and a pot full of something quite moldy on top of a wood stove.

"I'll bet whatever is in here was badly burnt," Gaenor commented, putting a lid back down on the fuzzy green mass within.

"What makes you say that?" Leonhart asked.

"Whatever happened here, obviously happened while this was cooking. See the ashes inside the stove. That's not a sure sign, of course, but the rest of this house is so neat that I wouldn't be surprised if whoever took care of it, emptied the ashes every day. I wouldn't be surprised if they used them to make their own soap too, or sold them to someone who did. Anyway, if this was just left on the stove it probably got quite burnt before the fire went out on its own. If you want, you can try cleaning out the pot and either prove me right or wrong."

"No thank you!" Leonhart replied, wrinkling his nose in disgust.

“I wouldn’t take that bet either,” Artur told them both, “but in my case it’s because I’m sure Gae is right. Whatever happened, it was sudden. I’ll check the loft. Gae, you and Leonhart should take a look in the basement.” He started climbing up a steep and narrow staircase while Gaenor led the way back to the front room.

They were halfway down the stairs when Leonhart asked nervously, “How can you see where you’re going?”

“It is pretty dark, but I thought we might find a candle down here,” Gaenor replied. “Now that you mention it, though, it’s not likely I’d be able to see one if it is here. Hold on, I’ll make a light.” She reached into her purse and pulled out the flint and steel. A moment later a bright light appeared just over her head. It followed her as she continued down the stairs. They were most of the way down when Gaenor looked into the room on her right. “Oh my,” she said, stopping suddenly.

The lower level of the house was all one room, Geramir and Khotina had used it as a laboratory and there was a large table in the center of the room. Every wall was covered with shelves and cabinets. Geramir’s and Khotina’s remains were also there lying on the floor with stools that must have tipped over when they fell.

Leonhard made an odd strangling noise and ran back up the stairs and out the front door.

“Artur!” Gaenor called loudly. “I found them.” She heard Artur scrambling down the stairs from the loft and through the house to her.

“That’s not as bad as I feared,” he said after a moment of contemplation, “especially with the prince feeding his breakfast to what’s left of the garden. Can you think of a way to halt the decay?”

“Stasis spell,” she replied. “It will only last a few days without maintenance.”

“That’s more than enough to study the bodies and then give them a proper burial. I’ll work on airing the place out before the spell on our noses gives out.”

“It still won’t smell like lilacs in here,” Gaenor pointed out, “but maybe I can do something about that. Why don’t you ask Leonhart to find some fragrant, nice smelling flowers?”

“I will. Just let me open this bulkhead here,” Artur replied and then did so and went to look for Leonhart.

Gaenor looked through her tools and went to work. She found a piece of paper on the lab table and quickly sketched out the two spells she was going to want to use. As she began to cast the stasis spell on the remains of Geramir and Khotina she felt the air all around her starting to move. Artur’s spell to air out the house was obviously at work. The wind inside the house was gentle but steady as Leonhart came back down the stairs.

“Lady Gaenor,” he said, carefully not looking at the corpses, “please forgive my behavior. I fear I reacted badly.”

“First time you’ve seen dead people?”

“No, but it’s the first time I’ve seen a body that was not freshly dead. I brought you the flowers you

requested. I think these smell nice, but I can't smell anything at the moment."

Gaenor looked at the flowers. They looked like lavender. "Yes, thank you, I think these should do nicely." She took the flowers and started casting her next spell. Using the moving air, the spell magnified the sweet smell of lavender and spread it throughout the house. A few minutes later the air stopped moving.

"Gae!" Artur called. "Did you turn off my spell?"

"I made it part of mine, dear," she replied. "It stopped moving when the air was clear. How much longer will it be before our noses start working again?"

"Not much longer," he replied, coming down the stairs. "Well, let's see what there is to see." Behind him Leonhart started making choking signs again. "Leonhart, why don't you run back down to the inn and tell the landlord we'll be staying another two nights. Then find a constable, or whichever authority around here might have the job of investigating mysterious deaths, and bring him back here." After the prince had left, Artur commented, "That ought to give us an hour or so to figure out what happened here. They've been dead a long time. Weeks maybe. Maybe months." He looked around the room and started going through the drawers and cabinets.

"What are you looking for?" Gaenor asked.

"I'm looking to see if they kept a journal; something that might tell us what they were up to."

You think they may have been killed by a spell that went wrong? It's possible," she added after he nodded. "They obviously never read my book. There's no sign of any notation."

"Adepts wrote out spells for centuries before you invented your notation," Artur pointed out. "They just did so verbosely."

"I know that," she replied agreeably. "I just made it easier, but if they didn't know my notation then they may not have been as aware of how some tools and ingredients react. They seem to have been researching in the old-fashioned way and that's very dangerous. You know that. It was your master that taught you about interactions and catalytic reactions and that's what got me started."

"True enough, although while he knew about them, you took the concept well beyond what even he knew. Anyway, yes, I think they must have been killed by some sort of magic, but whether it was murder or accident I'm not sure."

A bit over an hour later, Leonhart returned with a pair of constables. In that time Artur and Gaenor had only found more questions and no new answers.

"I'm afraid we haven't done enough forensic magic," he said to both Gaenor and the constables.

"Forensic magic?" one of them asked. "I wasn't aware anyone did that."

"We've had a few such cases, but not many and none to determine a cause of death."

"Out here it's not normally the sort of thing that needs doing," the constable told them. "The cause of death is almost always well known. Either there are witnesses to a fight or someone was killed and robbed. Here the bodies have been dead too long to be certain, but as far as I could tell there were no

marks on them, no punctures or lacerations. There may have been some light contusions, but my guess is they happened when these two fell to the floor.”

“So what happens to Geramir and Khotina?” Gaenor asked. “Will they be examined by the coroner?”

“My dear lady,” the constable replied, unable to hide his amusement, “there is no coroner out here. I’ll write my report and that will be that.”

“But two people died here.”

The constable shrugged. “I see no way to determine why they died. There is no sign of disease and you say your magic can’t determine such a thing and besides, knowing why they died won’t bring them back to life, will it? Good day, sirs, lady.” And with that both constables left.

“Incredible!” Gaenor said and followed that exclamation with several impolite words and phrases.

“My lady!” Leonhard gasped at her language.

“Nevermind, Leonhart,” Artur put in. “If you know what those words mean, why shouldn’t she?”

“But ladies don’t use such language,” the prince replied.

“Not when you can hear them perhaps.”

“So what do we do for Geramir and Khotina?” Gaenor demanded.

“There’s not a lot we can do for them, except give them a decent burial, I suppose. Do Asts bury their dead?” he asked Leonhart.

“We do, yes.”

“While I was looking around outside, I found a shed with some garden tools. Leonhart, you and I will dig while Gaenor tries to figure out what happened to our fellow adepts.”

“Dig?” Leonhart asked haughtily.

“Graves don’t dig themselves,” Artur replied.

“Like a common gravedigger?”

“Common, uncommon, so long as there a deep pit to properly bury these people,” Artur replied carelessly.

“I will not!” Leonhart stubbornly replied.

“If you don’t, you’ll only make more work for me,” Artur shot back.

“I should care about that?”

“You should. If I have to dig an extra grave, you’ll be in it,” Artur said coldly and emotionlessly.

Leonhart's eyes widened a bit then he whispered, "Digging. Is it hard work?"

"You can tell me in a few hours," Artur replied. "Gae, I know you had another few ideas. Try them out and anything else you can come up with. We'll be a while."

Gaenor nodded and looked back at her notes. When Artur had been gone a few minutes she heard Cornellya say, "I know some spells that may tell us something."

"I was hoping you did," Gaenor replied without looking up.

"You knew I was here?"

"I knew you wouldn't be far away. I'm sure Artur thinks you're around too, but he's hoping you went back to the Village."

"I won't do that until we're finished on Ichtar," Cornellya insisted.

"I know. Cornellya, you don't look well. Are you sick?"

"Just a bit tired. Casting the invisibility spell constantly is tiring after a while."

"You better try to rest a bit more. All right. Tell me about your spells. I'll write them down."

"You don't need to write them down, Gaenor. I'll cast them," Cornellya replied.

"I want to know what they are for my own education, Cornellya," Gaenor told the Vari, "not because I don't trust you to cast them."

"Oh. When you put it that way..." Cornellya described in detail the spells she intended to use. It was well over an hour later before she was ready to tell Gaenor what she had discovered.

"They were killed by a magic spell, but it was too long ago to be able to say just what the nature of the spell was. The traces it left are very dim now. The other problem is that I think there may have been two spells at work here. At least one of which they were probably working on. They were experiemental adepts, were they not?"

"So I've been told, yes," Gaenor replied.

"So they may simply have been killed by an experimental spell. You know better than most how dangerous that is."

"But you don't think so?"

"I honestly do not know," Cornellya admitted. "They may have been working on two different spells, one of which went wrong, or perhaps the two spells interacted badly."

"I've never seen that happen," Gaenor commented.

"It's not very common," Cornellya informed her. "I've never seen it happen either, but Kseniya Keshayu told me about it once. The other possibility is that they were working on one spell and were attacked by the other."

“Attacked?” Gaenor asked, concerned, “Who would have attacked them?”

“I do not know any more than you do. It’s just a possibility, not necessarily what happened. Artur will be back soon, but I have another spell for you. I have noticed that humans often mark graves with small monuments?”

“Sometimes we do. Often a slab of rock is placed at the head saying who was buried there. Sometimes it’s just a stick with a sign attached,” Gaenor told her.

“This is a carving spell, you’ll be able to carve out a slab of rock with their names on it very quickly.” She described the spell and Gaenor wrote the spell out in her notation.

A little while later Artur and Leonhart came in and carried the two dead adepts out of the house. At Gaenor’s suggestion they used a pair of sheets to enshroud them before lowering them together to the bottom of a deep pit. As they started filling the pit back in, Gaenor looked around for an acceptable piece of stone. As she walked toward a small cliff a hundred yards away from the grave Artur and Leonhart were filling in, she heard some sharp popping noises. She walked toward the noise and found Cornellya working behind a thicket of thorny bushes.

“Gaenor,” she called softly. “I found a perfect rock. Inside this granite cliff, there’s a big chunk of rose quartz. Hold on a bit, I’ll get it out. She recast her spell and a few more rocks crumbled out of the way and a roughly oval boulder of pink quartz rolled out.

“That is nice. When you said rosy quartz I expected it to be clear, but this is an opaque pink. It’s better; the names will be easier to read. Thank you. How did you find it?”

“The diagnostic spell I showed you in the house. It can be varied to almost any use. I’m sure you can figure it out.”

“I suppose I can,” Gaenor nodded, “but if I can’t, I’ll be sure to ask you later.”

“Oh, here, I found this clay in the stream over there. You’ll need it for the carving spell.”

“Thanks, I was going to use a lump of moistened dirt, but this will be easier to manipulate.” She took the clay and wrapped it in a piece of cloth and placed it carefully in her purse. “Okay, I’d better be the one to get this down to the grave.” She used a simple, but powerful propulsion spell to move the rock down the slope toward the grave. It was one she had to recast several times, because it wasn’t one that was constantly pushing the rock, not one that could be guided easily. Actually it was nearly as hard mentally as physically moving the stone would have been, but she got it in place just as Artur and Leonhart were finishing with the grave.

“What have we here?” Artur asked.

“A gravestone, Sir Artur,” Leonhart replied with a touch of disdain directed at Artur for not understanding the obvious. Artur glared at him, but he ignored it and continued. “Very appropriate, Lady Gaenor, but have we the time to carve it?”

“I have a spell for that,” Gaenor explained. She took a few breaths and then pulled out her knife and the lump of clay. She shaped the clay until it was roughly the same shape as the pink stone, then she started the incantation. As she spoke the incantation in the Old Tongue, she began carving the lump of clay. First

she slice off a piece to give herself a smooth flat surface. As she did so a slice of the quartz fell off leaving a mirror finished surface on the stone. Using the tip of the knife, she carved the inscription:

Geramir of Es Khotina of Kimn

Master Adepts

Noe and Enna, bless and keep them

“Very nice, Gae,” Artur commended her when she was finished. “Using the Astish names for the chief gods was a nice touch.”

“Neither of them were from Aston,” Gaenor explained. “But they lived and died here. It seemed appropriate. Shouldn’t someone say something about them?”

There was a soft sob and Gaenor was surprised to see Leonhart’s face wet with tears.

“You’ve already said it and more eloquently than I ever could, Gae,” Artur said softly. “Let’s get the big piece of quartz away from here.”

“No,” Leonhart disagreed. He stepped forward and picked up the sharp slab and stuck it in the ground at the other end of the dual grave. “A footstone to match the head stone,” he explained.

“You cut yourself,” Gaenor noticed.

“In a good cause,” Leonhart replied quietly.

“Perhaps, but we’d better get those cuts cleaned and bandaged or they might get infected. Let’s go to the well. Artur, would you close up the house while I bandage Leonhart’s hands?”

Artur nodded. “We’ll come back tomorrow to see if we missed anything. If we did, I hope we find it,” he continued mostly to himself as he went to close the doors and windows.

Four

They were a somber trio as they left the inn two mornings later. The weather had stayed warm, but now it was raining gently as they rode back toward Jeritalen.

“What were you hoping to find there?” Leonhart asked Gaenor softly as they rode in the soaking rain. “I don’t mean yesterday, I mean when you first arrived?”

“Allies,” Gaenor answered simply. “There is something terrible happening in the world and we are looking for other highly capable adepts to help us.”

“You had to come all the way here?”

“We’ll go all over the world, if we have to,” Gaenor told him resolutely. “There aren’t a lot of adepts who have the ability to help us and a lot of them either are not convinced there is a problem or cannot help us for one reason or another, so we’re looking for every adept who might be willing to join us.”

“What is this terrible something?” Leonhart asked. Gaenor explained about the spell that was cast on Ichtar and what was happening in the Parch. “So it’s raining in the Parch. What has that to do with Aston?” he asked, unable to see any connection.

“If the change in weather patterns continue, Aston will be covered by a sheet of ice a mile thick or better.”

“When?”

“If you live long enough you’ll probably see it. You’ll almost definitely live long enough to see it start to happen.”

“Oh,” he replied finally. After a very long pause he added, “You’re going to stop it, aren’t you?”

“We’re going to try,” Gaenor assured him.

“Good.”

They arrived in Jeritalen by the middle of the afternoon and Artur told Leonhart, “You may as well take the opportunity to sleep in your own bed. Also by now you should have a taste of what the rest of this trip will be like. If there’s anything you’re going to want, pick it up now, we won’t be back until we’re done in Remarscen. Meet us for breakfast at the Mishandan embassy. We’ll leave from there.” Leonhart nodded wordlessly and rode off.

“He’s improved, don’t you think?” Gaenor asked.

“A little,” Artur admitted. “He’s had a few shocks. We’ll see how he behaves when he’s more than a day from home.”

They were already eating breakfast the next morning when Leonhart arrived breathlessly and dripping wet. Artur looked at him and raised an interrogatory eyebrow.

“Please forgive my tardiness, Sir Artur,” Leonhart said, still gasping for breath. “My royal parents insisted I break my fast with them this morning before I leave the capitol again.”

“Very well,” Artur replied. “I naturally bow to their precedence.”

“But not mine,” Leonhart noted.

“By royal command,” Artur replied. “Are you sure you wouldn’t like something now? From what I’ve been told of the road ahead any lunch will be in the saddle today unless we care to ride after dark.”

“We still may,” Leonhart replied. “I do know that road and while the next town is only five leagues away the next one after that is over ten leagues. And, thank you, sir, I would have some kahwah if there’s any left. We have not had any in the palace in months. Their Royal Highnesses do not drink it.”

“Help yourself,” Artur replied offering him the brass kahwah pot. There wasn’t one of the traditional small cups on the table but a tea cup served well enough even if it was twice the size kahwah was normally served in.

"I do wish it would stop raining," Leonhart commented after his first sip. "I don't suppose you could do something about that?" Both Artur and Gaenor shook their heads. "Too bad."

After breakfast, they loaded the horses and started riding south out of town but had only traveled a few blocks when a dozen young men galloped up and rapidly surrounded them. They were the same young dandies who had accompanied Leonhart when Artur and Gaenor first met him. Now they had their swords unsheathed and were nearly within the length of their reach.

"Now we have you!" one of the young men said smugly.

"Sheath your sword, Tanered," Leonhard barked quickly.

"My prince!" Tanered replied, but made no move to obey.

"Sheath your sword," Leonhart repeated, "and the rest of you as well."

"But, my prince, we're here to rescue you."

"From what? Myself? Sheath your sword or you'll be guilty of treason. I travel with Sir Artur and Lady Gaenor by royal command. Do you dare to thwart my father's will?"

"No, my prince, no!" Tanered replied hastily.

"Then sheath your sword and allow us to proceed."

"But, you said you didn't want to just a few days ago," Tanered objected.

"Maybe I've grown up a bit since then," Leonhart retorted. "I'll explain it to you on my return."

"Yes, my prince," Tanered nodded and finally sheathed his sword and led the others away.

"Thank you for that," Gaenor said, breathing a sigh of relief.

"I wouldn't have let them hurt you," Leonhart replied. "Tanered always has been a hothead."

"No, it's not that, it just that the only defensive spells we have ready would have killed them."

Leonhart stared at her then replied, "Then I should be thanking you for not using them. It would have made life difficult for my parents. Most of my friends have fathers on the Royal Council."

"No use worrying about what might have been," Artur told them. "Let's ride. We have a long way to go today."

It finally stopped raining two days later. After still another week they finally reached the foothills of the mountains Remarcsen had been founded amidst. They were still over a day from Remarcsen however, when they heard a loud, low-pitched moaning sound as it rolled over them and echoed through the large hills and mountains.

"I know that sound," Gaenor remarked. "Can't say I ever wanted to hear it again."

"What is it?" Leonhart asked.

“Lomorgs,” Artur told him.

“Trolls? Do they really exist?”

“Stick around,” Artur replied, “You’ll see for yourself in a few minutes.”

“Maybe they haven’t picked up our scent,” Gaenor said hopefully.

“Probably not yet,” Artur commented, “but I wouldn’t put any money on being able to slip by them unnoticed. Those beasts are always hungry.”

“What do they eat?” Leonhart asked nervously.”

“Whatever and whoever they can catch,” Gaenor told him. “I wish I could tell where they are but their howls are bouncing all over the hills here.”

Another loud moan came from behind them followed quickly by one from in front.

“We’re surrounded,” Artur noted. “Get ready to fight. Our defensive spells ought to take them out before they reach us. Leonhart, be very very careful not to let them touch you. Their bites and scratches will fester easily.”

Behind them the low moan changed pitch and volume, becoming a high scream and was quickly echoed from in front of them.

“They’ve caught our scent,” Gaenor commented. “I sure miss Baron Rolder.”

“Why?” Leonhart asked. His voice was even but all the color had drained from his face.

“He knows how to hunt lomorgs,” Gaenor replied, “and he has the armor you should have to do it in. Last time we were able to get ahead for a while by crossing a river, but here there is no such opportunity. On the other hand, last time we met lomorgs we didn’t have any spells prepared to defend ourselves with. Oh, Nua! Here they come!”

There seemed to be two packs of about eighteen creatures with long hairy limbs. They were covered with light brown fur and their wide open mouths revealed long yellow fangs and dark red tongues. They were capable of walking bipedally, but at the moment they were loping forward on all fours.

“Now, Gae!” Artur shouted and started firing off the fireball spells he’d prepared. Gaenor followed suit and soon they were surrounded by dead and smoking lomorgs. The few survivors were running away, routed by the fire.

“Good thing we drove them off,” Gaenor said. “I’m all out of fire spells.”

“Me too,” Artur told her. Just then they heard a high female scream and the lomorg hunting moan began again.

“Oh no!” Gaenor gasped. “Cornellya! Follow me!” she rode off fumbling to unsheath the sword she had carried since her encounter with a Temi assassin in Gendri. Artur and Leonhart galloped after her. They rode hard for two hundred yards and saw six lomorgs charging Cornellya. She tried to cast a spell, but it

failed and she turned and ran as hard as she could.

Gaenor was still ahead of the two men and managed to get her sword out. She screamed her best battle cry and swung the sword at the closest lomorg, neatly slicing its throat. Behind her Artur and Leonhart decapitated the first lomorgs they could reach and then worked together to kill another. However, the two remaining beasts were now chasing Gaenor. She hacked with her sword at the one on her right, hitting it in the face. It fell back and Artur finished it off, but when she tried a clumsy attack at the one on her left, it knocked the sword out of her hand and, off balance, she fell out of the saddle. Her horse kept running.

Lying flat on her back and nearly unconscious, she saw the lomorg swing its powerful front paw at her. Then, before it could connect, something suddenly picked it up and threw it far away. Gaenor looked up and saw Cornellya, looking very scared, sit down and curl up on herself.

“Gael!” Artur called as he ran to her. “Are you hurt? Leonhart, go fetch her horse.” Gaenor heard him ride off.

“Bruised at least,” Gaenor said, “and I feel a bit dizzy.”

“Let me look at you.” He looked at her eyes trying to detect the signs of a concussion. “Your pupils are still the same size. That’s good. And you’ll heal fast, but let’s see if you broke anything in that fall.”

Together they checked carefully and eventually decided that Gaenor’s original assessment was correct. She’d gotten away with just bruises.

“What happened to that last lomorg?” Gaenor asked.

“Cornellya threw it up and over a hundred yards away,” Artur replied. “It died on impact, if it wasn’t already dead. Which brings me to our Vari. Cornellya?” Cornellya didn’t respond except to whimper a bit. “Cornellya, uncurl and face me,” Artur commanded. She did so slowly but eventually faced him. “This is why I tried to send you home. It’s dangerous out here.”

“I’m staying with you,” she said with soft defiance.

“Yes, I can see that now. Well, it’s too dangerous to have you following us around like that. You’ll start riding with Gaenor. Eventually we’ll find a horse or a pony for you. And don’t go invisible anymore. If you’re going to be around, I want to know where you are. Besides you look terrible. That spell is killing you. Don’t you realize how much you can drain yourself maintaining that sort of magic for hours on end? Oh, well I suppose you do now. Well, better stop doing it. If, and I still say it’s a big if, you do go with us, we’re going to need you healthy and strong, not all worn out because you’re trying not to be seen.”

“Yes, godfather,” she replied softly.

Leonhart finally returned with Gaenor’s horse. “I thought this one would never stop running,” he said as he rode up.

“I wouldn’t have blamed her,” Gaenor replied. “Thank you for bringing her back.”

“You’re welcome. Who is this?” he asked spotting Cornellya.

“Prince Leonhart,” Artur replied tiredly, “may I present my godchild, Cornellya Vasylya.”

“An honor, my lady,” Leonhart responded automatically. “You aren’t human, are you?”

“I’m a Vari,” Cornellya replied.

“Oh,” Leonhart replied, not knowing what else to say.

“Gae,” Artur cut in, “let’s recharge our fire spells. There may be more lomorgs around. Cornellya you should do the same and I think I’ll store a couple charges in you to Leonhart.”

“Me?” he asked. “Do magic?”

“Not really, you’ll be an amulet containing two spells, but I’ll be the one who casts them. Just don’t snap your fingers.”

They managed to get to an inn that night without further incident and made it to Remarscen the next day.

Five

“It’s a bloody small town,” Gaenor grumped on their fourth day in Remarscen. “You’d think someone around here would know where this Vitautis wight is.”

“I’m just glad the people around here have heard of him,” Artur sighed. “I think he’s been moving around a bit. He has lived in at least two of the other places we went to find him. Maybe this time we’ll actually find him.”

The party had spent the morning climbing a steep trail up to a small shack near the top of a nearby mountain. Gaenor knew she would normally have enjoyed the sight and smell of the autumn forest all around her. The fall foliage color was at its peak and this area was particularly colorful. Certainly Cornellya was fascinated by it. Having spent all her life in the Parch, she had never seen a deciduous broadleaf tree, or any trees for that matter, before following Artur and Gaenor to Wahton. The fact that the leaves were changing colors and starting to fall had her asking Gaenor endless questions about them. Prince Leonhart had been starting to become friendly and helpful as they had traveled south, but the last couple days he just followed them around quietly and morosely.

The shack was accessible only by a long staircase that had been built against the mountain side with timbers and gravel, so they had to leave the horses over a hundred feet below the building before climbing the stairs.

“Whoever lives here must be home,” Artur said optimistically. “There’s smoke coming out of the chimney.”

“Maybe he’ll invite us in for tea,” Gaenor replied flatly.

Artur knocked on the door and a few moments later it swung open to reveal a tall thin man with black hair and a swarthy complexion. He was wearing a long woolen tunic, cut in the style worn in Aston, but his pants were loose and baggy, a style Gaenor had only seen once before in Firdan on the visiting noblemen from Wanlaria. It was an odd combination, but she knew the clothes she felt most comfortable in probably looked odd to others when she was far from home.

“Vिताutis of Senne?” Artur asked.

“Yes,” the man replied. “Do I know you?”

“Probably not. I am generally called Artur the Southlander these days.”

“Call me Vito, everyone does, and you’re no Southlander,” Vिताutis laughed. “Your hair and skin are too light and your eyes are too blue.”

“True enough. I was born in Cilbe. It’s a long story and I’ll be glad to tell it to you later. First let me introduce my partner, Gaenor of Narmouth...”

“The Gaenor of Narmouth?” Vito asked excitedly.

“If there’s more than one of me,” Gaenor replied, “I wish she would show up already. I could use an extra pair of hands,” she finished with a smile.

“I have your book,” Vito continued. “Fascinating!”

“Thank you,”

“This is our guide, Prince Leonhart,” Artur continued. Vito nodded respectfully. “and my goddaughter, Cornellya Vasylya.” He waited for Vito’s reaction, but was disappointed at first.

“My dear,” Vito nodded at Cornellya too, but turned back to Gaenor and looked as if he was about to ask a question, but suddenly his head swung back to Cornellya. “Vieri?” he asked hesitantly.

“Vari,” she corrected him.

“Vieri is the plural,” Gaenor mentioned. “May we come in? We have a lot to tell you and it will be a lot easier if we don’t have to do it in your doorway.”

“Yes, indeed! Please come in all of you. I’m sorry I don’t have a lot of furniture, but I dare say we’ll make do somehow.” He wasn’t exaggerating when he said there wasn’t much furniture. The shack had only one small room with a bed in one corner a small crude table with a single chair near a window in another corner and a wood stove for warmth and cooking.

Together Artur and Gaenor told Vito about the rain in the Parch and what the Vieri had told them needed to be done.

“One thing I don’t understand,” Vito said at last. “What were you doing in the Parch if you were looking for the Vieri?”

“That’s where we live,” Cornelya told him.

“You do?” Vito asked. “Since when?”

“We always have as far as our written records go back and that’s about twenty thousand years.”

“I thought you lived in the mountains,” Vito said, sadness in his voice. “That’s what I’ve been doing here

all these years.”

“We were told you were studying lomorgs,” Gaenor told him.

“Lomorgs? Well, sort of, but not by choice. When I first built this shack they used to come sniffing around here. After a while I figured out various ways – spells, and noxious smelling concoctions - to keep them away. Not finding any Vieri, I wrote a paper on the subject, but I can’t say I’m particularly interested in them. Now you come along and tell me I’ve been wasting the past few years.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” replied Artur. “Your patience has been borne out. You waited long enough and a real Vari showed up on your doorstep. What did you want to know about them?”

“Just everything!”

“If you come along with us,” Cornellya pointed out, “I’ll be glad to answer all your questions, though a lot of them can probably be answered by Gaenor and Artur too. Gaenor visited us this summer and Artur spent years with us when I was born.”

“I’d like to,” Vito replied. “I was about to leave and try somewhere else anyway. The winters here are abominable and the lomorgs get hungry enough to ignore my defenses after a while, but I don’t know about going to Ichtar.”

“Then I guess I’ll have to convince you,” Cornellya replied brightly.

The trip back to Jeritalen was slow but uneventful. Vito was able to pack all his belongings from the shack up on the horse he bought in Remarscen. He told them that most of his possessions were in Senne in Wanlaria and all he had here were a few bits of clothing, some books and his spell tools. Discussing magic theory with him, Gaenor discovered that he didn’t use very many spells that used ingredients, so the number of items he carried with him were much smaller than what Gaenor and Artur had.

“Actually, I haven’t been doing many ingredient-based spells on the road,” Gaenor told him. “We have a large inventory of them at home, but we didn’t really know we’d be away so long when we left. Most ingredients I’ve been using have been materials I had at hand, although when I was writing spells for Artur, ingredients were as important a part of each spell as the tools were.”

“My master didn’t hold by ingredients,” Vito told her. “He said it wouldn’t do to rely on a material that could be used up just when you might need more. I guess the attitude rubbed off on me. I didn’t even learn any ingredient spells until I got to University.”

Leonhart’s spirits rose as they approached his home and he was quite talkative by the time they reached the city, telling Gaenor and Artur about growing up in the palace while Vito talked for hours with Cornellya about life in the Village.

“Now that we’re back,” Leonhart said expansively, “I’d be honored if you would all stay in the palace as my guests for as long as you like.”

“That’s very kind of you,” Artur told him, “but the weather’s turning cold again and I smell snow in the

air. If we're going to get out of Aston before we get snowed in, we'd better leave tomorrow morning. Still I suppose we could stay tonight, if the offer still holds."

"Of course, Sir Artur," Leonhart replied happily, "And I'll see that you are well supplied for the next leg of your trip. But if you're traveling to Kimn, maybe you should take a riverboat south. The Prinne is navigable all the way to the Thindra Sea."

"If it wasn't getting colder, I would, but if the river freezes on the way, we'll have an even longer trip than if we ride directly to Seinut."

"That's a good point," Leonhart agreed. "And the Prinne does generally freeze up north of Darit." Leonhart thought carefully about what to say next and then nearly blurted out, "Sir Artur, I want to thank you for allowing me to travel with you these past few weeks. I'm afraid I must have been a right bother at the beginning, but I'd like to think I've grown up a bit. I've seen and had to do things I would rather not have done, but having seen and done them... well..."

"I believe you've finally started growing up, Your Highness," Artur replied. It was the first time he had directly addressed him by his title. "If it makes you feel better, some in your position never do. You may find you no longer have as much in common with some of your friends as you once did."

"I'm not sure how many of them will want much to do with me after our last departure from Jeritalen."

"You're the crown prince of Aston," Artur replied. "They would try to be your friends if you were slowly roasting them over a bed of coals."

"That does not say a lot for them," Leonhart replied after thinking it through. "Not much for being a prince either."

"Keep that in mind and you'll be a wise king," Artur told him.

"Sir Artur, the day we met, you said you were a Cilben patrician?"

"I was."

"And a senator?"

"And before I served in the Senate, I was General of the Twelfth Legion," Artur said agreeably.

"Then you really know what it is like to be noble," Leonhart concluded.

"Yes. I also know what it is like to be a wandering vagabond and several things in between so I can tell you the major difference is in the quality of the food and lodging."

"I'm going to have to think about that," Leonhart confessed.

"Do that."

"But if my friends only want to be my friends because I'm the prince, how do I find true friendship?"

"How do any of us?" Artur countered. "Don't worry, some will like you anyway. Just don't blindly trust anyone who flatters you a lot."

“There go most of my friends,” Leonhart said sadly, then he smiled and added, “On the other hand there are several ladies who have been telling me exactly what they think of me. Yes, I can live with that, especially if they change their minds.”

“Good luck, Your Highness,” Artur told him wryly as they rode through the gate through the inner perimeter of Grosseschloss

Kimn

One

“You have Our thanks, Sir Artur, Lady Gaenor,” King Gunnas told them the next morning as they paid their respects before leaving. “Prince Leonhart is a changed man.”

“It was our pleasure, Your Royal Highness,” Artur told him. “Leonhart was a handful at first, but he grew up a bit, but if you’ll take my advice, don’t let him get too used to the luxury of the palace without doing something to earn it.”

King Gunnas asked, “What do you suggest?”

“The lad needs more responsibilities. Something to remind him that being king means a life of giving to one’s subjects, not taking from them. Give him a job, a tough one, something that will take up most of his time.”

“I’ll give that a try, Are you sure it won’t go to his head?”

“Depends on the job you give him, I suppose,” Artur shrugged.

A few minutes later Artur, Gaenor, Cornellya and Vitautis were riding south. Around noontime they reached a fork in the road and instead of following the Pirones River road which would have brought them back to Remarscen, they continued due south toward Seinet on the Thimdra Sea.

Cornellya was looking much healthier, now that she didn’t have to maintain a nearly continuous invisibility spell.

“It’s really quite difficult when you’re in motion,” she confided to Gaenor two days after they left Jeritalen. “You have to keep your mind on every little detail because it constantly changes. That’s why you kept catching me out of the corners of your eyes early on. I was still really learning how to use the spell effectively and occasionally I’d fail to adapt correctly. But then I’d stop moving when you’d turn around so you would not actually see me.”

“I had wondered about that,” Gaenor admitted. “So why didn’t I see you, even out of the corner of my eye after Verika detected you?”

“By then I was starting to get the hang of it. But you never actually saw me? How did you know I was with you in the garden in Ander?”

“It was a guess,” Gaenor laughed. “I knew you were still following us, of course, but it was only a guess that you would have followed Ibbet, Chas and me into that part of the garden, but if you had, I knew you’d have to be in the corner you actually were in. It was the only place you could sit without getting in someone’s way.”

“Ah, I had wondered about that,” Cornellya told her. “I thought maybe you’d picked up some of Verika’s talent.”

“There are times that might be convenient, but, no, I was using one of my own talents.” Gaenor smiled as she tapped her own head.

Cornellya laughed. “Oh look!” she exclaimed happily, “It’s the white rain again.”

“When it’s frozen into light flakes like this,” Gaenor corrected her, “we call it snow.”

“Snow,” Cornellya repeated the word, getting use to the sound of it. “Snow. What a funny word!

“We have funnier ones,” Gaenor replied, “like sleet, that’s when it melts partway and freezes again. Also, if rain freezes and comes down as balls of ice we call it hail.”

“Why do you have so many different words for it? It’s all just water that comes out of the sky, isn’t it.”

“It is, I suppose, but when it comes in so many different forms, it’s only natural to have different words to describe them. Think about how many words in the Old Tongue describe sand. There are words for light sand, dark sand, blowing sand, sand that has collected into a dune, quicksand. It’s all just sand, isn’t it?” Gaenor finished by paraphrasing Cornellya’s own question.

“You equate sand with rain?” Cornellya asked.

“No,” Gaenor replied instantly. “Well, maybe in a way I do at that. You might too if you lived on the shores of the Ocean Sea. All I’m saying is that we differentiate between different types of precipitation because they are as different to us as the different forms of sand are to you. Artur tells me that the natives of Arberoa have about fifteen different words for snow.”

“Do they?” Cornellya asked.

“Maybe,” Gaenor replied, “but I think at least fourteen of them are probably profane. By the time this storm is over you may know most of them, or else you can invent your own. Artur!” she called ahead to where Artur and Vito were deep in their own discussion. “Take a look to the west. Do those clouds look as nasty to you as they do to me?”

Artur looked in that direction then called back, “You’re right, Gae, I think we’re going to be caught in a blizzard when that catches up to us. I saw a settlement a few miles ahead of us on top of that last hill. Let’s pick up the pace and also stay together.”

“Right!” Gaenor called back. “Come on, Cornellya. We don’t want to hang back if a blizzard hits us.”

“What is a blizzard?” Cornellya asked.

“Lots of snow, wind and very cold temperatures,” Gaenor replied as they started catching up to the

men. "It's very dangerous to be out in one, you can lose your way in such a storm and get lost just a few steps away from safety."

"Really?"

"Absolutely. We don't get storms like that in Narmouth very often, but every ten years or so..."

"Maybe we should ride faster," Cornellya suggested.

"Not a bad idea," Artur agreed.

The snow was much heavier as they arrived in a small village named Aless. To Artur's relief there was a small inn there where they could stay. Unfortunately there were only two rooms available, so it was decided the men would stay in one and Gaenor would share the other with Cornellya.

Apart from its small size the inn was typical of inns in Aston, with rough hewn beams overhead and unfinished walls. The windows were glazed, but the glass was translucent so while some light came in from outside, they couldn't see out unless the door was opened. But the main room was warm and the landlady made sure her daughter got fires starting in the hearth the two rooms shared, so while it was bitterly cold outside, it was pleasantly warm inside, even to Cornellya who was used to the desert heat of the Parch.

The inn was otherwise empty this afternoon, the locals having gone home ahead of the storm. Once they had taken care of the horses and put their bags in their rooms, Gaenor had returned to the inn's one public room, ordered a pot of tea and sat down to work in her notebook.

Cornellya was interested in Gaenor's work, but Vito was asking his continuous questions about the Vieri. His questions proved that before meeting her, he really hadn't known very much about any non-human intelligence with the possible exception of lomorgs, always assuming they were intelligent. His knowledge of lomorgs was forced on him by his decision to seek Vieri in the mountains, not from any desire to understand the creatures.

Artur had been nursing a pint of bitter ale while trying his hand at the dartboard that had been hung in one corner, but gave that up and sat down next to Gaenor. "I never have understood the fascination some people have in that game," he remarked.

"Couldn't hit the target?" she asked.

"Couldn't help but hit it," he replied.

"What?"

"Well, look at that board. There are thirty-six dots on it and they're all about an inch and a half across. That's a fairly big target from eight feet away. Where's the challenge?"

"Is that why you never play when we go down to the pub?"

"The Mishandan boards are only slightly more challenging, Gae. Frankly I don't know why people have such trouble hitting whatever spot they want. Now javelins are much more challenging. Hitting a target dead on with one of those is a real accomplishment."

“You really don’t know, do you? Most of us aren’t as coordinated as you are. If dartboards were as easy to hit the target on as you think, the targets would be smaller or we’d have to throw the darts over our shoulders or around corners or something. The javelins sound like fun though.”

“Actually, they’re part of the basic training for a Cilben soldier,” Artur told her seriously.

“Still sounds like fun,” she replied. “They have a Maelstrom board, if you want to play a game.” Maelstrom was a game from Cilbe with the play determined by the roll of dice.

“Okay. You get the board and I’ll refill my mug.”

After the first game, Vito expressed an interest in it, so Gaenor let the two men play and took her notebook over to where Cornellya was sitting.

“I just looked out the door,” Cornellya told her. “It’s like a sandstorm out there, except instead of sand it’s this white rain, I mean snow.”

“That’s what a blizzard is like,” Gaenor remarked.

“How long will it last?”

“It could last for days, but if it’s a normal sort of storm, it will probably be clear tomorrow morning.”

“So we’re only here tonight?” Cornellya asked.

“That depends on how much snow falls before the storm stops. How deep was the snow when you looked outside?”

“About this high.” Cornellya held her hands about six inches apart.

“Already?” Gaenor asked. “It hasn’t been snowing two hours yet. Let’s hope it blows over quickly or we could be stuck here until it melts.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about that, miss,” the landlady, who had introduced herself as Mistress Larilla, told her from the doorway to the kitchen. “It’s too early in the season to get snowed in for long. The roads will probably be clear in a day or three. Good thing you’re headed south, though. Real winter weather comes later along the Thimdra Sea. I came to let you all know that dinner should be ready in a few minutes. Tonight we have roast chicken for the main course. Alternatively we always have sausage for those who prefer.”

They all chose the chicken, which had been made with a bread stuffing and a combination of herbs that were becoming familiar to Gaenor as typical of Astish cooking. It was served with well seasoned turnips and some fresh greens that surprised Gaenor.

“We don’t have much left,” the landlady admitted to Gaenor when she asked. “It certainly wouldn’t be enough to offer if we were busier, but more than my daughter and I can eat ourselves and it wouldn’t do to waste it. We have a lot of pears and apples in storage too if you like, but I made apple and raspberry pies this afternoon. I think that would make for a better dessert, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do,” Gaenor agreed readily. “How do you still have raspberries this late in the year?”

"I have them preserved in syrup," Larilla replied. "You won't see too many whole berries, I fear, but you'll taste the flavor and see the red color."

"Sounds good," Cornellya commented.

"I hope you'll like it," Larilla replied. She hesitated, then asked, "I hope this isn't too personal, dear, but I can't help noticing your ears."

Cornellya laughed and pulled her hair back to reveal her pointed ears, "My mother says they're my best feature."

"How extraordinary! They do suit you, I think, especially with the slant of your eyes. Do all your people have ears like that?"

"We find it quite normal," Cornellya replied.

"You must come from very far away," Larilla commented.

"I normally live in the Parch," Cornellya told her.

"I didn't know anyone lived there."

"There aren't very many of us and we only have a single village, but it is ours," Cornellya admitted with quite dignity. The landlady nodded and returned to the kitchen to get dessert ready.

Her daughter, who Gaenor guessed was about ten years old, was far more direct when she brought one of the pies out for the table. "Are you an elf?" she asked Cornellya.

"I am a Vari," Cornellya replied, smiling. "Elf?" she asked Gaenor a few minutes later.

"A mythical and magical type of person that some people believe in," Gaenor told her.

Vitautis however had much more to say on the subject. "Elves, Parchites, Vieri, Faeries, Sidhe, and a lot more names. All names for the same people. So actually you are an elf, Cornellya."

"I don't like that word," she replied.

"It's just a word," he shrugged.

"It doesn't sound nice. It's too short, like whoever came up with the word wanted to minimize the people it represents."

"Minimize?" Gaenor repeated. "An interesting concept, but if you don't like the word, we won't use it. That does beg the question of why do Mishandans call your people the same thing you call yourselves?"

"I'm not sure, but it could be because Shandi, Gostrinan too, is a descendant language of the Old Tongue."

"So is Larian," Vito added, "so some of our words will tend to be similar, especially proper nouns. Still it is odd that Shandi has retained the same pronunciation for Vieri as in the Old Tongue."

“It isn’t quite the same,” Artur pointed out. “In the Old Tongue the ‘ie’ diphthong is pronounced as two separate letters Vi...eri,” he exaggerated the pronunciation. “in Shandi it is pronounced as a single letter, ‘Veery.’” Old Tongue rolls the ‘r’ more too. In Gostrina they pronounce it more like ‘Verry.’”

“In Wanlaria we say ‘Faerie,’” Vito told them. “In Astish it’s Fareye. They say it’s because they think Cornellya’s people have excellent vision, but as you can tell it’s really just a corruption of the original ‘Vieri.’ Elf is a Barbarian word though. I wonder why the girl used it here.”

“We’re not all that far from the Barbarian Kingdoms,” Gaenor pointed out. “Sometimes words cross borders easier than traders do.”

“I think they speak Barbarian in Kimn too,” Vito remarked.

“There really is no single Barbarian language,” Artur told them all. “Not the way we would think of it. It’s a fairly closely related set of dialects. There are five main dialects and several dozen variants of them. If you learn one, though, you can manage to communicate, since they really are fairly close and most people there know more than one dialect.”

“Do they speak Barbarian on Kimn?” Gaenor asked.

“It’s not called Barbarian,” Artur replied. “Barbarian is actually a Cilben word.”

“I know that. It means ‘foreigner.’” Gaenor told him.

“Right,” Artur agreed. “Or it did a couple thousand years ago. Since then it has come to be applied specifically to the people in the Barbarian Kingdoms. Even they call themselves barbarians these days, but they originally called themselves Sendelians and their language is still called Sendish.”

“Sendish. And all the different dialects are called that?” Gaenor asked.

“Yes. I think a linguist would consider it one language technically, and that each variant is a dialect or a regional variant of a dialect. I’m no linguist though and it seems like a lot of different languages to me. Still, I’ve had to parlay with Barbarian representatives and know the version of Sendish taught in Cilbe.”

“If they speak Sendish in Kimn, maybe you’d better teach what you know to the rest of us,” Gaenor suggested.

“I’m not sure I can learn a new language that quickly,” Vito commented.

“Don’t worry,” Gaenor told him. “We have a spell that will help.”

“Really, you can learn languages by magic? That would have come in handy back in University.”

“Not really,” Artur told him. “It’s not the most pleasant experience, the spell works from mind to mind. You really don’t open yourself up completely, but it feels like it.”

“Maybe I’ll pass,” Vito said with a shudder. “I can always learn the old-fashioned way.”

The storm blew itself out overnight, but not before it had deposited over two and a half feet of snow in its wake. The next day was very cold and windy, but on the second day the temperatures rose well above freezing and the snow began to melt. Gaenor and Larilla’s daughter taught Cornellya how to make

a snowman and that evening Larilla's local customers started coming back to the inn. By the end of their fourth day in Aless Artur determined that enough snow had melted that they could start traveling again. Nearly two weeks later they arrived in Seinut.

Seinut's major industry was fishing, but as the largest port in Aston on the Thimdra Sea, there was also a fair amount of trade coming in and out of the port. The town was also more orderly in Gaenor's eyes than most of the settlements in Aston she had seen. Vito told her it was because of the foreign influence.

"People from other countries are often put off by the Astish way of doing things," he said.

"I know I was until I got used to it," Gaenor interrupted.

"I'm not surprised," Vitautis remarked. "Anyway, Asts aren't any more stupid than the people anywhere else, so in Seinut, the merchants do their best to make sure foreign traders feel comfortable. Keeping the streets clean and doing better finish work on the buildings isn't really all that hard, after all."

They spent a week in Seinut waiting for a ship that could carry their horses.

"Normally, I'd just sell them and buy new ones when we get back from Kimn," Artur admitted, "but when I tried selling them the local buyers didn't care to even come close to my price. So we'll take them with us."

"Couldn't we just stable them until we return?" Gaenor asked.

"We probably won't be coming back here," Artur replied. "Winter is closing in, The next storm could catch us in the mountains and trap us there for a month or better, so we want to continue on south to either Sorvohn or Maxforn. The good news, of course is that it's just coming on toward summer on the other side of the equator."

"Could be winter before we get there," Gaenor replied.

"It might be fast traveling," Artur disagreed. "The Minue is navigable south of Wahton all the way down to the Gulf of Nimbre. That should pick our pace up considerably."

"It will be nice to just sit and watch the world slip by for a change," Gaenor commented.

"Yes, I've always enjoyed sailing," Artur agreed.

The next day they found a ship bound for Kimn and left on the evening tide.

Two

The Customs agents who inspected their passports exiting Aston were as lax as the ones who had allowed them to enter. Cornellya had no passport so she became invisible again until their ship sailed and then again when they reached Kimn. The capitol of Kimn was also called Kimn and wasn't as much a city as the primary settlement on the island and the home of their queen.

In sharp contrast the customs agents who met them in Kimn, two tall and muscular women, were all business. Their initial questions about the party's business on Kimn were delivered in a bored tone of

voice, but that tone turned to intense and unpleasant interest when Artur and Vito admitted to being adept. From there the encounter went downhill rapidly and the two men were detained for further questioning.

“But why?” Gaenor asked as they were led away.

“They are illegal adepts,” one of the women told her flatly.

“I’m adept,” Gaenor pointed out. “Why aren’t you arresting me?”

The customs woman looked puzzled. “Women are allowed to practice magic, of course,” she replied.

“What will happen to them?”

“They will be tried and probably be found guilty,” came the reply.

“What’s the penalty?”

“Death, usually,” the woman made it sound like this was a just and proper punishment.

“But we didn’t know it was illegal for male adepts to visit Kimn. You really ought to let people know that before they try to land here,” Gaenor pointed out angrily.

“I don’t make the laws.”

“Isn’t there someone to appeal to?” Gaenor asked.

“Their trial will be tomorrow morning, you can try convincing the judge to be lenient. Failing that you might try appealing to the Queen. She might spare their lives, but I wouldn’t count on it.”

“But...”

“There nothing I can do for you,” the agent snapped. “Now get out of here. We have other work to do.”

Gaenor took charge of the horses and the packs and went out into the town.

“This isn’t good,” Cornellya said from her left side. “What do we do next?”

“Find an inn, I suppose,” Gaenor replied. “Take care of the horses and then see about getting an appointment with the queen, who and wherever she is when she’s up and dressed. I wonder where I’ll find her.”

“Most kings and queens live in a castle or a palace,” Cornellya pointed out.

“I haven’t seen one of those yet.”

“We just got here. I supposed it would be too much work to just ask someone,” Cornellya suggested slyly.

“You’ve been spending too much time with Artur and me,” Gaenor told her sourly. “You’re right, though. Let’s find that inn.”

They found an inn fairly easily. Kimn was not built like any city Gaenor had ever seen before. Instead of row houses or even adjoined buildings, each building or compound stood on its own with generous space around it and paved streets and alleys ran between each lot. The inn was as orderly as the rest of Kimn appeared to be, had at least a dozen rooms available, three public rooms and a sweet-smelling stable for the horses. It was owned by a middle-aged woman of moderate stature, who also brewed her own meads, ciders and wines on site. Gaenor learned that beer and ale were not popular on Kimn so was hard to find there.

“That isn’t a problem for me,” Gaenor commented on learning that. “I’ve always been more partial to cider anyway.”

Cornellya also had a question, though. “Everything seems to be run by women here.”

“Of course,” the landlady told them. “Men are not allowed to hold land in their own name and all their property actually belongs to their wives.”

“Just the opposite of Mishanda,” Gaenor noted, “but is that fair? Many men are capable of managing their own affairs. My friend, Lady Relle, believes that women ought to be equal under the law with men, are there none here who feel that way about men?”

“Perhaps,” the landlady replied, “and there is no shortage of those jobs that are usually filled by men, nor is there a law that prohibits men from working at any job they might be hired for, but I don’t know anyone who feels that way. It’s just the way it is.”

“It will take me a while to get used to it. Perhaps you can help me with another problem,” Gaenor said, and proceeded to tell her about the arrest of Artur and Vito. “So while their trial isn’t until tomorrow, I thought it might be a good idea to make an appointment to appeal to the queen. I don’t know how long I might have to wait otherwise.”

“She usually holds public court several afternoons each week and I think today might be one of them,” came the reply. She gave Gaenor and Cornellya directions to a large park-like area. There was a sort of a sprawling one floor manor-like affair on the large lot of land, but Queen Khodania was in the habit of holding court outdoors when weather permitted. It was a cloudy day but warm, so that’s where Gaenor found her.

A woman wearing royal livery in violet and gold asked Gaenor her name and business. When Gaenor explained, she asked, “Don’t you want to wait for the results of their trial?”

“I was hoping to avoid it altogether,” Gaenor replied. “In truth, however, I was not expecting an audience today, but if Her Majesty will allow me to speak...”

“She will always allow you to speak, lady,” the herald replied. “She may not grant what you ask for, but you are always permitted to ask.”

“All I hoped for was a chance,” Gaenor replied.

“No, you hoped to free your friends. Well, you may do so yet.”

It was late in the afternoon with the sun getting ready to set before Gaenor was called forward to state her case. She walked forward and curtsied before the queen.

“We do not bow or curtsy here, Lady Gaenor,” Queen Khodania told her. “Stand strong and proud.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Gaenor replied. “I come before you to beg a boon.” There was a murmur from the attending noblewomen who surrounded the queen.

“A boon?” the queen smiled. “Our ways are different from yours and the formal way of making a request is different, but we perceive no intent to insult us. Let’s see, I believe the proper response is supposed to be something like, ‘If it is proper and within our power, we will give it all due consideration.’ Did I get it right?”

“Um, I suppose so, Your Majesty. Actually I’ve never had to make a formal presentation in court of this sort.”

“Really? A noblewoman who is not acquainted with court etiquette?” Khodania asked suspiciously.

“Well, actually I’m not noble, just gentle and until a few weeks ago I was as common as dirt, Your Majesty,” Gaenor replied.

“Ha! If you were recently elevated in one of the outside kingdoms I doubt you were ever truly common, but I take your meaning. So how did that come about? What did you do that caused a king, I assume it was a king, to elevate your rank?”

“Well, ostensibly it was for inventing a hangover cure.” There was a chorus of chuckles from the court. “But in actuality I believe it was also for casting the binding spell on Queen Ymanya at the coronation in Firdan.” She went on to explain the circumstances and also explained the meaning behind her coat of arms as carved into her signet ring.

“Impressive,” Khodania said at last. “So you are adept as well. I welcome you, sister.” Another murmur filled the wooded glen they were in. “It has been a very long time since one of our own has come to us from outside.”

“One of our own, Your Majesty?” Gaenor asked.

“Adept. Specifically a female adept. Kimn is, as you might describe it, is a matriarchal thaumatocracy. That is, it is ruled by women who are adept. The office of Queen is not hereditary. I am the most talented adept of my generation. My successor will be the best of hers. So what is it you want of us?”

Gaenor explained what had happened at the customs station and why they had come to Kimn. She continued to explain until Khodania raised her hand to signal for silence.

“We are very sorry, Lady Gaenor, but we rarely interfere with the routine workings of our governmental officials,” the queen told her. “And this is very clear case of male adepts attempting to enter our realm. Still, I will not make a ruling against you as it would prejudice their trials. After the trial if you wish to appeal again, you are certainly free to do so.”

“But, Your Majesty,” Gaenor continued in desperation, “The rains in the Parch...”

“Yes, sister,” Khodania stopped her again, “We are aware of many disruptive forces in the world. We are not so isolated as you might think.” One of the ladies standing beside the queen leaned over and whispered something in her ear. “What’s that, oh yes, I see it now. Lady Gaenor!” she barked, “Is this

some sort of treachery you plan?"

"Your Majesty? What?"

"Who is that beside you? And why is she invisible?"

Gaenor looked, first to one side and then the other. "Cornellya, why are you invisible?"

Cornellya replied from Gaenor's left, "I was worried there might be trouble."

"There is. Please release your spell now," Gaenor requested of her friend.

Cornellya reappeared and a loud gasp and then an ominous silence filled the darkening glen. The ladies of the court were staring and pointing at Cornellya and Gaenor suspected that it wasn't simply because she had suddenly appeared.

"An elf?" Queen Khodania asked.

"I prefer to be called a Vari," Cornellya replied a little too sharply, then added, "Your Majesty," a little too late. The queen didn't seem to mind, however. Instead she stood up and walked over to Gaenor and Cornellya, her gaze never leaving Cornellya's face.

When she was within reach, the queen raised her hand slowly toward Cornellya's face. "May I?" she asked, suddenly dropping the royal 'we.' When Cornellya nodded, Khodania gently pushed Cornellya's hair away from her left ear. "It's true?" she asked in almost a whisper.

"What's true?" Cornellya asked. "That I am a Vari? Yes, is it not obvious?"

"Oh yes, yes," Khodania replied. "I meant the prophecy. Is it true then?"

"I hope you'll forgive me, but I'm not aware of any prophecies. The Council of the Wise teaches us that prophecy is the least accurate of the arts."

"Indeed, yes," Khodania agreed readily.

"Most of them, in fact," Cornellya added, "see prophecy as a useless superstition."

"But this prophecy was made by an e... a Vari," Khodania objected.

"To quote my own mistress," Cornellya replied, "'Were you there? Did you see it?'" The members of Khodania's court were buzzing among themselves now. Cornellya was a creature out of their legends, but she was obviously not quite fitting the mold they expected of her. Cornellya picked up on that and added, "I don't mean to say there is no such thing, nor would I blindly dismiss your prophecy without giving it due consideration, but my mistress always told me that the only true prophecies were either made after the fact or were self-fulfilling. Anything else is a wishful attempt to control the unknown."

"You've given me a lot to think about," Khodania said after a long pause, "but I'd also like to tell you about the prophecy before you dismiss it out of hand. Our own Council of Wisdom advises one to never come to a conclusion without all the available facts." Cornellya nodded her agreement. "Why do you not have dinner with us tonight?"

“What about Arturus and Vitautis?” Cornellya asked.

“Arturus is a Cilben name?”

“He was originally from Cilbe,” Cornellya confirmed.

“We have no dealings with the Emperor,” Khodania replied coldly.

“Then you have something in common,” Gaenor remarked. “Neither does he, Your Majesty.”

“I will have them summoned,” she decided. “I make no promises, mind you, but I will give their case full consideration, if you will so consider the prophecy.”

“Deal!” Gaenor and Cornellya said in unison. Then they looked at each other and laughed.

Three

“Our magic,” Khodania explained over appetizers inside the royal house, “is different from that practiced in the outside world.”

“How so?” Gaenor asked interestedly.

“Magic outside of Kimn is causative. You use it to create, to destroy, to change or to exploit. You use it to accomplish things. Magic on Kimn is preservative. We strive to maintain and preserve not to change or exploit.”

“Are your spells crafted by different means than ours?” Cornellya asked.

“No, we use incantation and ritual just as you do. We even use many of the same spells. The difference is in why we use magic. For us magic is the basic power by which the gods built the world and it is the power that keeps it in balance. So our magic is meant to help maintain that balance.”

“That’s hard to grasp,” Gaenor replied. “I mean, I understand what you are saying, but all your magic maintains the balance? You use no magic to help in creature comforts? None for defense of your kingdom. No Kimnan adept ever casts a spell that does not maintain the balance?”

“There are exceptions, but they are rare. We rarely need defensive spells and we prefer to build what we need with our hands. Magic is for healing. If a crop is failing, however, that is an imbalance. We may use magic to protect and preserve, to re-establish balance. If a woman or a man is injured, that too is an imbalance. Using magic to heal a wound re-establishes balance. In the rare exceptions when it becomes necessary to use magic in a way that causes imbalance, we use still more magic to correct it. However, it generally takes twice as much power to correct an imbalance than it does to create one.”

“That’s why you try not to create one,” Cornellya concluded, “but what about the adepts in the rest of the world? This concept of balance is a fascinating one, but if the rest of us are just using magic as we please, should we not have thrown the world so far out of balance you’ll never catch up?”

“Not every application of magic causes imbalance,” Khodania explained. In general, most magic use in the world is random so a spell is as likely to push the balance one way as another. Unless every adept

were to work together the balance doesn't go so far off that we cannot correct it."

"How do you measure the imbalance?" Gaenor asked.

"That is our highest magic," the queen told her. "I mean no disrespect, my sister, but it is not likely an adept as young as you are would be able to grasp the complexity of such spells.

Cornellya snorted and dissolved in laughter. "If she can't understand your magic," she told Khodania, "I doubt there's an adept anywhere who can."

"Oh, really," Khodania said doubtfully. "I'm sure Gaenor here is quite talented. She would have to be to have been initiated in the male dominated lands, but she is young. Lady Gaenor, seriously how long have you been adept?"

"A few months. I was initiated by the Vieri," Gaenor told her.

"By the Vieri," Khodania whispered.

"And the Council of the Wise sat to learn at her feet, asking her advice in the crafting of their highest magics," Cornellya continued proudly. "My mistress told me that Gaenor is one of the great magical geniuses of any age. She has devised a system of notation that has been hailed as revolutionary. She has proposed theory that may well turn everything we think we know about magic on its head. She has taught at the College in Mita and the Misha University, where Doctors of Magic conversed with her as an equal. My friend here wears a ruby on her finger that has been carved with her heraldic device for magic she invented and accomplished before she was even initiated. Queen Khodania. I mean *you* no disrespect, but are you so certain that you or any of your people are capable of fully grasping what Lady Gaenor of Narmouth has accomplished?"

Khodania turned to stare at Gaenor, awe, respect and a touch of fear all battling for a chance to show themselves on her face. "Who are you, sister?" she finally asked.

"Cornellya has a flare for the dramatic, I fear," Gaenor said humbly. "She has perhaps overstated my abilities and accomplishments."

"Not hardly," Cornellya scoffed.

"You really have been spending too much time with Artur and me," Gaenor told her sourly, but then suddenly laughed.

"Can you honestly claim that anything I said was untrue?" Cornellya challenged her.

"Technically, I suppose, but you make it sound so, so..." Gaenor was at a loss for words.

"And don't think age is an issue, Your Majesty," Cornellya continued. "You didn't seem to think I was too young to understand your magic, but I'm younger than Gaenor."

"You are?" Khodania asked, though she wasn't really hearing Cornellya any longer, other thoughts in her head were screaming for attention.

"It's hard to tell by looking at a Vari. I'll look like this until shortly before I die of old age, if I make it that far."

“Prophecy!” Khodania said in wonder. The she shook her head gently and returned her attention to Gaenor and Cornellya. “Forgive me, sisters. I fear I’ve let my mind wander. There is so much going on in the world right now, so many imbalances to correct.”

“That may be related to our mission,” Gaenor told her and proceeded to explain in total everything she had learned about the rain in the Parch, its eventual effect on the rest of the world and its apparent origin on Ichtar. While she was talking, Artur and Vito arrived under guard. Gaenor stopped briefly to get up and hug Artur and to ascertain that he and Vito were safe. Then when they had all sat down again she continued her explanation.

When Gaenor had finished, Khodania said, “Yes, that does fit what we have been seeing of late. It is nearly time for dinner, however, and it is not our custom to discuss such weighty matters while we eat. Sir Artur and Master Vitautis, we pardon you for entering our lands without permission, but only on the condition that you practice no magic for the remainder of your stay here. Let us all eat now and tomorrow we shall summon the Council of Wisdom. There is much to be discussed and I am only one woman.”

The Council of Wisdom did not actually meet the next day, nor for another two days after that. The Council members lived all over the island of Kimn and could not assemble on a moment’s notice. While waiting for them to arrive Khodania invited Gaenor and her party to stay in the royal house as her guests and she met with them for hours each day as her other duties permitted.

Artur and Vito were treated politely enough but neither the queen nor the members of the council who arrived early paid as much heed to them as they did to Gaenor and Cornellya. Gaenor asked about that, and the queen apologized for her behavior and that of her council, but on Kimn very few men held positions of prestige. Instead they handled jobs that required muscle or stayed home to keep house. Some few managed businesses in their wives’ names.

It was Cornellya who brought up an entirely different matter. “Are names that begin with ‘Kh’ common on Kimn, Khodania?”

“Not very common at all,” the queen replied. “Only the daughters of my family have such names. Why?”

“So Khotina was a relative?”

“My sister,” Khodania replied, then Cornellya’s words struck her. “Was?”

“Unfortunately,” Gaenor cut in. “We found her and her husband, Geramir of Es, a day’s ride north of Jeritalen. It must have happened months ago.”

Khodania asked for the details and Gaenor, Artur and Cornellya told her. Khodania’s face was streaked with tears when they had finished, but she said, “Thank you for telling me and for your respectful treatment of her remains.”

“Then we did the right thing? We didn’t know your customs,” Gaenor told her.

“It was not exactly the way we do such things on Kimn, but the respect is the important thing. Someday soon, I must travel to their grave. We rarely leave the island, but after I became queen my sister volunteered often to go on the trading missions even we must occasionally conduct. Then she met Geramir of Es and fell in love. I never met him. In fact I was the one who banished her from Kimn.”

“You banished your own sister?” Cornellya asked.

“Our laws did not permit such a marriage,” Khodania replied sadly. If she had brought him here it would have meant death for both of them. Banishment was the only way to save her life. She knew it, but she was in love. I’ve missed her so much these past ten years.”

Gaenor also told Khodania and the councilors about her notational system and some of her other hypotheses after dinner on the evening before the council was to meet. She talked late into the night, an unusual happening in Kimn where life usually followed the natural cycle of day and night.

“There!” Khodania told the Council of Wisdom, when Gaenor paused for breath. “Do you see?” However, she wouldn’t explain to Gaenor what she meant by that. She did ask where she might get copies of Gaenor’s writings, however.

“Well,” Gaenor replied, “for my thesis and the notational system, you might try asking the University at Misha’s Department of Magical Studies. They sent copies to Es, Mita and other centers of learning. The other hypotheses though, I’m still working on. I’ll see you get a copy if and when I finish, if someone wants to publish it.”

“If no one else wants it,” one of the councilors told her, “send them here. We’ll publish them and distribute.” Several others nodded their heads in agreement.

“That’s very kind of you,” Gaenor replied.

“And greedy,” Khodania told her. “As publishers we’ll make the lion’s share of the profits.”

“I seem to be doing well enough on my own lately,” Gaenor told her. “I just want others to share my ideas.”

“Admirable, but if you were trying to run a kingdom as small as this, you would appreciate the value of trade goods.”

“My writings aren’t exactly aimed at a wide audience,” Gaenor pointed out.

“They would sell well enough here and among adepts in other parts of the world,” Khodania pointed out. “And I think Cornellya was right about your notation system being revolutionary. The subtext adds a whole new level of understanding for students and accomplished adepts alike. Though, I still think it will take a long time to learn.”

“Some older adepts, being set in their ways, have trouble learning the system,” Gaenor told her. “But if you start students out with notation right from the start it will become natural to you. It’s working well in Mita and Misha, so far at least. Although this is the first year they have used it in the curriculum in Mita and Misha doesn’t teach it to first year students.”

“That might explain why it appeals to me then. This is a center of learning and we all have spent time teaching the young students.”

“How many adepts do you have on Kimn?” Gaenor asked.

“Oh, five thousand at least,” Khodania answered.

“That many?”

“Oh yes. Our girls are taught magic theory in school. The best students of the graduating class are initiated each midsummer. Of course adepts can’t always choose where they live.”

“Why not?”

“When a young woman is initiated she also enters our civil service and is assigned to a village where she will be needed. Such assignments need not last more than two years, but most women prefer to remain and settle down, if not at their first posting then their second or third. Until my appointment as queen, I was quite prepared to settle down in a small town on the southern tip of Kimn. My sister was there with me and I was happy.”

“How is a new queen chosen?” Gaenor asked.

“The Council of Wisdom keeps an eye on all adepts on Kimn and when a queen begins to grow old or gets sick, candidates to succeed her are nominated. The candidates are duly considered and tested, mostly without their knowledge. The final twelve are brought here and tested for a full month. At the end one is chosen and the rest go back to their previous postings but are almost always chosen for the Council of Wisdom as vacancies occur.”

“Does no queen ever die unexpectedly?”

“It happens,” Khodania admitted. “The interregnum lasts a year and the head of the Council of Wisdom fills in for the political aspects of the monarchy. The ceremonial ones go on hold, of course.” She paused then changed the subject, “Show me some more of your notation, sister.”

Gaenor pulled out a copy of the spells she had brought from the Village and they spent the rest of the night discussing them.

The Council of Wisdom would not allow Artur and Vito to appear before them when they convened officially, but listened to Gaenor and Cornellya as they explained the situation. Three days of debate ensued on the matter. Gaenor and Cornellya were interviewed together and separately by each of the councilors one by one. Finally the Council met in closed session another two days while Gaenor and Cornellya sat with Artur and Vito waiting for their decision. It was nearly midnight when all four were summoned to stand before the queen and council.

“We have decided that it would be improper for any of us to leave Kimn at this time,” Khodania told them. “However now that you have helped us to define the imbalance we have been detecting these past few months, we feel certain that we will be able to assist you from here. The spell the wizards of Misha will be casting we can augment and with our far greater numbers even at this distance we should have a beneficial effect. Some of us also believe we can maintain the balance so that the climatic danger to the world will be delayed a year or more.

“However, we cannot help you in this unless you help us in another matter. The Council of Wisdom has detected another center of imbalance starting to assert itself somewhere to the west. The Barbarian

Kingdoms are in a state of unrest and we believe the cause for this imbalance originates even further west, possibly in Cilbe itself. In exchange for our aid, you will travel to the Barbarian Kingdoms to investigate and if there is something you can do to redress the imbalance you will do so.”

“How will we do that?” Artur asked.

“If we knew that,” Khodania replied, “we wouldn’t have to send you.”

“Could this imbalance be related to the one coming from Ichtar?” Gaenor asked.

“We do not think so. This is an entirely different matter, sister. While you’ve been here you have learned much about our magic, more than I could have believed possible in such a short time.”

“I feel like I know almost nothing,” Gaenor told her.

“Then you are probably worthy of sitting on my throne,” Khodania told her warmly. “I feel that way most the time. It is difficult to explain but the Ichtar imbalance does not feel the same as the one in the Barbarian Kingdoms, but it is powerful enough that we can not redress both at once. You can detect the cause of the imbalance, we have taught you that much, then find a way to redress it.”

“By magic?” Gaenor asked.

“If appropriate” Khodania told her. “Not every problem can be solved with a wand of ash.”

Cilbe

One

“I don’t get it,” Vitautis admitted as soon as their ship had cleared the outer harbor of Kimn. “What is there to stop us from just heading on south now that they have let us go?”

“Our honor,” Artur told him. “We promised we would do this thing so that is what we will do.”

“Not to mention the fact that they will know whether or not we have lived up to our end of the bargain,” Gaenor added.

“Surely they would not let the world be destroyed if we ignored their demands,” Vitautis replied.

“No?” Gaenor countered. “Well, okay, I doubt they would, but what makes you think this mission they have given us isn’t as important as the one we are on. Khodania told me the imbalance we face is more immediate than the one on Ichtar.”

“I’m not convinced of that one yet either,” Vito said sourly. “So tell me. What’s all this nonsense about balance and imbalance?”

“It’s not nonsense,” Cornellya told him heatedly.

“Do you understand it?”

“Not really,” she admitted hesitantly. “I understand the basic notion, but Gaenor understands more than I do.”

“So?” Vito asked her challengingly.

“It’s simple enough,” Gaenor told him. “The natural state of the world is in balance. That is, when everything is working normally every action has an opposite reaction, every force has a counterforce and so on.”

“What does that mean?” Vito demanded.

Gaenor sighed. She really didn’t think this was a difficult concept. “Have you ever played caroms?” she asked.

“No. What’s caroms?”

“A table game with balls played in Mishanda,” she replied, “although I did once encounter a caroms table in Gostrina. Anyway, one uses a stick to hit a ball, which in turn must hit another ball into a pocket on the side of the table. Never mind the actual rules, the point is a moving ball will tend to keep moving unless it hits another ball or eventually stops due to the minimal friction on the table or the resistance of the air. If you’ve ever rolled a ball across a flat surface you must have noticed that.”

“Yes, yes, I believe it was Lord Romert of Es who demonstrated that two centuries ago. So?”

“When the cue ball, the one you hit with the stick, hits another ball, some or all of its energy is transferred to the ball it hits. The ball that was hit then starts moving. Action and reaction. Do you follow that? Good. The problem the adepts of Kimn see is that magic has a tendency to cause a reaction without an accompanying action. At least that’s what they believe. I’m not sure I agree. I believe that there is a certain conservation of matter and energy and that you cannot get something out of nothing. But there may also be more to this notion of balance than I can yet comprehend. The use of magic itself does not cause imbalance, but how it is used might.”

“How? If every action has an equal and opposite reaction, even in magic?”

“That I’m still trying to figure out,” Gaenor admitted. “Perhaps the imbalance has nothing to do with basic physical or magical force but the adepts of Kimn just perceive it that way. But they are correct in that there is a balance to maintain.”

“Look at a farm,” Artur suggested. “The farmer must continually fertilize his fields, rotate his crops or let them go fallow for some time or else he will completely deplete the soil of whatever it is that is needed for his crops.”

“Really?” Gaenor asked. “I never thought of that. Comes from never having lived on a farm, I guess.”

“Probably,” Artur agreed. “Try talking to Cornellya about how the Vieri grow crops in their caves, that’s pretty much how I learned. Anyway, even just a century ago no one knew why this might be so, although farmers understood it as the earth being tired and needing a rest. They fertilized the fields without entirely understanding that by doing so vital nutrients were restored and they rotated their crops because they got a better yield. It is only recently that we have come to understand why this works. If farmers just planted

the same crops year after year and never fertilized the fields, we'd all have starved long ago."

"That is actually very recent," Vito commented. "Farmers have not always rotated their crops."

"And the result?" Artur asked.

"More fertilization was needed," Vito admitted, "or they were forced to grow new crops, or they found new fields, or famine would wipe out the majority of the populace cyclically."

"Fortunately there haven't been too many of that last," Artur said. "People tend to learn fast when their stomach has a vote. So basically you're saying they either fertilized heavily, rotated their crops or let their fields go fallow the same as I've been saying. I did not mean to imply it was a conscious decision to do so. More often it was by necessity. I understand there are still some places in the rain forests in your native Wanlaria where farmers will cut down a section of jungle to clear the land and then burn all the wood and foliage to enrich the soil. They grow their crops on that lot for two, maybe three, years then move on to another patch of jungle and start all over again. Twenty years later the rain forest has totally healed itself and they may well come back to the same patch they slashed down once again. It's a good system if you have a small population. The problem is that the population down there has grown to the extent that by the time they come back to an area they have farmed before, the forest hasn't finished growing back. The land gets over farmed and the farmers are unwilling to try more modern methods."

"You're talking about the Wano people," Vito replied. "Primitives."

"Yes, I am. There are still quite a few small and isolated cultures of various sorts, especially in the Southlands and Maxform as well as the Wano. They are not civilized and aside from better tools and weapons, they aren't particularly interested in being civilized."

"We're getting off the subject," Gaenor pointed out. "The point is that some sort of imbalance can indeed occur."

"Now I do not understand," Cornellya said, shaking her head. "I accept the concept of conservation of energy and matter, so if neither matter nor energy can be destroyed how can the world ever be out of balance?"

"First of all, if Doctor Nyima's theory has merit, matter might be able to be converted to energy and I suppose it may be possible to convert it back again. That's why I've taken to referring to it as conservation of matter *and* energy. But this conservation is in the universe as a whole. The universe will not lose the total mass and energy that is inside, because there is no outside to the universe. It is theoretically possible, I think, to unbalance the world by losing some of its energy to the surrounding universe, but I don't really know that for certain. I really need to hear from Doctor Nyima and find out where I may be misunderstanding his work. Perhaps I should try writing again, although I still won't hear from him until we get back to Narmouth. Anyway, keep in mind that entropy always increases, that is, the amount of energy in a system that is useable decreases, but I don't think that really applies here, since if that applies to magical systems, and I don't see why it shouldn't, it just means that the power behind magic will gradually decrease in time."

"How soon?" Cornellya asked, alarmed.

"Unless something changes drastically, I don't think it would be any time soon. We've been using magic for millennia and there still seems to be plenty to go around. Perhaps it isn't subject to entropy."

“Or perhaps that is what it truly behind the curse from Ichtar,” Cornellya said thoughtfully. “Gaenor, we need to send word back to Queen Khodania and to Doctor Haxmire and the adepts in Misha and have them look into a possible entropy aspect in the threat from Ichtar. I mean, we think they are trying to destroy the world’s climate, but what if what they are really trying to do is use up all the magic in the world?”

“That’s as good a guess as any,” Artur commented thoughtfully. “The ones we really ought to contact are the Vieri in the Village, though. They’ll have better spells for detecting such high level magic use. I know you don’t want to go home yet, but I think it’s necessary.”

“No, I can contact Kseniya the same way you sent word to Borritt.”

“Not from here,” he told her. “It’s too far away.”

“Not really, but I can’t do it from this ship. It moves too much to be able to maintain the contact. It will have to wait until we reach land.”

“I’ll write letters to the others. This ship is supposed to be headed back to Kimn after it picks up whatever it’s supposed to be getting where we disembark. I’m sure Khodania will see the ones for Mita and Misha will be forwarded.

The weather stayed fair and not too chilly. The winds stayed favorable and they docked in Exlona several days later. In spite of all Artur’s warnings Cornellya expected to find a collection of crude wattle and daub huts inhabited by skin-wearing natives who habitually walked around with battle axes and broadswords hanging from their belts, but Exlona was a fair-sized metropolis by anyone’s standards. The locals built of stone and the blocks were large and carefully dressed and well set in mortar. They used different color stone to create interesting patterns and pictures on their walls. Most buildings were three or four stories tall and all had been roofed with slate tiles. It wasn’t as grand as Misha, but Cornellya thought it was larger and cleaner than Jeritalen.

“This is as civilized as anywhere else we’ve been,” she remarked to Artur. “Why do they call these the Barbarian Kingdoms?”

“A thousand years ago or more this place wasn’t so civilized,” Artur explained. “The buildings were smaller, not as well built and the major industries were farming and fishing. Inland they kept sheep and cattle too. There were less people living here as well.”

“Did they wear skins?” Cornellya asked.

“The well-off wore furs in the winter. But clothing was of cloth; wool and cotton mostly. Don’t confuse barbarians with savages. Anyway they weren’t civilized by Cilben standards when first contacted, just a collection of farmers, fishers and pastoralists organized into various tribes, so the word for foreigner became associated with them. The name stuck so even now when this land is a civilized confederation the people are still called Barbarians.”

“It’s a bigger city than I expected too,” Gaenor told them. “We’re not leaving until morning are we?”

“It’s only noon, Gae,” Artur replied. “We could be leagues away by sunset.”

“We need to buy some travel supplies,” she countered, “and we’re likely to get a better deal here in town where there’s more than one provisioner to buy from. Our clothing is getting a bit worn too. It’s

warmer here than in Aston, but the evenings are still a bit chilly, besides Cornellya and I are going to be up late this evening.”

“Both of you?”

“You were the one who pointed out how far away we are from the Village, two of us have a better chance of getting a calling spell to be heard there. I forgot to ask. Is magic legal here?”

“It’s not illegal,” Artur informed her, “but not highly respected either. Most Barbarians think of magic as a laughable superstition.”

“That makes sense,” Gaenor opined. “You don’t outlaw what doesn’t exist. But I’m not sure I care to audition for village idiot either.”

“You can do the calling from inside as well as out,” Artur pointed out.

“Then why did you climb to the top of a dune when you called your master back in the Parch?” Gaenor asked.

“You can hear better if there isn’t a lot of sand and rock between you and your target. By climbing up that dune, I got above about one hundred such dunes.”

“So we would do better to get on top of a mountain?”

“There aren’t any mountains in this part of Barbaria, Gae,” Artur told her.

“A roof top, maybe?” Gaenor suggested.

“Slates are very slippery, especially after the dew has fallen,” Artur replied readily.

“Best to do it from our room,” Cornellya told her. “If it doesn’t work we can try again tomorrow night.”

At Artur’s suggestion they did their shopping before looking for a place to sleep for the night. Gaenor found that the woolens in Exlona were very soft and warm with long silky hairs that stuck out from the yarn, giving items made from it a fuzzy look. She and Cornellya each bought a sweater of this wool, although the locals called them jumpers, with matching hats. Vito got one of the hats, but Artur settled for a long scarf. They all bought a new change of clothing in fabrics that looked more like the woolens Gaenor was acquainted with.

They ate early because Artur pointed out that if they started their calling too late all the Vieri would be asleep. Cornellya didn’t understand why that should be, but Gaenor explained that the sun would set at the Village at least an hour before it did in Exlona.

Gaenor decided she liked the Barbarian foods. There were strips of marinated and grilled meats and grilled vegetables all served with various dipping sauces. They also had bowls full of steamed grains that had been seasoned in a manner Gaenor couldn’t quite figure out, and hot fish soup that was a sort of chowder without any cream in it. The only utensils were a round-bowled spoon and a thin stick with a sharpened point so the meats and vegetables were skewered on the stick before being dipped and the grain and soup was eaten with the spoon.

After dinner Gaenor and Cornellya went to the room they were sharing and cast Cornellya’s calling

spell. At first they couldn't contact Kseniya, but at Gaenor's suggestion they moved to a small balcony on the south side of the inn that overlooked the street outside and tried again.

It took almost half an hour but finally they heard Kseniya's voice, "Who? Who is calling?" she asked. To Gaenor it sounded as though she was right next to them but talking very softly. "Is that you, Cornellya?"

"Yes. It is I," Cornellya responded in the Old Tongue. "Gaenor is with me."

"Where are you?" Kseniya asked. "Where have you been? We've all been so worried!"

"I am sorry," Cornellya replied, "but I had to go with Arturus and Gaenor. A Vari is needed in this. You know that, and nobody else would have left the Village."

"That is not true, child," Kseniya told Cornellya. "We do leave the Village and the Parch at need or when called to."

"Well, I felt called," Cornellya explained. There was no rebelliousness in her voice but an earnest need to explain.

"I thought you must have been," Kseniya said at last, "but you should have let us know you were leaving. How are you, Gaenor? And Arturus?"

"I'm well," Gaenor responded. "Artur is as well. And you and Borrit?"

"We're fine as are everyone else in the Village. For now at least. Surely you did not call just to say, 'Hello.'"

"No, although if it had occurred to me I could, I might have done so sooner to keep you informed as to what we've been up to and Cornellya really should have just to let you know she was still alive."

"Yes," Kseniya agreed firmly. "So what did occasion this calling?"

"I've had a possible insight into the curse from Ichtar," Gaenor replied. Then she explained the concept of entropy and how it might apply to the change in weather patterns.

"Interesting," Kseniya said at last. "I've never heard of such a thing, but you could be right if this entropy truly exists. It is a matter the Council of the Wise must consider. Tell me more."

And Gaenor went on to describe what she knew about the concept. It was difficult going because her only formal schooling beyond the elementary level had been private lessons with the one teacher in Narmouth, Master Prendur. Since then she had been reading whatever scholarly papers she could find that might apply to her interests. Her spare moments in Mita had been spent in the library, and her real regret about leaving Misha so quickly was that she had been unable to peruse the stacks in the library of the University at Misha. She wasn't able to provide the mathematical proofs behind the concepts, but Kseniya assured her that even if she could they weren't likely to be able to verify them anyway. They would deal with the concepts and see if they could measure the level of entropy in some manner.

Gaenor and Cornellya continued to talk to Kseniya a while longer. It felt like chatting, but she insisted that almost anything that had happened since they had left the Village could prove to be important.

"You mentioned the weather several times, dear," Kseniya noted when Gaenor had finished. "Has it

been unusual in anyway?"

"I don't know really," Gaenor admitted. "Until last spring I'd never been more than a day or two's ride from home. I have no previous experience with weather in Gostrina and Aston. The rains that caused the Trina to flood may have been normal, but Chas did say the snow in Aston was unusually early."

"And the storm in Mishanda last spring was unusual?" Kseniya asked.

"In its ferocity, perhaps, but storms in the spring are not completely unheard of," Gaenor pointed out.

"You may be right. Just as you have no experience with the weather outside of Mishanda I have even less outside of the Parch."

"I know the initial symptom of the Ichtar spell seems to concern the weather," Gaenor speculated, "but is it possible that weather is just a side effect?"

"What do you mean, dear?"

"Well, first you thought the point of the spell was to drown the Village and destroy the Parch, then you realized that would herald a worldwide change in the weather. I've just pointed out a possibility that the ultimate motive could be the depletion of useable magical energy. Now I'm wondering if the weather is a side effect for whatever this curse is powering up for."

"Such as?" Kseniya prompted.

"I haven't the foggiest, uh... I mean I haven't any idea," Gaenor hastily corrected herself. Kseniya, having grown up in the Parch would never have seen fog at any time in her very long life. "I was hoping you might, though."

"The Wise will re-examine the Ichtar spell for further ramifications," Kseniya assured her.

"Gaenor," Cornellya said urgently, "this is a tough spell to maintain. I cannot hold it too much longer."

"Go then," Kseniya told them. "Cornellya you should have said something sooner."

"It's not that bad yet," Cornellya insisted, "but I'm feeling the strain."

"I can hear the fatigue," Kseniya replied. "It will take some time to fully examine these new concepts you have presented us, Gaenor. Call again in a few weeks or so and I will tell you what we have discovered. Be well, both of you."

"Be well," they both echoed just as Cornellya let the spell dissipate.

Two

They left Exlona the next morning and found they had to pass through a sort of customs booth two hours later as they crossed into the next territory.

"I wasn't aware there were frictions between the tribes," Artur commented to a guard after they had

been allowed to pass.

“It’s not the other tribes we’re worried about, Sir Artur,” the guard told him. “It’s them Cilbens. They have their legions all along our borders. That makes folks nervous about strangers and the Kings’ Council is worried about spies, so we need to stop everyone. I apologize for the special attention I gave you, Sir Artur, but you look like a Cilben noble, no offense intended.”

“You aren’t the first to notice that, I fear,” Artur sighed dramatically. “I suppose I’ll have to get used to it so long as we are here.”

“Just keep that Mishandan passport, sir, and you won’t have too much trouble.”

They rode on and ran into another check point that afternoon. This one was no more obnoxious than the first although Gaenor was starting to wonder just how much time they would lose before they found the center of imbalance Khodania had told them about.

“It isn’t the checkpoints that bother me,” Artur told her, “but the looks on the faces of some of the people we’ve been passing. I always thought the Barbarians were friendly folks, but not when they’re on the brink of war.”

“What makes you think they’re going to war?” Gaenor asked.

“If the Emperor has stationed legions along the border, it’s the only reaction the Kings’ Council can come to. If they don’t attack, the Legions will. It’s a lose or lose situation, I’m afraid. If they attack it’s war and if they do not, the Emperor will see it as weakness and attack and then it’s war.”

“We’d better do whatever it is we have to do and then get the hell out of here,” Vito commented. “I don’t fancy getting caught between two armies.”

“We appear to be headed in the right direction,” Cornellya told him. “I’ve been ‘heeding the balance’ as Khodania showed Gaenor and me to do.”

“According to the map,” Gaenor commented, “we’re making a bee line for Cilbe city. Khodania may have been right that the center of imbalance is there.”

“The location wavers a bit,” Cornellya commented. “It’s like some great beast pacing back and forth in a large cage. It’s looking for a place to break out and keeps testing the defenses.”

“Yes,” Gaenor agreed. “That’s how it felt to me as well when it was my turn to monitor. What?” she demanded, seeing a pair of cavalymen blocking the road in front of them. “Not another checkpoint already?”

“Please halt,” one of the mounted soldiers called. “You have credentials?” Artur, Gaenor and Vito handed over their passports. “What about her?” he indicated Cornellya. Until now they had sufficient warning to allow her to use her invisibility spell when in a position to have to show their papers.

“The people of her land do not issue such documents,” Artur told the man.

“Where are you from, girl?” the soldier asked suspiciously.

“We call it the Village,” Cornellya replied, using the Old Tongue word for the name of the Vieri’s home.

“Never heard of it, what do civilized folks call it?” It was not a polite question and Cornellya bristled under the insult of being called uncivilized by someone called a Barbarian.

“We call it the Parch,” Vito told him flatly.

“No one lives in the Parch but the elves,” the soldier threw back with a laugh.

Cornellya whipped off her woolen hat to expose her pointed ears and coldly replied, “We prefer to be called Vieri!”

Both cavalrymen stared at her in disbelief.

“Well?” Gaenor asked with blustering confidence, “May we pass?”

“Uh, yes, pass,” the man told them. “One moment,” he added as they started to ride past. “You can get identification documents for her in any government center.”

“Thank you,” Gaenor told him.

“That was taking quite a risk,” Artur commented to Cornellya. “He might have decided to arrest us.”

“I’m sorry,” Cornellya replied contritely. “I lost my temper. It worked out all right though.”

“You’re young yet, but do try to keep your emotions in check,” he advised.

“I’ll try.”

They entered the next city around dusk. In the morning they visited the local government center and got a document for Cornellya. It turned out to be remarkably easy. She answered a few questions and a stunned clerk gave her a piece of paper that said she was permitted to travel within the Barbarian Kingdoms.

“It’s odd that you were permitted to enter Exlona without being given a pass,” the clerk told her.

“It must have slipped his mind,” Cornellya replied.

“Damned sloppy of him. Oh well, that’s taken care of. Enjoy your stay,” he finished in a manner that he had repeated that phrase so often it had lost its meaning.

“Before we leave, perhaps you could answer a couple of questions,” Artur requested.

“What do you need to know?”

“We’ve heard the Cilbens are massing a legion or two on your borders. Is that true?”

“Four legions the last I heard,” the clerk replied. “Along the main roads on our southern and western borders. If you’re trying to avoid them, you’ll have to go north and sneak through the Mallactines. Are you planning to travel to Cilbe?” His tone sounded innocent, but Artur decided to play it safe.

“I hope not,” he told the clerk. “We’re following another party and hope to catch up long before we

reach the western border.”

“Good luck.” The clerk returned in a bored tone. It was a dismissal so they left.

They sailed through official checkpoints after that, but two days later they ran into trouble with a less official one. They were passing through a small town on a dark and cloudy afternoon when they found the road blocked by several carts. As they approached, several villagers stepped around the carts and aimed crossbows at them. Looking over her shoulder, Gaenor saw another dozen or so surrounding them from behind as well.

“Stop and dismount!” a man on top of one of the carts demanded.

“What’s the meaning of this?” Artur shouted back indignantly.

“Checkpoint,” the man replied. “Dismount and prepare to pay the toll.”

“A toll booth? Here?” Artur asked. “Pull the other one, they may as well be the same length. Now move these carts out of the way. We both know you aren’t the king’s tax collectors so try that stunt with someone a little more gullible.”

Gaenor thought Artur was being inordinately brave in the face of so many cocked and loaded crossbows. She quietly dipped her hand into her purse for the flint and steel, regretting once again that she had never managed to make a ring into which she could combine the tools for a good defensive spell. Her ruby signet ring could be used for a number of healing and protective spells, but the protection was against hostile spells. It would do nothing against the crossbow bolts. She had some charged amulets, they all did, on her belt, but they held the spells they had prepared to defend themselves against the bandits of Aston. They would kill several of these people, but unless they also managed to frighten away the rest, the four adepts would still be killed. Instead she decided she would try to scare them all with a large ball of fire that she could direct after the initial spell was cast. The incantation was not a short one, however, and she hoped they would hesitate long enough for her to cast it.

Before she could get more than halfway through the incantation, however, the steel cable that served as a bow string on the leader’s crossbow suddenly snapped. At first Gaenor thought he had fired, but a moment later when another snapped, she realized they had broken. Another broke and then another and another until going around in a circle they all had snapped in two. Gaenor looked at Cornellya who looked back just as confused as she was. It was then that Gaenor realized that the spell that broke the bows must have been cast by Vito.

While the townsfolk were off balance, she grabbed one of the amulets loosely attached to her belt and invoked it. Instantly a ball of fire appeared in each of her hands. She threw one at the base of one of the carts and threatened to throw the other at the men behind her. There was a lot of shouting and shoving but a few moments later, the men had all run away. Artur cast a dampening spell to put out the fire on the cart Gaenor had thrown the fireball at and Gaenor tossed the spare fire ball harmlessly on to the road behind them. Artur and Vito dismounted and moved one of the carts out of their way. They rode through quickly and put another two leagues between them and that town before stopping for the night.

They were eating dinner when Cornellya noticed the people around them were staring at the adepts. She pointed it out quietly to Gaenor.

“We’re strangers here,” Gaenor told her. “We would tend to attract attention. And your ears are showing too. It’s unusual to see a legend come to life.”

“We haven’t attracted this much attention before,” Cornellya insisted.

“Gae’s probably right, Cornellya,” Artur assured her, “but there’s an old time-tested way to break the ice.” He waved the barmaid over to their table and told her, “I’d like to buy a round of drinks for the house.” The young woman nodded and went to the inn keeper who was tending the bar. The innkeeper announced that Artur was buying a round for the house and the place went silent. “That can’t be good,” Artur whispered.

“Nobody wants a free drink?” the innkeeper asked into the silence.

“Hell, yes,” an elderly man who had been sitting in the shadows. “I’ll have a drink no matter who’s buying. Make it some of that dark ale you keep in the back. Better yet send a pitcher of it and five glasses to the table of my new best friends.” He walked with a cane over to the adepts’ table. “Howdy, folks,” he greeted them. “Mind if I join you?”

“Please have a seat,” Artur waved him to one of two empty chairs.

“Thanks. I will. My name’s Boleslaw. I’m from Axlon, originally. Been watching you from the corner over yonder. There’s some strange story going about and I guess that’s why most of us have been watching you. Like we expect you to suddenly sprout wings or break out in purple glowing spots.”

“What sort of story?” Gaenor asked him.

“They say you’re sorcerers, although I guess you and the elf lady here would be sorceresses, hey?” The barmaid brought a pitcher of very dark ale along with the five glasses Boleslaw had asked for. The old man poured glasses for each of them and handed them around.

“I prefer to be called a Vari,” Cornellya told him tightly.

“And we prefer the term ‘adept,’” Gaenor informed him in somewhat warmer tones.

“No offense intended,” Boleslaw told them, taking a deep swig from his glass. “You can call yourselves the Mumbling Monks of Maxforn if it pleases you. What I really want to know is when the Cilben General Arturus Cornellian Marno became a sorcerer.”

“What makes you think I’m General Arturus?” Artur asked as he took a sip of his drink. “Good ale, this.”

“My leg may be weak but my eyes aren’t. I was a captain in the Kings’ Army when we met your Twelfth Legion at Malere. That was a day, was it not?”

“Not one I’d prefer to live again,” Artur commented.

“Don’t know why not,” Boleslaw replied. “You won that one.”

“I took a great risk. It worked, that’s all.”

“You mean the fake campfires you had your men light so it would look like there were a hell of a lot more of you than there were?”

“If you figured it out, I’m surprised your kings agreed to negotiate,” Artur told him.

“We didn’t figure it out until long afterward,” Boleslaw laughed. “By the time the kings realized they’d been had, you had also negotiated a peace which gave them most everything they really wanted, everything that was important anyhow.”

“All I recall granting them was recognition of their right to hold their own lands.”

“That was enough. It was the first time they’d received such recognition from Cilbe. And it meant they had won a peace in which they didn’t have worry about the Legions coming back to steal their lands. That along with your little trick earned a lot of respect. The fact that you were brave enough to meet them on the field without bringing bodyguards meant a lot to them too. It meant you trusted them to be men of honor.”

“They were men of honor.”

“You say that even after we decimated the Fifth Legion?”

“Tacarus was a fool. He treated with you dishonorably, then fell for one of the oldest tricks in the book which allowed you to kill almost every man in his command. He deserved to die. I do grieve for his men though.”

“Not every Cilben took that attitude,” Boleslaw pointed out.

“Most Cilbens believe the official propaganda,” Artur replied. “I knew Tacarus, however. He was a cadet the same time I was, a year ahead of me. I know what kind of officer he was. I’m just surprised he wasn’t killed by his own men, but then the Cilbens train their soldiers better than that.”

“So are you really all sorcerers... adepts?” Boleslaw asked as he finished his glass. He reached for the pitcher to refill it. In response, Gaenor pulled out her pieces of malachite and steel and used them to turn the flame on the candle lighting their table green. “Okay,” Boleslaw drawled. “An interesting trick. Does it serve a purpose?”

“I suppose it could,” Gaenor replied. “A signal, perhaps.”

“Gae, you’ve been using that example a lot lately,” Artur pointed out. “Why?”

“It is a bit flashy and superficial,” Cornellya added.

“I never realized you could do that,” Vito admitted. “Would you show me how?”

“It’s a relatively quiet and definitely harmless effect,” Gaenor replied to Artur. “And I’m a bit fond of it, considering it was my own discovery,” she said to Cornellya. “Of course,” she told Vito. “Can you think of another use for it?”

“As a matter of fact yes,” he replied. “If the color of the flame can be turned to black, a small military unit could stay warm on a cold night even if trying to hide their location.”

“There are other ways to manage that,” Artur pointed out, “although this would probably be the easiest. The other ways I can think of involve having to actively manage the spell and that can tire you out after a while.”

“Could be dangerous too,” Gaenor pointed out. “At night it would be difficult to see where the flame is, but I’m not sure that would work in any case. I read once that the color of a flame is an indicator of its heat. A green flame is cooler than a blue one, but is hotter than a yellow one which is hotter than orange or red. I’m not sure whether black would be hotter than violet or colder than red.”

“Could be either,” Cornellya told her. “Black would be beyond the visible spectrum of light. That goes both ways. What?”

“Sorry,” Gaenor apologized. “It just seems strange to hear you talking about the visible spectrum of light. It’s such a new concept to me.”

“It’s old news to the scholars of my people,” Cornellya replied. “we may be isolated from the rest of the world, but we are not primitive or backwards.”

“I know,” Gaenor admitted sheepishly, “but it still surprises me from time to time. Sorry.”

“Instead of talking about it, why not try it?” Cornellya suggested.

“Okay.” Gaenor considered what she wanted to do and cast the spell. The candle went out, although the wick continued to glow for a few seconds. When she passed her hand over the flame and then eventually touched the wick itself, she confirmed that the small fire had, indeed been extinguished. “Well, so much for that idea,” she commented. She relit the candle then tried the spell again only this time tried for black by making it hotter than violet. This time the flame became invisible but the candle melted under the invisible flame very rapidly and the molten wax flowed away from the wick, causing the candle to grow shorter visibly as they watched. She changed the flame back to its normal yellow color. For a second or so it was nearly a foot high, but rapidly shrunk back to its normal length. “So much for a black flame,” she said at last.

“I can still think of uses for those spells,” Vito told her.

“So can I but if you want to be warm without giving away your position, I recommend extra blankets. It doesn’t pay to play with fire.”

“This all very instructive,” Boleslaw commented at last, “and if I was a sorcerer I’d probably want to swap recipes too, but this doesn’t answer my real question. I know full well that magic is illegal in Cilbe. I’ve seen people killed after being convicted of witchcraft there. So how does a respected general and senator come to take it up?”

“It was sort of forced on me,” Artur told him, “after I was banished from the Empire.”

“I hadn’t heard about that,” Boleslaw told him. “That sounds even more unlikely than you being an adept.”

“Not if you take Cilben politics into account. Perhaps the word ‘banished’ is not quite accurate. A better description would be I ran for my life after the Emperor chose to look the other way when a political enemy chose to have me killed.”

“Now that sounds like the noble Cilben way I came to know and love during my sojourn in the Empire.”

“May I ask what business brought you to Cilbe?” Artur asked. He finished his first glass of ale and

poured the remainder of the pitcher out for himself, then signaled for another.

“My cousin is the local king ‘round these parts and round about ten years ago he served as the Chief of Chiefs in Sendmoot. He made me his ambassador to Cilbe for the five years of his term. I must say, your Emperor did not exactly impress me as the great font of wisdom of the age.” Boleslaw emphasized that comment by taking a long draft to finish his second glass, then filled up a third from the fresh pitcher.

“Obviously he’s not my Emperor,” Artur replied sourly. “He gave up any claim on my fealty years ago.”

“I must say I think our system of government is better,” Boleslaw told him. “I’ll admit that the occasional imbecile will inherit a throne, but at least the Council of Kings almost never elects one as the Chief of Chiefs.”

“On the other hand when we do get a good Emperor, he’ll usually serve far longer than five years. There are plusses and minuses to any system,” Artur pointed out.

“So what brings you to Barbaria at this interesting time in our history?”

“What would any group of adepts be doing?” Artur countered. “Looking for work, mostly.”

“I don’t imagine you’re finding much,” Boleslaw commented, “unless you’re putting on entertainments for the masses.”

“We could do some impressive fireworks displays,” Artur told him.”

Boleslaw glanced at the candle and replied, “I suppose you could at that.”

Three

The next two weeks were decidedly odd. As they rode through towns and villages, people stopped to watch them ride past. Sometimes they whispered among themselves and pointed at the adepts but most of the time they just stared at them in eerie silence.

Their passage through the frequent checkpoints became faster, but they were left uneasy by the way guards would often blanch when seeing their passports and then hastily wave them on. They were three quarters of the way across Barbaria when a troop of cavalry rode up to intercept them at a crossroads.

“Are you General Arturus Cornellian Marno?” a lieutenant asked Artur formally.

“It’s been quite sometime since I served in the Legions,” Artur replied, “but that is my name.”

“You and your party will come with us, sir.”

“Where?”

“Sendmoot, sir. The Kings’ Council has demanded that you stand before them. We will escort you there.”

“Looks like Boleslaw told on us,” Artur commented to Gaenor an hour or so later. Before they had

been headed due west, but were now going southeast.

“Are we in trouble?” Gaenor asked softly, not wanting to be overheard. She had the feeling she need not have bothered. None of the horsemen seemed particularly worried about what she had to say and, in fact since they had turned south at the crossroads, the men had behaved as though they were an honor guard rather than soldiers escorting prisoners.

“I doubt it,” Artur replied. “If the Council of Kings wanted our arrest, we’d be in chains. I imagine they just want to talk to me. Some of them know me of old. At least I’m sure some are old enough to remember me, like old Boleslaw did.”

“But we’re headed away from the imbalance we promised to correct. At least I think we are. Will this take long?”

“It’s over a week’s ride from here to Sendmoot Are you ‘heeding the balance’ at the moment or is it Cornellya’s turn again?”

“Cornellya’s turn this week. Should I drop back and talk to her?”

“No. We aren’t going to try and avoid this summons so I don’t want to let these men think we’re planning to. I’ve a better idea. Lieutenant,” he called, “our horses need a rest. We’ve been riding a long time.”

“Yes sir!” the lieutenant replied and ordered his men to halt and pull off the road.

Once they were stopped, Gaenor and Vito pulled out some water and food while they let the horses graze on the late season grass. She offered some to the horsemen who politely refused, having brought their own supplies. Finally while they were eating she asked Cornellya about the state of the balance.

“I think the situation has become quite complex these past few days. I tried to tell you about it last night, but you were too tired and thought we could discuss it while we rode.”

“Complex?” Gaenor asked. “How so?”

“It is hard to describe. Cast the spell and take a look for yourself,” Cornellya replied.

“Might I take a look?” Vitautis asked.

“I’m sorry, Vito,” Cornellya told him. “We promised Khodania that we would not teach this spell to any man. It isn’t fair, I know, but we did promise after all. Frankly I don’t think their way of life is any better than the male-dominated societies most of your human nations have. I just don’t see why anyone should be in charge just because of their gender.”

While Cornellya had been talking, Gaenor cast the spell that allowed her to monitor the state of what the adepts of Kimn called the balance. It was a difficult spell no matter how it was cast, although there was a lot of flexibility in how it could be accomplished. Gaenor had discovered that her signet ring could be used with a piece of hematite to accomplish it. Once she was able to ‘heed the balance,’ she saw what had been bothering Cornellya immediately.

“You should have told me about this,” she said to Cornellya, “even if you needed to wake me up from the first sleep in weeks.”

“What’s wrong, Gae?” Artur asked.

“Cornellya’s right. The situation is entirely muddled. I can still sense that the center of imbalance is to our west. Right now I’m convinced it’s in Cilbe, the city, itself, but in a sense we are in the center of imbalance right now and we’re also headed toward the center which, if my guess is right, almost has to be Sendmoot.”

“I’ve been examining this longer, Gaenor,” Cornellya cut in. “What I think we’re seeing is that the true center of imbalance is in Cilbe, but over that last few days a new center has developed to our southeast, in Sendmoot, perhaps. The focus point we are currently in just developed an hour or so ago, just prior to meeting these soldiers.”

“So now we are at a point of imbalance?” Artur asked.

“I don’t think so,” she replied. “I wish we had more time to learn this spell with Khodania, but I think we and whatever we are to encounter in Sendmoot represent a force that will either restore or destroy the balance that is threatened in Cilbe.”

“Interesting,” Artur murmured.

“I still don’t get it,” Vito admitted. “I’m not saying I actually accept this whole concept of balance, but surely this cannot be the first time the world has threatened to be in imbalance. What have they done in the past?”

“Khodania told us that was the only reason most Kimmians ever left the island. If an imbalance could not be addressed from Kimn then a small group of adepts would go out into the world and quietly deal with it,” Gaenor told him. “It doesn’t happen very often, maybe once each generation at the most.”

“Let’s ‘heed’ this balance a little more closely from here on out,” Artur suggested. “Whether our friends on Kimn have it right or not, I suspect this will prove to be vital information if we can figure out all its subtleties.”

The journey to Sendmoot lasted for a week and a half-long eternity. Their escorts were invariably polite but never particularly warm toward the adepts. They did not so much refuse to answer question as grudgingly admit they did not know the answers. Not only did they not know why the Kings’ Council wanted to see Artur, but they also appeared to be woefully uninformed as to the whereabouts of the Cilben Legions, who was in command of them or exactly how many were lined up along the border of the Barbarian Kingdoms. Gaenor was tempted to plumb the depths of their ignorance and ask questions they almost had to know the answers to, but Artur cautioned her not to pry. Right now they were being escorted with honor, if the men came to think they were spying the few comforts they enjoyed while traveling would probably disappear.

“They’ve been paying for our rooms every night,” Artur reminded her one night. “Considering that most nights they’ve slept in barns and probably usually erect a tent wherever they happen to stop, we could be far less comfortable if they decided we ought to be.”

"I guess I was being a bit immature," Gaenor admitted. "It's just that they're so stiff and formal."

"I know. I admit to being tempted to tease them myself, but there's a time and a place. This is neither."

The one set of questions they could and would answer, however, concerned a lot of Gaenor's curiosity about the government of the Barbarian Kingdoms. The so-called kingdoms were really descended from the ancient Barbarian tribes. Each one was a city-state that controlled a certain amount of territory around it. Within each territory were a number of small towns and villages, but each state had only one real city. Each city-state was ruled by a king; however kings were not necessarily hereditary.

"They usually are," Lieutenant Polek explained one day, "but they must be ratified by their council of nobles for their kingdoms. It is rare for an eldest son not to be so chosen, but it does happen. Usually it is the old king who designates a different successor, although I did once hear of a case where the son was so unpopular that the council voted in someone else."

Each king in turn sat on the Council of Kings in Sendmoot and every five years they chose a new Chief of Chiefs from among their own number. Polek confirmed Gaenor's suspicions that this title was an ancient one that had hung on since the days in which kings were nothing more than tribal chieftains. It was nearly the last vestige of Barbarian tribalism.

Sendmoot was the largest city in Barbaria and someone must have decided that meant building it like no other city. Barbarian cities were solid affairs, built on simple lines, but aesthetically designed. They were a triumph of substance. Sendmoot, however was a triumph of form. It was a city of soaring spires and obelisks and nearly every building was sheathed in pure white limestone.

"So what do you think of our capitol?" Lieutenant Polek asked as they entered the city.

"Blinding," Gaenor said, awed. Then she realized that was not an adequate response. "It's absolutely magnificent. As though a great artist wanted to show the world that white was the only color it needed or perhaps that color was inconsequential to beauty. I've never seen anything like it."

"General Arturus?" he asked Artur.

"What Gae said. I've never been here before, but I've read the descriptions. They don't do the reality justice." Privately Artur thought it was all too much of a good thing, but he kept that opinion to himself. The obelisks, even he had to admit, were beyond being merely grand. There were similarly shaped structures in Baria and Drombra, but they were monolithic pieces, awe inspiring in their own right, but the Barbarian ones were built of limestone blocks and rose hundreds of feet into the sky. They were hollow inside, some being open to the public and others used as office buildings. All were designed to serve as look-out towers of immense proportions in times of war. Sendmoot, however had never seen war directly. Looking at the city, Artur thought it would be sinful to fight a war in such a city.

The Council of Kings met in an immense round building that stood atop a thirty foot tall hill that had been terraced into steps, all treaded with the same limestone that typified the city. The building itself was surrounded by a double colonnade of fifty foot tall columns and was covered by a large ornate dome perched atop another colonnade. According to the books Artur had read, it was the second largest such dome in the world. Artur had seen the largest. It roofed the grand temple to Jube in Cilbe. If this one was smaller, it wasn't by much.

They came to a halt at the foot of this Moot Hill and Lieutenant Polek told them, "my men will see to your horses and other property. Is there anything you need to bring with you to the Kings' Council?"

“Without knowing why I am here?” Artur countered. “Gae, let’s bring our tools and your notebooks, they may be of use. Vito, bring whatever you wish or nothing. Your choice. Cornellya?”

“All that I have is in this pack,” she said indicating the leather bag she wore on her back.

“Bring it then,” Artur told her. He took the spell kit he shared with Gaenor and told Polek, “We’re ready. Are you sure they are ready to receive us? Governments rarely work that hastily.”

“My orders were to present you to the Council of Kings immediately on our arrival.”

“Then lead on, Lieutenant,” Artur shrugged.

As they started up the stairs Gaenor commented, “This has to be the busiest single place I have ever seen.” All around them there were people – men and women – climbing and descending the stairs to the Moot.

“It is pretty active,” Artur conceded, “but you haven’t seen the Great Forum of Cilbe. It is larger; more area, more people and louder, much louder. I don’t miss it one bit. This is quite pleasant in comparison. This has a lot more stairs, though. You’re really certain the Council is in session today?” he asked Polek.

“Technically speaking, the Kings’ Council is always in session,” the lieutenant replied. “With this much traffic on the stairs, though, it’s a certainty the kings are actually here at the moment. They’ve been here all day for months since the current crisis began.”

When they reached the top of the hill Gaenor saw that inside the colonnade were a series of doors that entered the hall from every direction. When they entered the nearest one they turned left into a wide circular hallway. After walking a quarter of the way around the perimeter they reached the antechamber to the Council’s meeting hall. The antechamber featured a pair of stairways that let observers climb up to the triple balcony. Polek told them that the observer’s galleries were rarely ever filled, although it was an unusual day that the first balcony wasn’t filled.

“Who comes to watch?” Gaenor asked.

“Anyone who wants to,” Polek replied. “Law students mostly, but also petitioners waiting for their turns and other interested parties.”

The wide double doors to the Moot Hall floor were shut and four men in dark blue uniforms stood at attention in front of them. To one side another man sat at a table, it was his job to check credentials and to make sure that only kings and those with business entered the main floor.

Lieutenant Polek approached the table and announced, “By the command of His Royal Majesty Steropan of Berrinta, Chief of Chiefs, His Excellency, General Arturus Cornellian Marno has arrived at Moot Hall!”

The man at the desk, another lieutenant, looked through his papers until he found Artur’s name. “General Arturus is welcome in Moot Hall,” he replied formally at last. One of the men standing guard turned and quickly entered the hall. “I have no record of the other three, however,” he added more conversationally. “They’ll have to wait in the observation gallery.”

“So will I until my turn,” Artur pointed out.

“Not so, Senator,” the desk-bound lieutenant disagreed. “Our orders are to admit you to the hall on your appearance here. Pete there just ran forward to let it be known you have arrived. You may enter as soon as he returns to open the door.”

“Thank you, lieutenant,” Artur replied. “Why don’t you three go up to the balcony?” he suggested to the three other adepts.

Gaenor and Cornellya rushed up the stairway with Vito following at a more leisurely pace. The two women arrived at the second balcony in time to hear Artur’s name being called formally by an official at the far end of Moot Hall. They found seats near the railing in time to see Artur pacing forward with dignity.

The hall had round sides except at the front and back where the walls were flat. Gaenor learned later that behind the dais where the Chief of Chiefs presided were a number of caucus rooms for the kings to meet in when smaller groups needed to discuss a matter. From what Gaenor could estimate there were over one hundred kings present on the Council floor that day and only a few empty seats. The hall was eerily silent.

When Arturus had reached a small open area before the dais he came to a halt and saluted Chief of Chiefs Steropan in the cross-chest Cilben manner.

“Thank you for coming here today, General,” King Steropan said by way of greeting. “We have awaited your appearance with great anticipation.”

“I’m sorry to have kept you waiting,” Artur replied in his customary manner, half serious, half light-heartedly.

“We were all quite interested to hear that you were in our kingdom with a Mishandan passport, General.”

“I have not been welcome in Cilbe for roughly twenty years, Your Majesty,” Artur told the king. “I found a new home where I am now known as Sir Artur.”

“Sir Artur?” the king mused. A smile threatened to break out on his face. General and senator to mere knight was a demotion. “Somehow it suits you, Sir Artur.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty. I am comfortable with it.”

“Still the fact that you are not welcome in Cilbe is troubling,” Steropan told him.

“How so, Your Majesty?” Artur asked.

“You are aware of our situation with Cilbe at the moment?”

“I have been hearing bits and pieces for months now, but have not been in a position to judge how much is true and how much is just rumor.”

“Cilbe has posted four legions along our common border,” Steropan told him. “They are the Fifth, the Ninth, the Fourteenth and the Eighteenth Legions.”

“I’m surprised the reconstituted Fifth Legion was sent on this particular assignment,” Artur commented.

“We believe the Emperor did so to test our reaction. By now he should have noticed our reaction was to show patience.”

“That might have worked when Balto was alive, but I’m not sure Lusius understands that concept. No that’s not true. I know he does not.”

“We would like to say that surprises us. Still if Imperial Cilbe desires a war, we are more than prepared to give it to them,” Steropan declared. A loud roar of approval, the first sound from the assembled kings and the audience since Artur had entered, filled the hall.

“The best way to win a war, Your Majesty, is to not actually fight it,” Artur replied a bit sententiously.

“Strange words from a general whose own legion won so many illustrious victories. Still it fits in well with what we know of you. One of the reasons we sent for you was because you treated us honorably after our defeat at the hands of your Twelfth Legion. The treaty you concluded with our favored allies in Arberoa also adds to your honor as does the fact that your Senatorial record is one of finding alternatives to war, such as the one that was nearly declared on Baria.

“General Arturus,” Steropan continued, “for all this and more you are the most respected Cilben in Barbaria. Until recently we have enjoyed a somewhat nervous peace with Cilbe. Trade has been good, we have sent our sons to Cilbe to be educated and had a tacit mutual non-hostility agreement. These recent build-ups along our border are troubling. As we said, we will not flinch from Cilben aggression, but wisdom tells us that we prosper most when peace is maintained.”

“Your Majesty is wise, indeed,” Artur commended him.

Steropan merely nodded at the compliment. He was not about to be side-tracked by a mutual admiration competition. “We propose to send a new legation into Cilbe to negotiate a new treaty with the Empire.”

“If anyone but Lusius wore the Imperial oak wreath of Cilbe, I would say you had a good chance of success,” Artur replied.

“It is a long shot,” the king admitted, “but one we hope will have a better chance for success if you sponsor it before the Senate.”

“I left Cilbe with legionaries trying to kill me, Your Majesty. And earlier this year an old enemy hired the Temi to assassinate me. I sincerely doubt my influence would be a positive one”

“Artur!” Gaenor called out from the second balcony. A harsh shushing sound filled the chamber.

“By Your Majesty’s leave,” Artur said bowing slightly to the king and pointing at the balcony, “my partner and love, Lady Gaenor of Narmouth. Beside her you might also see my godchild Cornellya Vasylya and our colleague Vitautis of Senne.”

“This hall is honored by their presence, I am sure,” Steropan replied. “Your lady appears to have advice for us. Shall we give her leave to speak?”

“She probably will anyway,” Artur said barely loud enough for the king to hear. “Your Majesty,” he

continued in a louder tone of voice, "I would be most grateful if you would."

"Then by our leave, we invite Lady Gaenor to enter the hall," Steropan replied.

Gaenor got up and raced back to the stairway and down to the entrance to the main floor of the Moot Hall. The guards opened the door as she approached and she briefly wondered if they kept an ear on the proceedings within or if there was someone within who kept them informed. As she walked purposely up the aisle, it receded from her mind as she became aware of a hundred kings and more watching her every move. She rubbed the ruby of her signet ring and muttered a minor tranquilizing spell to help calm herself.

"Gae?" Artur asked when she was close enough.

"Artur, take this commission," she told him without preamble, then belatedly she quickly turned and bowed to Steropan. The king's smile showed he was obviously not insulted.

"Gae, there's no way I can guarantee its success and it's more than likely my name will cause it to fail completely," Artur tried to explain.

"No, Artur, this will aid us in restoring the balance."

"How?" he asked.

"I don't know. I just know that both Cornellya and I were heeding the balance and when His Majesty made the request everything came into focus. Take the mission, it will resolve the local imbalance leaving the entire focus to the west."

"In Cilbe?" Artur asked.

"Probably."

Artur thought for a full minute then made his decision. He loved and trusted Gaenor in every way that counted. If she said this was the correct thing to do, he would do it. "Your Majesty," he said turning to King Steropan. "I would be honored to escort your legates to Cilbe and lend them what support I can."

Four

King Steropan was far less formal and the conversation less stilted that evening when he met with the adepts after dinner. He was friendly and open with all four, but the majority of his conversation was with Artur.

"I really do thank you for doing this, Arturus," he told Artur yet again. "As it is, I think we're going to have to try to slip you into the Empire while the Legions are looking the other way."

"You aren't going to try a diversion, are you?" Artur asked.

"That hadn't occurred to me," Steropan replied thoughtfully, "but no. The situation is far too volatile to try something like that. It would be best to just keep things quiet, the way we have these past few months. Any change is liable to attract the wrong sort of attention."

“Good,” Artur agreed. “If it wasn’t a matter of time, I’d say the best way to accomplish it would be to return to Exlona and sail from there to one of the Thimdra States, Wallen, probably. From there we could sneak in just south of where the Legions are patrolling.”

“That would more than double the length of the trip, Artur,” Gaenor commented.

“Right, which is why we do not have the time. I’m still not sure how much good my association with this mission will do it, but if we are intercepted by one of the Legions, I may be able to influence the general to let the mission pass, but it will have to be a small party.”

“I was only planning to send four representatives,” Steropan told him. “They’ll meet with our permanent ambassador in Cilbe, Thank Zeunas he hasn’t been expelled from the city!”

“Probably just ignored,” Artur replied. “That’s pretty much the position the Barian ambassador was put in some twenty years ago.”

“I hope we can head off war now as well as you did then,” Steropan told him. “We have such a nice land here. For two centuries the tribes have been at peace with one another and we have learned that we all prosper when it stays that way.”

“Barbaria has prospered,” Artur agreed. “That’s probably why Lusius wants to annex it. He’s a greedy bugger. Before I left he had started quite a few monumental projects in Cilbe. That sort of building is expensive so he’s had a closer eye out for money he could grab than a traveling merchant. What sort of men have you chosen for this mission?”

“I wanted to send our most experienced negotiators,” Steropan responded, “but for some obscure reason, advanced age seems to be inevitably riveted to great experience.”

“Funny thing, that,” Artur chuckled.

“Which reminds me that you are reputed to be, what? Sixty-five?”

“Sixty-seven.”

“You’re remarkably well preserved. How do you do it?”

“It’s magic,” Artur deadpanned.

“I’ll have to try it sometime,” Steropan returned. “Anyway, it occurs to me that getting our men to Cilbe is going to require speed and stealth; two qualities that tend to wane with time. So, I’ll be sending younger men than I might normally send.”

“Young men need to get experience eventually,” Artur pointed out.

“Yes, and in normal circumstances I’d send an equal number of older and younger men, but this time I have to choose the best of our younger men. Still they aren’t all that young nor are they completely inexperienced. My son, Gerek, for example...”

“Will he be leading the legation?” Artur asked.

“No. That will be Wellum. He’s actually the brother of the king I narrowly defeated in the last election.”

“Politics, then?” Artur asked.

“Not really, although that did make ratification by the Council easier. Actually had Wellum been a candidate I may well have voted for him myself. He’s a good man and the only member of the party over forty. Gerek is thirty-three and the other two colleagues, Makhail and Ronertt are thirty-one and thirty-four respectively.”

“You’re right then, They aren’t really all that young,” Artur replied.

“The best men for the job are in their fifties and sixties, but these four are the best I can send. I hope they are good enough.”

“With Lusius, I don’t know if anyone would be good enough. There aren’t many men left in the Senate with the courage to defy him and if he wants to invade the Barbarian Kingdoms I’m not sure what good your delegates are going to do, except maybe to stall for time a bit.”

“Even that might be a benefit. It will give us time to march men down from the far north and for the Kings’ Council to come to a consensus.”

“A consensus?” Artur asked.

“Of course. We need to choose a war leader. I mean it could be me, but there are better, more qualified military leaders in the kingdoms and it is up to the Council to make their best choice.”

“Politics get in the way of that, I’ll imagine.”

“No need to imagine it. All you need to do is stick around a few days and take naps in the balconies like half the town does and you’ll see for yourself.”

“No thanks, I saw enough of that in the Senate.”

“The Senate is a magnificent example of politics in action,” Steropan told Artur, “but its members are mere noblemen. Nothing is more political than a council made up entirely of kings.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Artur laughed.

“And there I was hoping you’d challenge me to put my money where my mouth was.”

“No, if I want to give you all my worldly goods it would be far easier to just send you a bank draught. It would be cleaner than betting on politics.” Both men laughed.

The High Priest of Zeunas held his hands above the four legates and the four adepts in benediction. “In the name of Zeunas and all the gods of Sendelia, may you face adversity with courage, dilemma with cleverness and doubt with steadfast loyalty to your convictions. We entrust you with the hopes and dreams of well-being and peace for all Barbaria, May Zeunas guide you with wisdom. May Kernos help you in clever negotiation. May Deamma give you patience and Vio courage.”

He continued on in a language Gaenor had never heard before and made a number of expansive seeming gestures, but when he concluded she felt a her body tingle all over. She looked at the priest and was about to ask about that, but he stopped her with a sly wink of one eye.

“That priest was adept,” she said as they rode out of Sendmoot.

“I noticed,” Artur replied dryly.

“Not too surprising,” Vito told her. “The priests of a few countries are adept, even where magic is in ill repute or outright illegal. It’s quite common in the Southlands in fact. Like here the magic is used mainly in blessings.”

“I hadn’t realized that,” Gaenor replied.

“They don’t exactly advertise the fact,” Vito said. “In fact they keep it as secret as they can.”

“How did you find out?” Gaenor asked.

“Pretty much the same way you did. I was in Pahn some years back and observed a priest conducting a public benediction. I realized immediately what had happened, just as you did. After thinking about it, I was able to work out which parts of the benediction were actually a spell. I talked to others and it turned out it was quite common there and in the other Southlands. They don’t see it as magic, but as a blessing of the gods.”

“Gae, we haven’t had time to speak the last couple days,” Artur began, “but I need to ask you about this balance concept and what you and Cornellya saw in the Moot Hall.”

“It’s simple in theory,” Gaenor began, then caught the expression on Artur’s face “but you’ve heard this before, haven’t you?”

“Several times, actually,” he replied. “I’m more concerned with how ‘heeding the balance’ indicated we were supposed to escort this legation to Cilbe.”

“Oh. Well, that’s actually not so easy to explain,” Gaenor admitted. “It was something I felt when you reached the point of decision. It was as if Cornellya and I suddenly had a choice of paths. One path led toward a feeling of greater imbalance and the other toward balance.”

“But how did you determine which was which?”

“Ah, that was easier. Whenever the king suggested escorting his legates into the Empire, the imbalance decreased. When you tried to talk him out of it, the opposite happened.”

“You still might have guessed wrongly,” Artur pointed out.

“Not really. If my convincing you to help the Barbarians was the wrong thing to do, Cornellya would have corrected us.”

“All right, I can accept that. I still wish you could tell me more about this spell you’ve been using, but I suppose I don’t really need to know it so long as you and Cornellya are around. What does bother me is that I don’t really know whether the Kimnites are using us for some purpose of their own.”

“They are,” Gaenor replied readily.

“I mean something that has nothing to do with this mystical balance of theirs.”

“That I couldn’t say,” Gaenor admitted. “To tell you the truth, I honestly don’t know if anything dire would happen at all if we just let this imbalance go unchecked, but they feel that it is pivotal to their prophecy.”

“Prophecy? You never mentioned a prophecy,” Artur accused.

“It’s not much of a prophecy, if you ask me. Khodania told us about it but it was too obscure for me to believe any of it and Cornellya dismisses it as silly superstition, though she didn’t say that to anyone on Kimm.”

“I’m in full agreement with that,” Artur told her. “In Cilbe they have many prophecies on record and more are made every day. It’s all a great bit of nonsense.”

“No argument from me and I never understood the whole bit about taking the auspices,” Gaenor agreed. “Like the entrails of a chicken or a sheep could tell the future.”

Artur laughed, “It’s worse than that. If the auspices were negative, it was felt they could be changed by doing something to gain the gods’ favor. Then they’d gut another bird or beast to see if Their Divinities had possibly changed their minds. I always suspected the real reason for retaking the auspices was because the priests got to eat the critter being sacrificed afterward. If it was diseased, they’d go hungry unless something else was sacrificed.”

“I thought it was offered up as a burnt sacrifice,” Gaenor commented.

“Some genius came up with the notion that the gods were satisfied with the smell of cooking meat not by the meat itself and since it would be bad form for the person sacrificing the critter to eat it himself, why not use it to feed the priests? I’ll tell you there were a lot of very fat priests at one point. These days only the very old-fashioned still indulge in that sort of nonsense.”

“That’s good,” Gaenor replied. “Sacrifices are supposed to mean something more than giving up material possessions.”

“I’ve always thought the Mishandan idea of sacrifice was a sensible one,” Artur admitted. “Performing a service during what would otherwise be leisure time is at least productive.”

“I feel that way too, but having grown up in Mishanda, I’m naturally prejudiced.”

“Tell me though,” Artur said, “do you think that ‘heeding this balance’ will give us such concrete guidance all the time?”

“Probably not. In fact, I seriously doubt it will happen again. From what Khodania told me, the spell is only used to see if the balance has been successfully restored. It isn’t supposed to tell us what to do. It’s just that this time the choice was so clear cut and the results so diametrically opposed. Usually choices are not as obvious nor are the results so different.”

“That’s good,” Artur sighed. “I never did believe in predestination or fate or fortune-telling or any of that

sort of thing and the concept that we could make a correct move based on some mysterious force or balance of force or whatever the Kimnites claim it is, just seems too close to that for my taste.”

“Well, once we resolve this issue our promise to Khodania will be filled and we can stop ‘heeding the balance.’ Feel better?”

“I will.”

Five

“How many men are in a legion?” Wellum asked Artur. They had made good time approaching the border. But once they were there, they were having trouble finding a place where they might slip past the patrolling Cilbens. The land was hilly here and they were lying down on top of a grassy knoll looking down on several small groups of Cilben legionaries. “I swear they are everywhere.” They had briefly considered asking for passage from the surrounding Cilbens, but decided that they’d be better off if they could pass into the Empire without being seen.

“Everywhere we want to be,” Artur replied. “Let’s see. There are eight to ten men to a mess unit, and ten mess units to a century. Six centuries equal a cohort and each legion is made up of ten cohorts. A full legion, then, is made up of six thousand men in theory, but in practice a legion is almost always a bit undermanned so call it fifty-five hundred or so. However if Lusius is planning to attack, he may have over-filled these four legions a bit. So if there are four legions along this border there are roughly twenty-four thousand soldiers. That may sound like a fair number, but they are patrolling a very long border.”

“That is nearly as many men in our entire army. They certainly seem to be everywhere,” Garek commented. “How are we going to get past them?”

“We need to find a place where they don’t cover the ground quite so thickly,” Artur replied.

“We’ve been looking for such a place for the last three days,” Wellum pointed out.

“Gae, do you think Cornellya’s invisibility spell might help?” Artur asked.

“Not much,” she replied. “While you may not be able to see someone using the spell, when they are moving you can see where they are by the way whatever is behind them seems to ripple. It’s like a wave of heat off a desert surface.”

“That’s what I thought, but I was hoping you might have an improvement in mind.”

“Cornellya has gotten very good at adjusting the spell on the fly so that she is very hard to detect even when you know where she is, but I doubt she could do so for eight people. In fact she has said so. It might work at night, though.”

“Night?” Artur considered the idea. “Yes, I was coming to the conclusion we’d best cross the border under the cover of night anyway. That spell would make us almost impossible to catch at night, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes, but it is more dangerous too. Visibility is cut down while invisible. It isn’t completely dark, more

like wearing those glare glasses we bought in Fronor.”

“That will make it very hard to see at night,” Artur commented.

“But not impossible,” Gaenor replied. “The main problem will be how to keep the party together. While we’re invisible we won’t be able to see each other.”

“We can still hear each other,” Wellum pointed out, “Can’t we?”

“So can the Cilbens,” Gaenor replied.

“Well, yes,” Wellum agreed easily, “but we can agree to meet at a certain place on the other side of the patrols.”

“Do you have a place in mind?” Artur asked.

“On the main road to Cilbe about two leagues north of here,” Wellum replied.

“Closer to three, I think,” Artur interrupted. “But it’s the only road hereabouts.”

“Yes. Anyway there’s a small border town about two miles on the other side of the border.”

“It’s likely to be positively infested with legionaries,” Artur pointed out.

“We don’t have to stop there, just meet at the other side of town.”

“Risky. If I were commanding we’d be patrolling at least a league away from the border. Deeper if I had the men and it looks like whoever’s in charge has them.”

“It will be easier for us to look like an innocent party of travelers if we are stopped on the road,” Wellum retorted.

“Travelers, eh?” Gaenor commented.

“What’s that, my lady?” Wellum asked, puzzled.

“Just a little notion I learned from a friend. Tell me, my lord, what paths do the local smugglers use?”

“Good idea, Gae!” Artur commended her.

“My lady!” Wellum was aghast. “What would a well brought-up woman know about smuggling?”

“You’d be surprised what a well brought-up woman would know,” she replied, “especially a well traveled one. Now you’re avoiding the question. Where do the smugglers cross the border?”

“Well, when they’re trying to avoid customs...” Wellum said thoughtfully. “There’s a small dirt road about six leagues to the north of here. It heads a couple of miles west from the border then angles south to connect to the main road after another four leagues.”

“And we need to be back on the main road by sun-up. That’s going to mean some hard riding tonight,” Artur commented.

“We can rest once we’re safely beyond the border patrols,” Gaenor told him.

“That we can,” Artur agreed. “Let’s drop back to where the rest are. If we can get to the smugglers’ road before dark, maybe we can grab a little sleep before starting out.”

They made good time headed north and found the road, just a wide beaten path, half an hour before the sun set. Unlike their previous vantage point, this area was wooded with tall red pines.

“It would be nice if we could see further than the next bend in the road,” Artur grumbled.

“If we can’t see them, then they can’t see us,” Vito pointed out.

“Yes, but if they surprise us we’re in trouble and if we surprise them, the chances are we’re still in trouble,” Artur retorted.

“I can ride ahead of the rest of the party,” Cornellya volunteered. “If I’m invisible, they won’t see me and I can head back to keep you from being caught.”

“Can you handle that spell when you’re on horseback?” Artur asked worriedly.

“That’s not an issue,” Cornellya told him confidently. “The real problem is that I need to travel slower than normal so if there is someone they won’t hear me coming.”

“There are ways to muffle the sound from a horse’s hooves,” Artur told her. “You won’t want to rely on them, but they may help. Wellum, does this path cross any others between here and the main road?”

“Not until the other side of these woods, about a league and a half from here,” Wellum replied.

“Good, if there are legionaries out there tonight, that’s where they are most likely to be. Cornellya we’ll send you out a quarter of an hour ahead of us. Don’t ride too quickly; we have all night. And if you see no soldiers, wait for us just this side of the crossroads. We’ll check the crossroads carefully, then go through this whole routine again.”

They waited a full hour after it was fully dark and then started out. It was a moonless evening and the woods were very dark so they had to ride carefully in spite of their desire to travel as rapidly as possible. They found Cornellya waiting for them just inside the far edge of the woods.

“I saw a patrol go by out there just after I arrived,” she told them. “They looked like they were in a hurry to get somewhere to the south of us.”

“What’s south of here?” Artur asked the Barbarian delegates.

“That town I told you about,” Wellum replied.

“If I know soldiers, they were probably hurrying back to get a drink before sacking out. Anyone headed north from there will be moving much more slowly. Let’s just try for it, otherwise we could be out here all night waiting for another patrol to pass.”

“Do you want me to go first?” Cornellya asked.

“Yes. We’ll be in the open for a while here so be careful. Wait for us at the next wooded area.”

“Right.” She disappeared and rode off.

“That’s amazing!” Wellum breathed. “I missed that last time. I can see why you didn’t want to try that with all of us though. You can see where she is as she moves.”

“I think I mentioned that,” Gaenor replied, “but yes. And she’s better at it than the rest of us.”

A mile away from the forest, Cornellya came riding back. “Hold up a bit,” she advised. “There’s a patrol up ahead heading north. Give them a few minutes and they’ll be out of our way.” Then she turned and rode away again, turning invisible as she rode. The next time they saw her was at the beginning of the next patch of forest.

“This forest goes on for at least a league, doesn’t it?” Artur asked.

“It does according to the map,” Wellum replied. “I’ve never actually used it, you understand.”

“Okay. I think we can relax. Unless there are a lot more soldiers around here than we’ve seen hints of, they won’t be patrolling this far back from the border. Not with the woods here anyway. Welcome to the Cilben Empire.”

“We still have a lot more riding if we want to be on the main road by sun-up,” Vito said nervously.

“Indeed,” Artur agreed. “Let’s ride.”

The sky was just starting to lighten with the first tendrils of false dawn when they found the main road again. There was an inn at the end of the trail where it met the road and the innkeeper did not seem surprised in the least to see the party approaching from that direction.

“Haven’t had much traffic on the Back Trail these last two months,” he said by way of greeting. “Will you be wanting to break your fast? And perhaps rooms for the morning?”

“Both,” Artur replied.

“Excellent, masters. I’ll have the boy see to your horses, just tie them to the rail and I’ll have food at your table in a few minutes.” He rushed back into the inn to see to both matters.

“Good service,” Garek commented. His fellow diplomats agreed.

“He’s obviously used to pre-dawn arrivals,” Artur commented as he removed the packs from his mount. The rest followed his example. “What sorts of goods are brought through here to avoid customs?”

“The usual sort of things,” Wellum commented. “From Barbaria almost anything we produce - jewelry, cheeses, some weapons. Our steel is highly prized in Cilbe, I’m told. From Cilbe almost anything might come through. Gold ingots and some gemstones most often, but small manufactured goods too.”

“Gold and gems?” Gaenor asked. “But if you export jewelry...”

“People always want what they do not have,” Wellum replied as they entered the inn. We have rich deposits of silver and some platinum in our mountains, but only a few gold deposits. Our jewelers use the imported gold either as it is or alloyed with silver. The gems too. We have some magnificent gems, even some diamonds, but there are gems in other parts of the world we prize as well. We import jade from Cilbe for example and beryl and aquamarine.”

Breakfast featured a form of pancake Gaenor was unable to identify, Artur told her the flour, while half modern wheat had large percentages of wild grains like einkorn and emmer in it. The sausages also tasted odd to her until she realized the meat inside them had to be mutton. The only familiar part of the meal was the maple syrup, which she surmised must not have been a local product since the only trees in the region appeared to be pines, cedars and other conifers.

“It’s likely Barbarian,” Garek told her. “We have many sugar maples in the north.”

“It could also be from southern Arberoa,” Artur commented, “but I’d guess you’re correct since the maples of Barbaria are so much closer.”

After breakfast they napped for a few hours and shortly after a light lunch were on their way again. After a sunny start to the day, clouds rolled in not long after they left the inn at the end of the Back Trail. They were high clouds and not immediately threatening, but their presence cast a gloomy feeling over the day and the members of the party retreated into their own thoughts. It was this introspective mood, perhaps, that caused them not to notice they were surrounded until it was too late.

The road was running through a curved valley between two low hills, when they saw five men in bright red tunics and trousers standing in the road ahead of them. Their faces and hair were hidden behind bright red masks that wrapped completely around their heads.

“Temi,” Gaenor noted nervously. She and Artur looked over their shoulders and saw another five coming up the road behind them and several on the hills on either side of the party. “We’re surrounded.”

“Oh, Seunas and Deamma!” Wellum swore fervently. “I never expected the Cilbens to use Temi assassins.”

“What do we do?” Garek asked worriedly.

“Find out what they want,” Artur told them. “Gae, Vito, Cornellya, get ready to use those defensive amulets. Meanwhile let’s get within hearing distance. They have to formally issue a challenge before they attack. Merely being seen is not sufficient to satisfy their honor.”

“Temi have honor?” one of the other legates asked. Gaenor thought his name was Makhail.

“A very strong and somewhat inflexible one, actually,” she told him. “It may not coincide with yours or mine on many counts, but it does exist.”

“I’ve heard a lot of stories about the Temi,” Garek said. “None of them are pleasant.” The other diplomats made similar statements. Vito and Cornellya looked at each other, both puzzled, but nervous because everyone else was.

One of the Temi rode closer and told the party, “Keep riding, but do not try to escape.”

They rode on another few miles until the sun was low on the horizon and the Temi indicated they should stop and set up camp at the base of a hill.

“No wonder you said we should bring tents, Senator,” Wellum said to Artur.

“I just thought there might be a chance we’d get caught too far from an inn,” Artur replied. “And normally I’d want to pitch my tent on top of a hill in case of rain.”

“It will not rain this evening. You and you,” the only Tem who had spoken so far said pointing at Artur and Gaenor. “Come with me.”

They left their horses behind and followed the one Tem up the hill. The rest of the party was obviously under guard. From the top of the hill they could see thousands of ground-colored tents. Most were small pup tents but there were also some larger, round structures with domed roofs.

The Tem removed his mask to reveal his stern long face and short straight black hair. At that moment his entire manner toward Artur and Gaenor took an abrupt about-face. “Silly mask,” he muttered. “Makes it hard to breathe, but it is expected of us.”

“A Temi encampment?” Artur asked.

“Yes. You have seen one before?” the Tem asked.

“No, but I have heard of your yurts. I understand that they are the epitome of camping comfort.”

“They are,” the Tem confirmed, “and they collapse into an efficiently small bundle. In a far northern or southern winter, I’d rather live in one of these than many permanent homes.”

They continued down into the camp. As they entered, there were Temi dressed in earth tones all around them, just watching them in what Gaenor thought must be a respectful silence. There were men and women of all ages quietly watching them. Even the children were eerily silent. Temi did not look like most Cilbens Gaenor had seen before. Their faces had a different shape; they tapered down to their chins making their faces tend toward triangular in shape. And their eyes were almond-shaped with the whites looking slightly yellowish. Cilben hair color shaded mostly from brown to blond, but Temi hair ranged from dark brown to blue-black. They also stood a bit shorter, although Gaenor wasn’t sure she had met enough Cilbens to be certain of that, and on the whole looked just a bit more muscular on the average.

“I don’t believe I’ve ever seen a Tem who wasn’t dressed in red before,” Artur commented.

“We only wear this color when on an active mission,” their escort told them. “I’d have thought you knew that, Senator.”

“I did know that,” Artur admitted, “but it is true nevertheless that I have never seen a Tem in another color.”

“It’s a silly color to have to wear,” the Tem told them unexpectedly. “Oh, it makes it easier to intimidate an outsider, but there are times I’d like to go back in time and throttle the venerable ancestor who came up with the idea.”

“So red is not exactly a favored color here?” Gaenor asked.

“Miss Gaenor, you will never see a Tem wear an item that is red when not required to. Not even a ring as beautiful as yours. May I inquire if it has some special significance to you? Last spring the only jewelry you were known to wear was a piece of Anderan quartz.”

“How did you know that?” Gaenor asked.

“It was part of the description we had of you,” he replied. “The ring?”

“It’s a signet ring. It was given to me on my elevation to the gentry,” Gaenor explained.

“Congratulations,” the Tem said simply. She was about to reply, but at that moment they reached their destination. They were in a very large clearing between the tents and near what must have been the largest yurt in the encampment. Out of it stepped the only Tem Gaenor had ever seen the face of before; Chief Leracus of the Ridec Clan.

“You have kept us waiting,” he accused them.

“I didn’t know you were waiting for us,” Artur replied calmly. “In fact I’d have thought you would be glad not to see us again.”

The Tem Chieftain looked at them for a long moment, then replied, “You know little of our ways, so I’ll forgive you. Please, come into my yurt, we need to talk first.”

Artur and Gaenor exchanged a glance then followed Leracus into the yurt. The structure was a dark grayish brown outside, but inside it was a riot of color. The walls of the structure, Gaenor learned later, were rigid, formed by a lattice of wooden slats that folded into a neat bundle when being carried. However, the wooden substructure of the walls was covered all around by a long tapestry that ran from one side of the door around the yurt and back to the other side. It appeared to tell a story, but it wasn’t one Gaenor recognized, nor did she get the chance to ask about it. The floor was covered by a thick woolen carpet into which a colorful and ornate pattern had been woven.

There were several chests along the wall and what looked like a pile of furs in the back, that Gaenor decided must be where Leracus slept, and there was a low table in the center of the circular room with a teapot and three cups. Leracus lowered himself gracefully to the floor by that table and gestured for Artur and Gaenor to do likewise.

“I heard of your arrival in Wahton,” he told them after they had seated. He started to pour tea into the cups and handed one to Gaenor and the second to Artur. “You were gone before we could get there.”

He filled the third cup and held it up in toast to them. Artur returned the gesture and Gaenor followed his example. Then they all sipped their tea. Gaenor was surprised by its flavor. It was heavily laced with jasmine and sugar.

“You did not seek us out,” Leracus said once they had all tasted the tea. “I therefore assume neither of you intend to replace me as chief.”

Gaenor had been taking a second sip of the tea and caught herself just shy of spitting it out in surprise. Artur smiled at her reaction.

“We do not have the experience to serve well as chiefs of the Temi,” he replied to Leracus.

“You are a wise man, Arturus,” Leracus told him. “It is not right to try to lead a people you do not know. A Temi chief does not rule his people, but leads by example. He is not better than other Temi, but is the greatest of equals. To behave otherwise is to commit suicide. One does not challenge a chief so long as that chief continues to lead well, but an outsider such as you would court challenges from both clans merely by breathing. I don’t doubt you could stand up to those challengers, but you would nearly depopulate the clans before they got the message. Still you both are technically chiefs. This is not unprecedented. A chief may decline to serve honorably.”

“Really?” Gaenor asked.

“Oh yes,” Leracus told her. “He – well, I say ‘he’ but we have had many female chiefs too – may feel he is getting too old or may be dissatisfied with too many recent decisions or any number of other reasons. So long as it is done for the good of the clan, we consider it honorable and that chief continues to be a chief in name if not in practice.

“You two,” he continued, “have defeated me by having survived the Parch. Either of you could demand to be chief of the Ridec Clan, but you have chosen not to. Because of this you are of the Ridec Clan and are chiefs and you shall be treated as such. Tonight we shall celebrate your return and I shall keep the rest of my promise.”

“What promise?” Gaenor asked.

“We shall sing of you. Our best singers have been writing songs of you ever since we heard you were still alive. They will want to hear of your exploits, how you alone among the Temi have survived more than four days in the Parch and everything you have done since then. I hope you like telling stories, for we love to listen to them”

It was full dark by the time they finished their tea and Leracus led them back outside. The encampment had become transformed from a set of drab tents into a magical sea of torch lights. They walked only a few feet to what was obviously supposed to be the place a chief would sit. While they had been inside, someone had laid lush carpeting down on the wide circular area in front of Leracus’ yurt, leaving only enough space for a large central campfire. Leracus sat down and gestured for Artur and Gaenor to sit on either side of him. As they did so a hush filled the encampment.

“The newest clan chiefs have returned to us at last,” Leracus announced. “All hail, Chief Arturus and Chief Gaenor.” As one the clan clapped their hands once and then saluted them in the Cilben manner. Arturus returned the salute and, after a moment of hesitation, so did Gaenor. “Let the feast begin!” Leracus concluded.

The Temi were a well-traveled people and their favorite foods showed it. Gaenor recognized some of the dishes as Thimdran and Gostrinan. Others appeared to be of Cilben origin and still others were entirely new to her. There appeared to be more meat than vegetables in their diet, but Gaenor reminded herself that a feast could hardly be representative of their normal lifestyle. In fact, she decided, the uninhibited merriment that was displayed that night almost had to be the opposite of their normally hard lifestyle. A quasi-legal tribe like the Temi that lives a nomadic life in tents, however luxurious, could hardly afford to celebrate like this often. But they were obviously ready to make the most of the opportunity when it presented itself.

After the first round of food had been brought out, a woman with a young girl nervously approached Gaenor. Gaenor, uncertain of what to do, looked at Leracus who told her, “She wants you to touch her

child. We believe that children can gain strength from the touch of a hero.”

“Hero? Me?” Gaenor asked.

“Of course,” Leracus replied matter of factly. “And we haven’t even started telling stories yet. She asks based strictly on the strength of the songs about you. Go ahead. It does no harm and will strengthen the girl and thereby the clan.”

Gaenor reached out with her right hand and touched the girl’s forehead. The child giggled and the mother looked pleased.

“Thank you, my chief,” she said to Gaenor and then led the girl away.

“Very well done,” Leracus commended Gaenor. “Where we touch a child governs the sort of strength that is imparted. You chose to make her intelligent. That is good. Intelligence is stronger than mere muscles.”

Then the songs began. Leracus told them that music was the Temi’s greatest treasure and that all Temi sang or played instruments. It was considered more important than prowess with weapons.

“That’s surprising,” Gaenor replied.

“We make our living in the Empire as warriors and assassins, but that does not define who we are,” Leracus told her patiently. He was about to expound further on that subject, but there was a sudden commotion at the edge of the gathered Temi. Two Temi women came forward, both appearing to be holding something that was invisible and trying to get loose.

“Cornellya!” Artur exploded. Cornellya became visible immediately. “You were supposed to wait with the others!”

“Nobody said I had to stay there,” she replied rebelliously.

“Generally, when one is being held by armed guards, there’s a tacit understanding that you’re supposed to stay put,” Artur replied sarcastically.

“Girl,” Leracus said sternly, “do you not know it is forbidden to spy on the Temi? The penalty is death.”

“Uh, it is?” Cornellya asked, looking worried.

“Illustrious Leracus,” Artur requested formally, “I would humbly request mercy on behalf of my goddaughter.”

“This one is part of your clan?” Leracus asked. Artur nodded. “Then she is kin. Technically she is permitted here, but in the future, Lady Cornellya, you will behave honorably while among us and you will refrain from using magic against the Temi.”

“Yes, illustrious Leracus,” she replied humbly. He nodded to the two women who released the Vari. She sat quietly next to Gaenor.

“Now, brother,” Leracus said to Artur, “tell us a story. How did it come to pass that you are kin to a Parchite?”

Gaenor saw that Cornellya was about to protest the word and quickly whispered, "Let it pass. It's what Vieri are called in Cilbe." Cornellya, still somewhat shaken, nodded her understanding. Meanwhile, around them the assembled clan became quiet in anticipation.

"It started over twenty years ago," Artur began. He proceeded to tell the clan of the time he convinced the Senate not to declare war on Baria and the political and personal consequences. The Temi were perhaps the best audience he had ever encountered. Their reactions to various parts of the story encouraged him to continue and to add dramatic touches in appropriate places. They also were realists to a greater extent than any other people he had met over the years. When he got to the point where he had to put down his horse and then drink its blood in order to survive, most people had been sickened at the thought. The Temi, on the other hand, nodded knowingly at that part, some commenting on the sense in not wasting a necessary source of moisture. They were utterly attentive as he described the Vieri Village and his training as an adept by Master Borrit. Finally he talked about his friendship with Cornellya's parents and how they asked him to be her godfather. When prompted, he continued to tell them about how he lived after leaving the Village. He told them about his adventures in various parts of the world and how he eventually settled down in Narmouth.

"And this is where you met Chief Gaenor?" Leracus asked.

"In time," Artur replied. "I was there for several years before I decided to find an assistant." He continued to tell them about the amazingly stubborn, but intelligent girl who had camped out on his doorstep until he finally gave in and hired her. Gaenor listened raptly to Artur's story. She had never heard how he had viewed the incident. As he continued, she began to interrupt here and there to correct or augment his tale with her own point of view. As they continued talking, the story gradually became Gaenor's more and more until at last she was talking almost exclusively.

Artur's story was one of physical adventures, but Gaenor's point of view stressed the lessons she learned from each incident. She explained how she had learned the art of magic and had begun to fashion it into a science long before she became adept and she talked about how it had felt to cast the ceremonial binding spell in Dana. It was Artur who spoke about the assassination attempts on him in Dana but as his health began to fail in the story, Gaenor's viewpoint started to truly dominate the tale.

She hesitated when she got to the fight with the Tem outside the inn at Gendri, but Leracus urged her on, saying, "We do not blame you for the death of that Tem. He was trying to kill you, the better warrior won. That is all."

"Actually it was Artur who got him," Gaenor explained. "He saw my fight from his room above."

"Then the Tem was doubly beaten. He should have known where both of you were before starting his attack. Continue."

She described their trip to Fronor on the edge of the Parch where they met Leracus. She asked him, "I still do not understand why you did not just challenge Artur and kill him and me right there."

"I did not feel it would be honorable to kill a sick old man who had already defeated so many of my warriors," Leracus explained. "Nor did I wish to kill you, which would only have been necessary because by then I knew you would try to stop me from killing Chief Artur. You had already proven yourself a worthy warrior and enough such warriors had already died in the commission of that contract. So I devised the challenge I did. Never in our history had any Tem survived for four full days in the Parch. If you could do that, you would be worthy of being a Tem chieftain. It was an easy enough

decision to make. If you had died I would have concluded the contract agreed on with the younger Girdecus. If not your strength would belong to the Ridec Clan.”

“Yes,” Artur agreed. “You had nothing to lose either way. I bow to your wisdom.”

“You did know who hired us?” Leracus asked.

“Until a few months ago, I suspected,” Artur explained, “nothing more. But I met Flacco, the older Girdecus’...” he searched for the right description of Flacco’s relationship with Girdecus.”

“Yes, we know Flacco,” Leracus admitted.

“Of course,” Artur nodded. “Anyway he admitted it was Martius who hired you.”

Leracus nodded. “And now that you know for certain, what will you do?”

“I’m not sure. I do not have the luxury of tracking him down and killing him myself, I have more important matters to attend to.”

“They must be important, indeed, if you can so readily dismiss a blood debt,” Leracus commented. His tone made it an implicit request to hear that story as well.

Gaenor continued telling of how they made their way to the Village and how she awoke already adept. Then she explained about the rain and the curse the Vieri told her originated on Ichtar. By now she could tell that story in her sleep.

When she was finished, Leracus nodded and said, “Yes that would be more important than a personal blood debt. You are both great people. A lesser person would place his personal business first.” Then he called for the second remove of the feast and still more food and drink were brought forth. “Try some of this wine,” he recommended. “It is our own. We harvest wild grapes each autumn just a few days from here. We have a small village where they are kept until well aged.”

“I wasn’t aware the Temi had villages,” Artur commented.

“Just the one. Each year a number of Temi from the Ridec and Dectar clans are chosen to live there taking care of those possessions the clans have that require a sedentary home. The life of a nomad is poetic, perhaps, but I doubt you will find a truly rich nomad who doesn’t have sedentary kin.”

“I suppose you could keep your money in a bank,” Gaenor suggested.

“We do,” Leracus admitted, “but not in Cilbe. We are not permitted there. Not openly in any case. More music for our new chiefs!” he commanded. Several Temi bards came forward. They sang together on one song about Artur and the Twelfth Legion, then took turns on other songs about Artur and Gaenor. Two of the songs were obviously less than an hour old, containing details of the stories Gaenor and Artur had just told.

The festivities went on for hours. After the feast, they danced for two hours, with the men and women guiding Artur, Gaenor and Cornellya through the wild and complex steps. When that was over there were more songs and stories. Gaenor found herself telling about the incident in Fasri when she learned about the interaction between malachite and steel and to demonstrate she turned the campfire green for several minutes before changing it back again. The Temi thought it was an amazingly funny story the way

she told it and all jumped back from the fire in surprise when it changed color. Then they laughed again, this time at themselves.

Gaenor decided that in spite of the circumstances in which she had first become aware of the Temi, she liked them. Fierce warriors and assassins they may be, but this was a society in which rank was settled by ability, not by birth or gender or even money. While the Temi did not practice magic themselves, there was no surprise that Gaenor did. It never occurred to them to wonder whether or not it was a woman's place to be an adept. It was true that the Kimnites would not wonder about that either, but theirs was a matriarchal society and forbade men from practicing magic so were no better than cultures in which men dominated.

It was sometime after midnight when Leracus presented Artur and Gaenor each with their own set of red Temi uniforms. Gaenor wondered if there would ever come a time when she might actually wear them, but thanked the clan chief sincerely for the honor. Much later she noted that many of the Temi had drifted away from the fire area. She could hear them talking and singing quietly in the distance. It sounded like they were trading songs. Still further away she could hear drum beats and imagined that some of the more enthusiastic dancers were there now. But there were still quite a few people around them. Several mothers had come with their children to be touched by either Artur or Gaenor, and a group of children had come over at one point to get a closer look at Cornellya.

Cornellya had not caused as much of a stir in Mishanda or Aston because people there, even though they might have heard of the Vieri, didn't really know what one looked like, so they would naturally assume she had come from very far away, and most of those who had seen her knew she was a friend of Gaenor. In Kimn and to a lesser extent in the Barbarian kingdoms, she was a respected mythical character come to life. In Cilbe, however, she was quickly recognized for the unusual creature she was. Her appearance had caused quite a stir at first until Leracus declared she was kin, but the children had been often put to bed with stories of the magical Parchites and couldn't help wanting to see the subject of these stories.

It was after the red uniforms were presented that Artur and Leracus started talking in earnest.

"You have a great mission ahead of you, Chief Arturus," Leracus noted. "How may we assist you?"

"In the long run I'm not sure you can, but for now you could tell me how things stand in Cilbe. We've heard many rumors about the political situation there."

"I fear the gods have chosen to make the Emperor mad," Leracus replied bluntly.

"How so?" Artur asked.

"He ignores the business of the Empire in favor of his personal luxuries. He spends an inordinate amount of time in his villa a few leagues north of the Cilbe, where he indulges in disgusting sexual practices with slaves and young boys and girls. I will admit that we Temi are quite prudish by Cilben standards, but the stories that have come out of his villa are well beyond any form of decency even by the lax standards of the city.

"He taxes the provinces at an ever increasing rate to help pay for the games he sponsors in the circi in Cilbe itself and it is rumored that he believes he is a god himself."

"That is very disturbing," Artur agreed.

“Yes,” Leracus said. “Did you hear that three years ago he used over three hundred ships to build a bridge between his villa and Pendola?”

“That’s a new one by me,” Artur admitted. “Why did he want to do that?”

“So he could ride his horse there in a single day,” Leracus responded. “It took over a week to build the bridge and it used an entire forest to do so. Then he had tons of dirt and gravel brought in to pave this new bridge.”

“This sounds familiar,” Artur interrupted. “Didn’t the Emperor Callius try that same stunt about fifteen hundred years ago?”

“He did,” Leracus agreed. “I think that is where Lusius got the idea, and it worked out about as well as the old historians tell us Callius’ attempt did. Lusius rode across the Northern Cilbe Bay and back for two days and on the third day great Jube sent a storm to punish his hubris. Half the ships were destroyed and the rest were badly damaged. The Temi did quite well, you may be happy to hear. As soon as the Emperor announced his plans we invested heavily in lumber futures. It had been our plan to merely profit from the actual building of the bridge, but when it was destroyed there was a lumber shortage across the northern half of the Empire.

“So,” Leracus continued, “what are you doing with a group of Barbarian princes?”

“I promised to see they reached Cilbe and, if possible, to lend them my support in entering peace negotiations.”

“Good,” Leracus replied. “A war with the Barbarian Kingdoms will profit us not and only sending four legions is a recipe for disaster. There should be six at least. Even that would gain us nothing we do not already have. So we will help you,” he concluded emphatically.

“How?” Artur asked.

“By making sure you reach Cilbe. Always remember this, what a chief promises, the clan delivers.”

Six

“But if you are all born adept,” Vitautis was asking Cornellya, “why did you need to develop a spell to make humans adept? How did it even occur to you to do so?” The party had stayed where the Temi had stopped them for another day. Artur, Gaenor and Cornellya did not return from the Temi encampment until several hours after the sun had risen, so they had spent the day resting up. In the morning Artur told the Barbarians, to their relief, to break camp. They hadn’t been riding for more than a few minutes when Vito started in on his long running interview with Cornellya. Lately these discussions had come closer to arguments. Vito was not unknowledgeable on most matters magical, but in his chosen specialty he knew so very little, because no human writer had ever met the Vieri. Until he had met Cornellya the sum of his knowledge on that subject came from other people, none of whom had ever met a Vari either. He had rapidly found out that the folk tales had almost nothing in common with the reality, but now was beginning to wonder if Cornellya’s people were really the same Vieri as all those others had written about.

“How would I know,” Cornellya responded. “I wasn’t there. Besides, what makes you think we invented that spell for humans?”

“Who then, the trolls?” Vito retorted.

“Of course not! It was for us.”

“But you didn’t need it.”

“What makes you think that?” Cornellya asked, sounding exasperated. “Don’t you think we get sick? Don’t you think we can be harmed by thionase? There are a thousand ways to lose your hold on magic, to become non-adept and when you can expect to live for a thousand years or more you’ll also live to see them happen to someone. Our initiation spell isn’t like the one you use.”

“How do you know that?”

“It’s obvious, your initiates don’t heal any faster than non-adepts. Our spell was invented to restore health. Being adept is part of our health. That it happens to work on humans too is just the way magic is. Ask Arturus or Gaenor, they were both initiated in the Village to heal them from intense dehydration and other injuries suffered in the Parch. Now they are not only healthy but will probably live as long as my people do, unless something kills them first.”

“How long do Vieri live?” Vito asked.

“As long as we want to. Thousands of years usually. We are not allowed to practice the high magic until we are at least one thousand years old.”

“Could I be initiated with that spell?”

“You do not need it,” Cornellya told him. “You are already adept.”

“But I won’t live for thousands of years,” he pointed out.

“You could.”

“How?”

“Are you not adept? Cast the right spell on yourself,” Cornellya said matter of factly.

“But I don’t know that spell. Will you teach it to me?” Vito asked.

“I don’t know it. I’m only twenty years old, after all. But it would be against the Way to teach it to you.”

“Why?”

“Because you are not yet one thousand years old,” Cornellya pointed out as though he should have realized it.

“If I was over a thousand I wouldn’t need you to teach it to me,” Vito protested.

“But you are a human adept. If you study the Way and Gaenor’s system, I’m certain you can figure it out in time. Excuse me, I want to talk to Gaenor,” Cornellya told him and dropped back to ride beside Gaenor.

Wellum glanced over his shoulder then leaned over toward Artur and said, "I'm surprised she doesn't just turn him into a pumpkin."

"She's a nice girl," Artur replied, "and is too well-mannered to do something like that. Besides it would be counter to the Way."

"What is this Way?" Wellum asked.

"It's hard to boil down to a few hundred words but it's short for "The Way of Life," Artur explained. "It defines the entire philosophy and lifestyle of the Vieri."

"Maybe I'll have to visit her Village someday," Wellum decided. "They sound like very interesting people to know."

"Better bring one heck of a lot of water with you or you won't make it."

"Is the Parch really that dry?" Wellum asked.

"Drier. To tell the truth, I don't think you can carry enough water to reach the Village alive without assistance from the Vieri themselves. I was rescued by them both times I visited. The first time I just got lucky; didn't know anyone lived in the Parch but I didn't have much choice in the matter. The second time I thought we had enough water, but that just wasn't the case."

"A pity, I'd love to see their desert city." He caught sight of a flash of red behind and to his left. "Did you know there are Temi following us?" he asked Artur.

"There's probably a few dozen of them all around us," Artur replied calmly."

"Why?"

"Because Leracus promised they would help me get you to Cilbe safely. And the Temi never lie and they never break a promise."

"Never?" Wellum asked.

"They would kill themselves first," Artur replied.

"But surely there are times when..."

"Not for a Tem. If there is something a Tem does not want to say, he simply doesn't say it. No little white lies, no polite courtesies."

"They would make frighteningly terrible diplomats," Wellum decided after a moment's consideration.

Artur laughed. "They would at that. Still, they might be very good at it. At least you would know where you stood. Wars would probably be a lot less bloody as well. They tend to resolve their irreconcilable differences, few as they are, in single combat. Feuds are not tolerated."

"Funny, that's not the way I've heard it."

“There are a lot of tales meant to frighten outsiders. They’ll deny the untrue ones if asked, but otherwise they encourage them. It makes most of what they do much easier.”

“How many of those stories are true, though?” Wellum asked.

“Enough to keep the rest of us guessing,” Artur replied.

“I just saw another five or six Temi,” Wellum noted nervously after looking to his right.

“Don’t worry,” Artur assured him. “They’re here for our protection.”

As they traveled on, their sightings of their Temi guards became more frequent and it was not uncommon to see as many as a dozen red-clad men or women standing together at once. Artur began to wonder just how many guards Leracus had assigned to them.

Little of incident happened as they continued to travel east. The weather remained cool but tolerable, but it also became damp. The area west of the Mallactine Mountains was generally drier than the area to the east of them at this latitude, but winter was the wet season and storms coming in from the Ocean Sea had enough moisture in them to survive the trip up and over the Mallactines. As they rode, the days turned into a succession of dreary, cloudy, misty mornings that were usually followed by drizzling afternoons or raining evenings. Only one in three days was bright and sunny and only once did they get two fair days in a row until they reached the mountains. Then the skies cleared and the nights got chilly.

Through it all they often saw several Temi trailing or leading them. Artur tried to keep a count of the different Temi he spotted. The fact that they wore identical red clothing and that he never saw more than twelve at any given time made it difficult but he was fairly certain there were at least two dozen men and women guarding them. By the time they were halfway through the Mallactines, he was willing to double that estimate.

They were still in the western foothills when a Temi woman approached Artur and Gaenor to inform them, “There is a legion headed out of Cilbe toward us.”

“You saw them?” Artur asked.

“I did, my chief,” she replied.

“Were you able to make out which legion it was?”

“No, my chief, they were too far away. Does it make a difference?”

“It might,” Artur replied, “but then we don’t really know why they are headed this way, do we?”

“Actually we do, my chief. We’ve been spotted and word was sent back to Cilbe as fast as a relay of horses and messengers could carry word.”

“I wish I’d known that earlier.”

“It did not matter until we knew what the Emperor’s reaction to the news would be.”

“And do you know for certain what the reaction is?” Gaenor asked.

“He sent out a legion to intercept you. That should tell you all you need to know.”

“A good point,” Artur allowed.

“How far away are they?” Gaenor asked.

“An hour, no more than that.”

“Oh good, advanced warning,” Artur said sarcastically. “Can we try to avoid them?”

“They are marching in a single column, but they have outriders just as we do. They know where we are.”

“Thank you for warning us,” Gaenor told the Tem.

“It is my honor to serve you, my chief,” she replied. Then she turned and rode off to the north away from the road.

“What do we do, Artur?” Gaenor asked.

“I don’t think we have much choice. In spite of the Tem’s appraisal of the situation, we don’t really know they have come to intercept us. Why would they? We’re a fairly small party, there’s nothing outstanding about us.”

“What if there are more Temi around us than you think?” Gaenor suggested.

“I doubt there’s no more than a few dozen,” Artur guessed. “Leracus has other matters to occupy him, I’m sure.”

“What if instead of a few dozen, he sent several hundred warriors to escort us? That would make the Emperor sit up and take notice, wouldn’t it?” Gaenor asked.

Artur looked at her as they rode, then replied, “I should have asked her how large an escort we have, shouldn’t I?”

“I’d say so, but it’s much too late now, even for evasive maneuvers,” she replied.

“We have more company, look on the next hill,” Garek announced.

Artur looked ahead and saw a small unit of uniformed legionaries. “A small group. One or two contubernia at best and one or two decurions with them. It’s just an advanced party. We should try to meet the main body in a valley.”

“A valley?” Wellum asked. “Should we not be looking for a position with a better advantage?”

“If we were a legion I would try to make them attack us uphill,” Artur replied, “but we’re just a party of eight men and women. It’s very unlikely an entire legion would have been dispatched to attack a party of eight when a single century could accomplish that. Our best fighters are our Temi guards. They’ll take the high ground around the valley and may even find a way to look like a more formidable force as well.”

The valley in front of them was a broad spread surrounded on three sides by high hills and Artur decided that was likely to be their best place to meet the approaching Cilbens.

“It’s time for lunch anyway,” he commented.

“I’d always thought I’d have something more satisfying than cheese and bread for my last meal,” Wellum commented sourly.

“We still have a few pieces of jerky,” Gaenor told him brightly.

“It will do, I suppose,” he sighed. “What sort of wine, do you think, goes with beef jerky?” Several others laughed at the feeble joke.

They occasionally saw small groups of Cilben legionaries on top of the next hill, but the Tem’s estimate was accurate and they were still eating when the main force appeared.

“Shouldn’t we at least get a little further off the road?” Vito asked.

“I don’t know why,” Artur replied. “If they’re coming to meet us, we’ll only get them angry if they have to chase us down and if they’re just passing through we can move quickly enough to suit almost any general.”

“And if this is not just any general?” Vito countered.

“We do have allies, Vito,” Artur said calmly. He took another look at the approaching army and smiled. “Gae, how about we heat up some water for tea?”

“Tea? Now?” Gaenor asked.

“Trust me.”

A few minutes later, amid a fanfare of war trumpets, the legion, with its general at the front of the column approached and came to a halt some fifty yards away from where the party was busily pretending to be enjoying a picnic.

“Hail Lusius!” the general greeted them.

“He has you greeting each other in his own name now?” Artur asked, a tinge of anger in his voice.

“Uh,” the general faltered. “You are speaking of His Serenity, the Emperor Lusius, man. Who are you to question the Emperor?”

“I seem to have made a career of that,” Artur said, mostly as an aside to Gaenor. “My name is Arturus Cornelian Marno. I doubt it’s a household name in Cilbe these days but as you command the Twelfth Legion, you may have heard of me. Who are you?”

“Senator Arturus?” the general asked in amazement.

“No, we’ve already established that’s my name, you can’t have it,” Artur countered. “Would you like some tea, by the way?”

“Tea?”

“Yes. Boiled leaves. Ever hear of it?” Artur asked lightly. There was a stir going through the Twelfth Legion. Most of the men were too young to remember Artur, a few had not even been born when he last commanded this legion, but the older career men nearing the end of their second hitch would have served with him.

The general glanced over his shoulder worriedly then realized he still had not answered Artur’s question. Artur had never been officially banished nor had he ever been formally stripped of his senatorial rank. Such would normally have happened but Emperor Lusius had several problems that needed his attention at the time. When Artur had fled the Empire and been given up for dead in the Parch he stopped being a problem.

“Permit me to introduce myself, senator,” the general tried again. “I am Tarsus Morianus Pallar.”

“Of the Morian family,” Artur noted. “Good people, most of you. Would you be Clardius’ son?”

“Nephew. Jallius was my father.”

“Don’t believe I ever actually met him,” Artur replied. “Didn’t he command the Nineteenth Legion near the Barian border?”

“Yes, he did” General Tarsus replied, sounding pleased that Artur should remember that. Behind him the normally well-disciplined legion was buzzing. Before he could do anything to stop it, however, one of his senior centurions stepped forward and laid his sword down at Artur’s feet.

“Thank you, Beryllius,” Artur murmured to the man. “and you Hannius,” he added as a second centurion did likewise. “Gentlemen, I appreciate the honor, but it would be best if you keep your oaths to General Tarsus.” Both men retrieved their swords and saluted Artur. He returned the courtesy. “So, General, what brings you this way?”

“Apparently you do, Senator,” Tarsus replied, trying to bring the conversation under his control.

“Me? All I’m doing is escorting a party of foreign dignitaries to their embassy in Cilbe. Barbaria wishes to sue for peace. It seems like an honorable desire. I saw fit to honor their request for my help.”

“Perhaps,” General Tarsus considered, “your presence in this place is purely coincidental then, Senator. We were dispatched from our camp at the north end of Cilbe Bay to investigate and counter the movement of a large group of Temi.”

“Ah. They are with me. When I explained my need to the chief of the Ridecs he offered his assistance.”

“They are with you, Senator?” Tarsus asked. The buzzing behind him grew louder.

“Yes. Is that a problem?” Artur asked.

“I’m afraid it is,” Tarsus replied, but the moment he did Beryllius and Hannius laid their swords at Artur’s feet again as did another centurion Artur did not recognize and an old decurion that Artur thought he remembered as a private legionary. The sound from the Twelfth Legion changed from a buzz to a gasp, causing Tarsus to look up and around. “Uh oh!” he whispered.

Artur followed his gaze to see the surrounding hills covered in red-clad men, women and children.

“Don’t you just hate it when you find yourself dressed in the wrong fashion,” Gaenor quipped to Cornellya. The Vari giggled. The Barbarians were awed.

“I could be wrong,” Artur ventured, “but that may well be the most Temi anyone has ever seen actively engaged on a mission at one time. So, General, perhaps you could do me a favor?”

Tarsus turned his nervous face back toward Artur. “I would be most anxious to assist the Illustrious Arturus in any honorable task,” he replied slowly, still rather wild-eyed.

“Good man!” Artur returned, clapping the general on the back. “Do you think you could see it clear to help me deliver these peaceful Barbarians into the city?”

Time stopped moving for a very long moment as General Tarsus considered the ramifications of every possible decision he might make. He had six thousand of the most disciplined soldiers in the world under his command. They were facing over ten thousand equally disciplined warriors who had the added advantage of being feared by every gods-loving Cilben citizen. Any decision that led him to attack the Temi would enroll him in the same book of military disasters General Tacarus’ memory lived on in ever since the Fifth Legion was decimated by the Barbarian Kingdoms. Joining with Senator Arturus was likely to ruin his career when the Emperor learned of his decision. It was also likely to endanger his life and that of his family. But the Twelfth legion was like family to him as well and they would die if they had to fight the Temi.

Furthermore there was a clear path of honor. Tarsus never doubted the veracity of what Artur had told him so there was no honor in dying at the hands of the Temi, not if they really were not attacking the Imperial City of Cilbe. If Artur was telling the truth, it would be dishonorable to disrupt the Barbarian mission to Cilbe.

He motioned Artur to follow him a few dozen paces away from everyone else. “It appears I really have no choice, do I?” Tarsus whispered.

Artur considered the massed Temi clan. “I don’t know, I think you have a lot of choices. It’s just that most of them would be wrong.”

“You have me in a lousy position. You know that, don’t you?” Tarsus asked. Artur remained silent. “If I choose to fight I’m dead. My legion might be too, but I’m getting the sneaky suspicion that I’m more likely to find myself fighting over two legions worth of Temi singlehandedly.”

“Imagine the stories they’ll tell if you win,” Artur suggested whimsically.

Tarsus gave him a sour look and continued, “If I join you, Lusius will have my head on a spike.”

“Maybe not,” Artur disagreed.

“Senator, you haven’t be in Cilbe, lately have you?”

“If I had been,” Artur replied, “my chances there would make yours here easy odds by comparison. By the time I left, Lusius was ready to eat my liver, but I’m going to continued helping the Barbarians if I can and I’d planned to do that long before I picked up my flashily garbed friends there.” Tarsus looked at him, but Artur couldn’t tell what he was thinking. “There are larger things at stake, General, than the whims of a madman on the throne of an empire.”

“Just between you and me,” Tarsus replied quietly, “I have to agree with your assessment of the Emperor. He’s a walking advertisement for bringing back the old custom of leaving a defective child out for the wolves.”

“He’s not physically defective,” Artur pointed out.

“No, but I’d still like to leave him out for the wolves. Very well, Senator, I’ll follow your orders before my senior officers all mutiny on me.”

“Thank you, general. Who knows this may all work out for the best yet.

Seven

The march toward Cilbe was difficult to coordinate. Finally Artur found it necessary to take charge and assigned the Twelfth Legion to march on his left flank and the Temi to group themselves, somewhat less formally, to the right and rear. Both the legion and the Ridec Clan sent outriders ahead to scope out the terrain even though Artur told them it would not be necessary.

The Barbarian legates were particularly pleased by the turn of events until they realized that not only would it mean making less actual progress each day, but that they would have to sleep in tents rather than in comfortable inns. Military food was also not to their taste, although Gaenor was surprised by its quality in spite of its simplicity. Artur made several pointed comments about how the Barbarians’ ancestors might feel about their descendants and their inability to “rough it” for a few nights and they stopped grumbling while he could hear them at least.

They were only three days march from Cilbe when they came out of the hills but the weather chose not to cooperate. The days of heavy mist they experienced on the eastern side of the mountains became constant rain here in the west. The skies didn’t clear until they stopped for the night only a few hours from the city.

“Artur, I’m worried,” Gaenor told him late that night.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, then he thought of something. “Not the balance again?”

“Actually, yes. Cornellya and I think the situation is focusing again.”

“Okay,” he replied resignedly. “Tell me about it.”

“Looking back, I think it all started when we met the Temi. Something happened then. It was probably Leracus’ decision to aid us. There was another change in the way it feels when we met the Twelfth Legion.”

“That sort of makes sense,” Artur commented. “Each time we gained allies we came closer to correcting whatever imbalance is occurring.”

“Correcting is not quite the right word. The imbalance is just as great as ever. It’s more like the gods are picking up sides.”

“Excuse me? Are you saying the gods are involved in all this?” Artur asked.

“No. I don’t believe that. It’s just a simile to describe the feeling I’m getting. There are many forces involved in what the Kimnites call the Balance. Normally they are random, pushing every which way at once. But at the moment some of those forces are aligned. That’s how an imbalance forms. Well, as far as I can interpret what I get out of the Kimnites’ spell, more and more of these normally random forces are aligning. One center of alignment appears to be in Cilbe and the other is around us.”

“That makes sense also,” Artur told her. “Lusius wants to go to war with the Barbarian Kingdoms and we’re trying to stop him.”

“Actually I think the forces are all lining up on two people. Lusius is one. You’re the other.”

“Just another way of saying the same thing. Do you have any suggestion of what we need to do?”

“No. That’s why I’m so worried. I don’t know which way this is supposed to go.”

“Who says it’s *supposed* to go anyway in particular? We’ve promised to redress the Balance the witches of Kimn are concerned about. I’m not convinced it wouldn’t resolve itself in time. They can’t have been ‘Heeding the Balance’ for more than a thousand years or two if that. If the Balance is all that fragile the world would have been destroyed long before they came along.”

“No, it would have merely been out of balance. There would have been periods of widespread war and migrations and other sorts of massive changes,” Gaenor informed him. “In time such imbalances become random and balanced again, but in the process many lives are lost or ruined. Nations are conquered by invaders and other such calamities.”

“Who are we to say that is a calamity?” Artur countered. “A tyranny may be stable but the people under a tyrant suffer. When such a nation is overthrown is that not a good thing?”

“Perhaps,” Gaenor admitted. “I’m only trying to explain the conclusions I’ve come to. Besides we promised the Kimnites we would redress the Balance here.”

“Yes, we did,” Artur agreed. “Even though we still don’t know just what the cause of the imbalance is nor how to correct it, except that we’re supposed to conduct the Barbarians into Cilbe.”

“That’s only part of it,” Gaenor told him.

“Then until something else comes along this is what we’ll continue to do, Gae. We can’t sit around fretting about every detail of this Balance. That’s not living. We can only go ahead and do what we think is right.”

Gaenor nodded and a few minutes later Artur heard her breathing change, indicating she had finally fallen asleep. He stayed up considerably longer mulling over the problems Gaenor had brought up.

There was a feeling the next morning that something was about to happen. Everyone seemed to feel it. Cornellya and Gaenor were busy “Heeding the Balance” and discussing possible defensive spells should they need them, so their nervousness was easy to understand. Vito had a naturally nervous personality. The Barbarians were up earlier than normal and anxious to get moving, but Artur decided that was because they knew they could be in Cilbe by nightfall and were tired of sleeping on the ground.

He decided the feeling was not his imagination when both Leracus and Tarsus stopped by while Artur

and his party were eating breakfast. He introduced the two leaders to each other and Cornellya served them tea.

“We need to talk, senator,” General Tarsus began after a sip of his tea.

“Truth,” agreed Leracus.

“You realize that by law no legion may enter the imperial city until it has been disbanded,” Tarsus continued.

“The Temi are similarly prohibited,” Leracus said as well.

“I’m aware of both restrictions,” Artur told them. “Keeping the legions from entering the city as an army makes sense, but I’ve always wondered about the fairness of the laws against the Temi. Chief Leracus, do you mean to tell me you have never actually been inside the city?”

“Hardly, Chief Arturus,” Leracus replied. “I have been inside Cilbe many times, especially when I was younger. But I was never there legally. You are not proposing we enter Cilbe en mass, are you?”

“That would be an act of war,” Artur replied. “I have no intention of declaring war on the Emperor.” Both Leracus and Tarsus breathed sighs of relief. “Instead it would be best if the Ridec Clan and the Twelfth legion remain beyond the city limits while I bring the Barbarians to their embassy.”

“I’m not sure you’ll be safe within the city,” Tarsus commented. “Not from what you’ve told me.”

“True enough.” Artur agreed, “That’s why I’ll need you to remain conspicuously at the city’s edge.”

“That might be misconstrued,” Tarsus worried.

“This many Temi will definitely cause much distress within Cilbe,” Leracus added. He sounded more thoughtful than worried, however.

I’m hoping that having both of your forces standing just outside the city will give me the distraction I need to slip into the city, get the legates to their embassy and get out again before anyone there has time to react to your presence. Once I’m out we withdraw again and everything goes back to normal.”

“It might work,” Tarsus admitted.

“Certainly there is no force that can stand up to us within the city,” Leracus agreed. “There might be some posturing from the Imperial Guard, though.”

“I thought of that,” Artur admitted, “but we have three times the warriors. No soldier would willingly attack against such high odds.”

“You haven’t been in Cilbe in a long time, Senator,” Tarsus observed. “The Imperial Guard is not made up of the cream of the legions any more.”

“No? Who then?”

“Lusius had an interesting idea. He recruited young and disaffected men; juvenile delinquents, mostly. And put them through intensive military training and used them to rebuild the Guard. The end result was a

legion of ruthless, amoral soldiers who are fanatically loyal to no one but Lusius.”

“How sweet,” Artur replied sourly.

“Of course,” Tarsus added, “even they ought to hesitate before attacking us.”

“All right,” Artur said, finishing his tea. “Let’s be very careful not to pick fights with them. We’ll fight to defend ourselves, of course, but the point of the exercise is peace.”

“Hail, Arturus!” Tarsus replied, standing and giving him the formal salute of a soldier accepting an order from his commander.

Leracus stood too and saluted, replying, “As my chief commands!”

“So this is what it’s like to ride at the head of an army,” Gaenor commented.

“It’s been several days,” Artur pointed out, “did you just notice?”

“Actually, yes. Until today I only saw the Temi and the legionaries at a distance. “You have us advancing in a much tighter formation this morning.”

“Change of plans,” Artur explained. I originally thought to have the Temi and the Twelfth approach Cilbe from different directions. This morning I decided that if we stay together any military response from the city will be united as well.”

“What if they try to flank or surround us?” Gaenor asked.

“The Imperial Guard is only about five or six thousand strong. We have several times that number, they wouldn’t get much of an advantage no matter how they approached. Also from what General Tarsus tells me, they are not quite the elite force they once were.”

“I overheard some of that,” Gaenor retorted. “The key word I remember is ‘fanatical.’ Fighting them wouldn’t be a walk in the park, you know.”

“Fanatical, but not particularly disciplined,” Artur told her.

“I wouldn’t be too quick to discount them anyway,” Gaenor replied.

“I’m not. It’s the main reason we’re marching in a tighter formation. I want to make sure they can see just how badly out-numbered they are.”

“I sure hope it works, because they can certainly see us,” Gaenor replied. “They appear to be waiting for us.”

Artur looked ahead. “They seem to have come out from the city to meet us. Not a very bright move but it absolutely ruins my plans.”

“Who was it that said that no battle plan survives contact with the enemy?” Gaenor asked.

“Just about everyone,” Artur replied sourly. “So much for slipping the Barbarians in quietly.”

“Maybe not. Try telling them we’re just an honor guard,” Gaenor suggested. “It’s not far from the truth. Who are all those others? The ones not in uniform, that is.”

“Citizens of Cilbe, I imagine. It isn’t a particularly brilliant idea, but they’re curious about what is happening out here so they came to watch.”

“They can get killed that way,” Gaenor commented.

“Good thing we’re not here to fight then.”

They rode forward until they were a few hundred yards from the Imperial Guard. Artur caught Tarsus’ eye and signaled him over.

“Sorry to pull you away from your legion,” Artur apologized, “but I might need you here to help identify whoever comes out to talk to us.”

“That’s all right, my men know what to do, but what makes you think they’ll stop to talk?”

“We have the upper hand,” Artur pointed out. “It’s almost expected that they’ll try to talk us out of attacking them.”

“I doubt the possibility has occurred to them,” Tarsus told him, “but they will probably try to bluster a bit first. I don’t know who is currently in charge, but the more they threaten and bluster, the less they’ll believe they have a chance. Expect some phenomenally bombastic threats.”

“I don’t suppose you have any aspiring historians in the Twelfth at the moment?” Artur asked.

“I’m not aware of any. Why?”

“Nothing. I just thought that if you were correct, there ought to be somebody around to record the encounter. Maybe someone in the civilian crowd is a historian. It doesn’t matter. I think most of the classical historians were liars anyway. If there’s any remarkable blustering going on someone will do it one better when it gets written up. Oh good, here comes today’s lecturer.”

“Senator, whatever else happens today,” Tarsus said, laughing, “it’s been an honor meeting you. I don’t think there’s another man in Cilbe who could describe that man as a lecturer. If I survive it’s an experience I’ll be sure to tell my children.”

“Why?” Artur asked. “Who is he?”

“His name is Crassos. I’ve never heard if he has a prenomen or cognomen. I don’t even know if he’s a native Cilben, although he looks it. Rumor has it he used to make a living as a bouncer in one of the rougher bordellos in the harbor district. I do see he’s been promoted though.”

“Yes,” Artur agreed. “He’s now the Captain of the Guard. A bouncer, you say?” Crassos was a large man in every way. The horse beneath him looked as though it was carrying more than it was used to.

“That’s what I’ve heard. He was only a junior centurion last time I was in the city, but he already had a rather nasty reputation. He’s known for neither restraint nor intelligence. Just another bully who’s made good. I do wonder what happened to his predecessor, though.”

“Maybe he ate him,” Artur suggested. Any response Tarsus might have had remained unspoken because Crassos chose to start speaking while still thirty yards from Artur and his party.

“In Emperor Lusius’ name you are commanded to disburse and leave this place,” Crassos began. “Failure to leave will result in your annihilation!”

“Not really very good at this, is he?” Artur commented to Tarsus.

“I imagine he is just warming up,” Tarsus replied.

“We will destroy you all and fertilize the fields with your blood!” Crassos continued.

“Ah, the classics!” Artur laughed softly. “So few truly appreciate them in this modern age.” Tarsus chuckled softly. “Is the civilian crowd actually laughing?”

“Crassos isn’t the most popular man in the city and from what I’ve heard he likes to accuse citizens of treason as a way of currying Lusius’ favor.”

“Sounds like an ancient tragedy,” Artur opined.

“Not ancient enough.”

Crassos continued on with his rhetoric getting continually gorier. Artur heard someone gagging behind him. He glanced over his shoulder to see that it was Vito, but the Barbarian legates didn’t look very comfortable either. He let Crassos run down and then he and Tarsus rode forward so he wouldn’t have to shout his reply.

“Captain Crassos, I presume?” Artur started. Crassos nodded looking pleased this stranger had heard of him. “My name is Artur. I believe you are laboring under a misapprehension. We are not here to invade Cilbe, merely to escort four representatives of the Barbarian Kingdoms to their embassy here with full diplomatic honors.”

“None of you shall pass!” Crassos replied angrily.

“By whose authority do you obstruct a duly appointed ambassador to the Emperor?” Artur asked softly. “Think carefully about your answer,” he continued when Crassos didn’t reply instantly. “Your life might depend on it. You know as well as I do that Lusius doesn’t appreciate officers with too much initiative.”

Crassos’ eyes hardened. “Who the hell are you?” he asked as well.

“I told you. My name is Artur. I’m called Artur the Southlander. Look; here’s the deal. Allow me to escort the four Barbarians to their embassy, we’ll enter the city unarmed. Then once they are safely ensconced with the ambassador, I’ll return and the armies here will disperse.”

“You have a lot of Temi assassins with you,” Crassos replied distrustfully.

“You’ve dealt with them before, have you?” Artur rejoined. “They are not merely assassins you know.

Today they are serving as body guards. Of course, if fighting breaks out here, who knows how many innocent civilians might get caught as well. That wouldn't endear you to Lusius either, would it? But don't worry. So long as your bully boys do nothing more than posture, everything will be all right." Meanwhile the crowd itself was looking more restless than any of the assembled soldiers.

"Artur the Southlander, hmm?" Crassos growled. "I'm going to remember that name."

"You do that," Artur told him. "And while your at it remember another one; Arturus Cornellian Marno." Crassos looked puzzled. "You may not have heard it before, but I guarantee Lusius has. Say, 'Hi,' for me, why don't you. Sorry I couldn't stay long enough to pay my respects, but you know how it is." Crassos growled again but turned and started riding back.

"Senator," Tarsus said, "That was both brave and foolish. Crassos can carry a grudge further than any man I know."

"I don't plan coming back to Cilbe, General, and I'm safe enough from the likes of him anyway," Artur replied. "Let's get the Barbarians into the city." They had just turned around when a roar erupted from behind them. Artur looked over his shoulder and saw the Imperial guard charging. "Jube!" he swore, kicking his horse into a gallop, "What happened?" he shouted to Tarsus.

"Don't know. I don't think Crassos ordered that, he was only halfway back to his front line."

"Damned amateurs!" Artur replied. A few seconds later he reached the spot the Barbarians and the other adepts were waiting at. "Better draw back," he shouted to them, "and let the armies do their jobs." They didn't need any encouragement. They rode hard until they were well behind the Temi and the Twelfth Legion. "Did anyone see what happened?" he asked when they finally found a place to stop and look back at the battlefield. The Imperial Guard had fanned out from their position into the cup that was formed by the Temi and the Twelfth Legion. It was an incredibly poor strategy, but Artur didn't think there had been any thought behind the attack at all.

"The Cilben citizens who came out to watch," Gaenor informed him, "were shouting a lot of insults toward the soldiers on both sides. I think one of them started throwing rocks too. The Temi didn't react, of course, but several of the Imperial Guard broke ranks and ran at the people throwing rocks."

"And the moment that happened the rest of them thought they had been ordered to charge us," Artur concluded. "Jube! I really was hoping we could do this peaceably. It was so damned close too."

The battle was not a long one. The Imperial Guard charged, but due to that they were soon almost completely surrounded. After an hour over half of them lay dead on the field and even the most fanatical of the survivors had come to realize that they didn't stand a chance. When given the chance to surrender, they took it without hesitation.

"Hail, Arturus!" General Tarsus greeted as he and Leracus joined Artur after the fighting. Leracus silently saluted. "We appear to have won the day. What do you wish to do with our prisoners?"

"Put them to work burying their dead," Artur answered. "Did we lose many from the Twelfth Legion?"

"Sadly, we lost over seventy men and have around two hundred injured, but those were light compared to what we did to them."

"How about from the Ridec Clan?" Artur asked, turning to Leracus.

“Fifteen dead, but three hundred injured,” the Temi leader replied. “There is worse news, however, my chief. Many of the Imperial Guard deserted the battle field just after the fighting began and retreated into the city.”

“How many?” Artur asked.

“Two thousand at least,” Leracus replied. “I believe their captain fled with them.”

“Damn!” Artur swore.

“A problem?” Gaenor asked as she approached the men. Artur explained the problem. “We have to get the Barbarians to their embassy,” she pointed out.

“I agree,” Artur told her, “but if we enter the city we are bound to be attacked. For that matter I’m not sure we are doing them any favor by delivering them now. Lusius isn’t likely to entertain their petitions for peace.”

“Maybe not, but our promise was to escort them safely anyway. How many men do we need to guard the prisoners?” she asked.

“I don’t trust them at all. We have roughly one thousand prisoners. We need to leave at least two thousand guards to watch them, just so they won’t start thinking about going back on their surrender.”

“Fine, leave two thousand legionaries and Temi and take the rest into Cilbe. That should be enough to get them safely to the embassy.”

“It would be seen as an act of war,” Tarsus warned. “No one has marched an army into Cilbe in centuries.”

“General,” Gaenor replied, “we’re already at war with the Emperor. None of us are ever going to be his friend. If we try to sneak into the city we’ll be attacked and probably killed, if we take the main body of our force we should be able to drive back any resistance we meet. Am I correct or is my ignorance showing?”

Artur considered the idea while Tarsus and Leracus waited for his decision. “Let’s do it,” he said at last. “Gae, next time we need to fight a war I think I’ll leave you in charge.”

Eight

In Cilbe one’s importance and influence was measured by the proximity of his house to that of the Emperor. The Barbarian Kingdoms’ embassy was an urban estate situated on the harbor side of the imperial palace. Artur decided to not march his army down the main street which led directly to the Forum of Balto, the Senate Building and the Imperial Palace itself. Instead he chose a path down a series of narrower side streets to the harbor district and then up the hill toward the capitol district. It would still look as though he was marching on the palace, but the army would not actually pass the palace’s gates.

The streets were so narrow he chose to have the army move in three columns down parallel streets. He, Gaenor, Cornellya and Vito rode with the Barbarians in the middle of the center column. The streets

were lined with silent Cilbens watching the procession, unsure of how to react to the unprecedented scene. Armed and organized legionaries were only allowed inside the city when part of a rare full triumphal procession. The Temi were never allowed in Cilbe and yet here they were in their feared blood-red garb.

As Artur expected, a contingent of the surviving Guard chose to attack when they were within the city. Afraid to fight the legendary Temi, the Guardsmen tried to take the members of the Twelfth Legion by surprise. It was a good plan, and had the Imperial Guard still been made up of elite soldiers and not just the nastiest fighters the Emperor could find, it might even have worked. The Imperial Guard was familiar with the streets of Cilbe in a way neither the Temi nor the legionaries could be. But these Guardsmen were also an undisciplined lot and were repulsed easily each time they attempted an attack.

Finally, Tarsus ordered his column to spread out along the street they were marching on and when the Imperial Guard attacked the flank of the column one more time, he had the leading and trailing parts of the column race around the block and surround the Guard unit. None of those guards survived the encounter and the Twelfth Legion came through with only light wounds.

They were at the Barbarian embassy when a large and final assault by the Imperial Guard began. The Barbarians quickly took refuge in their embassy and Artur told Gaenor, Cornellya and Vito to follow them, but only Vito actually obeyed. He didn't have time to argue as he drew a sword in anticipation of having to defend himself and the women.

Leracus led half of the Temi warriors with him in a flanking move on the Imperial Guard while Tarsus' legion faced them head-on. The Guards' attack quickly collapsed and they ran away in the direction of the Imperial Palace.

"We should follow them, Arturus," Tarsus shouted across the distance between them. "Otherwise they'll just keep harassing us."

"You're right," Artur called back. "Let's just put an end to this once and for all."

They followed the retreating guards back to the palace gates where they turned to make a stand, using the gate to their advantage. Defenses in restricted areas can be held in place for a long time by a limited number of fighters and this final defense threatened to last for hours until Leracus sent a century of his men up and over the palace walls. They came in from behind the remaining guards and the battle was over in minutes.

"There may be more of them left," Artur commented and he led the soldiers into the palace grounds. They were fanning out to fill the main courtyard when an arrow whistled down and killed the legionary in front of Artur. Artur looked up to see several archers on the roof of the palace, but before he could react, a shimmering golden dome appeared to cover him and several others. Out of the corner of his eye he saw that Cornellya had cast a defensive spell. Gaenor took a more active attitude toward defense and cast a large fireball at the attacking archers. They died instantly.

Then Gaenor scared him terribly by drawing her own sword and shouting, "This way, Artur!" He followed instantly, unwilling to let Gaenor go into the palace itself alone. She had come a long way in her ability to use a sword but her style still had more enthusiasm than skill. Behind him, Cornellya and many legionaries and Temi followed.

Gaenor led the way through the empty palace corridors as though born there. Artur realized she was still "Heeding the Balance," and ran a bit faster to keep up with her. They charged up two very long flights of

stairs, down a long hallway and then back down another stairway.

“Do you know where you’re going?” Artur asked.

“Haven’t the foggiest,” Gaenor replied. “I’m just following the center of imbalance.”

“Terrific,” Artur muttered. He looked around and realized they were headed toward a large room that Lusius used as an audience chamber, or at least he had twenty-odd years ago.

“Through here,” she gasped, trying to catch her breath when they reached a tall and wide set of doors.

“Stay back,” Artur instructed her. He kicked the center of the right side door and it sprung open, there were several guards just inside and Artur closed the distance between them, killing one immediately and fighting a second while Gaenor fought another and the rest of his following soldiers teamed in to take out the rest. He dispatched his second and saw Gaenor disarm the man she was fighting. He tried to run away but a Tem cut him down. That was when Artur finally got a chance to look around the room.

There were several Cilben nobles, dressed in senatorial robes, at the far end of the room. They were standing very still and only one of them, Emperor Lusius was armed. Lusius had not improved with age. He had never been a robust man, but now he appeared quite haggard and wild-eyed. Gaenor learned later that he had been starving himself off and on over the previous two years because he was worried his cooks were trying to poison him. His imperial robes hung loosely on him making him look like a sickly child trying on his father’s clothes. He held a long knife that was still dripping blood.

On the floor in front of the Emperor lay the body of Crassos. Several nobles stood to one side. Artur recognized none of them, but could tell they were all looking for alternative exits.

“You!” Lusius shouted seeing Artur walking toward him. “I had you killed years ago.”

“You did a miserable job of it,” Artur replied. “Care to try again?”

For one long moment it looked as if Lusius would actually try to fight Artur, then the Emperor dropped the blade and ran toward a large window overlooking the palace courtyard. There he paused a moment, then threw himself out of it. His hysteric scream was short-lived and ended abruptly when his head struck the tiles of the courtyard.

Artur and Gaenor stepped to the window and looked out to see the body of the dead Emperor.

“The Balance is restored,” Gaenor told him.

“You’re certain?” Artur asked.

“Absolutely.”

The courtyard was filled with milling legionaries and Temi who looked up to see them. It was Leracus who saw the implications of the situation first.

“Hail, my chief!” he shouted. “Hail, Emperor Arturus!”

“Hail Emperor Arturus!” echoed Tarsus.

“Arturus! Arturus! Arturus!” came the repeated chant of the assembled Twelfth Legion and the Ridec Clan of the Temi.

Artur turned to look at Gaenor and shook his head sadly. “I think I really screwed up this time.”

Here ends Book Two of Gaenor’s Quest.

The third book continues with more of the worldwide search by Artur and Gaenor for companions with which to assault Ichtar, the dreaded domain of the demons!

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